

DEMOCRATIC AUDIT

How Should We Vote?

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Introduction

ELECTIONS constitute a key instrument of representative democracy. They are the mechanism whereby the people, as sole source of political authority, authorise representatives to act in their place as legislators, and to form an administration which governs in their name.

Despite their centrality to representative democracy, however, there have been few systematic attempts to assess electoral systems against specifically democratic criteria. Certainly there exist recognised international standards for ensuring that the conduct of elections is "free and fair". But these standards deliberately stop short of judgment on electoral systems as such, and on the various methods for translating the popular vote into parliamentary seats and governmental office. And those authors who do discuss these matters systematically, rarely stop to consider what might count as distinctively democratic criteria for any assessment of the competing systems on offer. Even the criteria given by the government to the Independent Commission on the Voting System (the Jenkins Commission), for its consideration of electoral reform in the UK in 1997-98, were not justified on any demonstrably democratic grounds.

We make good this gap, by identifying the criteria for the assessment of different electoral systems that can be derived from basic democratic principles. In doing so we will hopefully make an important contribution to current discussions about reform of elections to the Westminster Parliament, as well as providing a set of standards for the evaluation of electoral systems more generally. Six different systems will be examined, and the main characteristics of each are briefly set out in Table 1. Five of the six are already in use, or about to be used, in one form or another, for different elections in the UK.

| Table 1: First-past-the-post (FPTP) and its rivals |
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| <p>1. Plurality Rule (or FPTP)</p> <p>Electors cast one vote for the candidate of their choice in single-member constituencies, and the candidate with the largest number of votes is elected, regardless of the proportion of the vote obtained. Currently used for the UK parliament.</p> |
| <p>2. Alternative Vote (AV)</p> <p>This is similar to the plurality system in that one candidate is elected in each constituency. However, here voters can list candidates in order of preference. If no candidate wins an overall majority of first preferences, candidates with the fewest are progressively eliminated, and the next preferences on these ballots are distributed between the remaining candidates until one secures a majority. A variant of this system is the Supplementary Vote (SV), as used for the London mayoral elections, under which electors are restricted to two preferences only. This use is justified by the fact that it avoids the danger of a mayor being elected on a very small minority vote amidst a plethora of candidates. But it would also make US Presidential elections fairer and more open, since other candidates could</p> |

stand without dividing the popular vote (as Nader did in 2000).

3. Single Transferable Vote (STV)

This is a system of large multi-member constituencies in which voters list candidates in order of preference (whether candidates of the same or different parties), and candidates are elected once they have obtained a given quota of votes, if not by first preferences, then with the help of subsequent preferences. Used in the Irish Republic and in elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly. STV is a preferential system rather than proportional, though it is usually proportional in practice, depending on the size of the constituencies. The larger the constituencies, the more proportional it becomes.

4. Closed List PR

Like the above, this is a system of multi-member constituencies, or even one single constituency for a whole country in various European countries. Voters however have one vote only for a party list of candidates. Candidates are elected by a quota system which ensures broad proportionality between seats and votes cast. Used in the UK for elections to the European Assembly.

5. Additional Member or Mixed Member System (AMS/MMS)

Here electors cast two votes, one for a constituency candidate to be elected under FPTP, and the second for a list of party candidates in regions or a whole country, ranked in numerical order. Proportionality under AMS/MMS is determined by the ratio between directly elected members and list, or "top-up", members; and the size and impact of any threshold for election in the list section. The "classic" version of AMS involves a 50:50 ratio between constituency and list representatives, as in Germany; smaller proportions of list representatives, as in elections to the Scottish Parliament (57% constituency MPs; 43% list MPs) and Welsh Assembly 67:33) produce less proportional results.

6. AV Plus (the Jenkins proposal)

Under the proposals of the Jenkins Commission in 1998, a hybrid form of AMS/MMS would be introduced for elections to Parliament. Most MPs – 80 to 85 per cent – would continue to be elected in local, though rather larger, constituencies. But voters would cast two votes under AV, not one as under FPTP in their constituency and in addition they would cast a second "party" vote for some 98 to 132 list MPs (15 to 20 per cent of the total in the House of Commons). The list MPs would not be elected nationally or regionally as under most AMS/MMS systems, but from counties and equivalent-sized metropolitan districts in England, Scottish and Welsh Euro-constituencies and two top-up areas in Northern Ireland. There would be 80 list areas in total, 44 of which return a single list MP and 36 larger areas two list members.

The differing roles of elections

Before proceeding to a discussion of how these systems should be assessed, it is worth making a number of caveats. The first is that elections serve a number of different functions, and there are different democratic criteria against which they can be evaluated. Not all these functions or criteria are entirely compatible with one another. It follows, therefore, that there is no one self-evidently "best" electoral system, from a democratic point of view; it will be a question of making the most defensible trade-off between a number of possible considerations.

Variations in and between systems

Secondly, there is considerable variation in the precise form in which these different

electoral systems can be implemented. Thus, for example, the single transferable vote (STV) system will tend to deliver more "proportional" results between the party vote and its seats in parliament as the size of the constituencies increases, and with it the number of members to be elected in each. Similarly, the additional member system (AMS) will be more "proportional" in its effects, the more equal is the ratio between members elected from the list and those elected on a constituency basis and the larger the electoral district from which list members are elected; and will be the less "proportional" in relation to the height of any threshold for representation. (See further the website reports on Germany & New Zealand for more detailed discussion of such practicalities.)

The point is, much variation and "fine-tuning" is thus possible in designing an electoral system. Here we consider each system in what might be called its "classic" form, and the general tendencies of each.

National conditions

The final caveat to be mentioned is that how an electoral system works out in practice also depends on the particular circumstances of the individual country. Among the most important of these circumstances are the type of its political system, the social and political configuration of its electorate, the distribution of its political parties, and the character of the citizen body as a whole. The UK has distinctive features in all these respects, which will need to be considered in any discussion of alternative electoral systems.

Distinctive UK features

Of these distinctive features, one of the most significant is that the UK has a parliamentary rather than presidential system of government. That is to say, we do not vote separately for members of the legislature and for the head of government, as in a presidential system. We combine the two functions into a single process. In electing a Parliament of a certain composition we are also thereby helping choose a government which can command majority support in that parliament.

However, these are two separate functions, and each is affected differently by the character of the electoral system. Our existing plurality, or "first past the post" (FPTP), system normally allows the election to determine the formation of government and its programme directly, by giving the party which wins the largest minority of the popular vote a clear majority of seats in Parliament. It does so, however, by producing a Parliament that is unrepresentative of the overall distribution of electoral support between the political parties. Most alternative systems (other than the Alternative Vote) would produce a more representative Parliament, but one where the formation of government and its programme would most likely depend on negotiation between the parties in Parliament, rather than being the direct outcome of the election itself.

So electoral systems have different consequences for the composition of Parliament in relation to the electorate, and for the process of government formation. Both these need to be assessed according to democratic criteria.

Empowering the voters

There is a third aspect of elections - that is how much they empower the voters themselves. How effective is the choice they are offered between candidates and parties? How equal is the value of their votes? How much encouragement is there to participate in the election? How far does the political system provide them with an accessible avenue for opinion and redress between elections?

Not all of these features are solely determined by the particular electoral system, but they are considerably influenced by it.

Developing democratic criteria

The three different aspects of an electoral system -its implications for the composition of parliament in relation to the electorate, for the process of government formation, and for the citizens themselves and their relative empowerment - are inter-related; but they can be separated for clearer analysis and assessment against democratic criteria. In developing these criteria, we shall be using them in the first instance to assess FPTP, the system currently in place for elections to Parliament. Each of the main alternatives to it will then be systematically assessed in their turn.

What, then, are our democratic criteria? The UK Democratic Audit has consistently employed two key principles of democracy in its analysis. The first is that of popular empowerment and control over collective decision-making and decision makers - through institutions that ensure the popular authorisation of key political and governmental officials, their continuous public accountability, and their responsiveness to public opinion, within a context that guarantees citizens the fundamental freedoms of expression and self-organisation.

The second principle is that of political equality - that everyone counts for one and their voices merit equal consideration, whether as voters, users of public services, residents, or whatever. These two principles will be central to our analysis of electoral systems. As will become evident, they sometimes stand in some tension with each other; and this is one reason which makes the democratic assessment of electoral systems not always straightforward. Our first task is to see what implications the two principles have for the different aspects of an electoral system that have been identified above.

Elections and parliamentary representation

THE FIRST PURPOSE of elections is to choose a parliament that, besides producing a government, has the task of holding it continuously accountable on behalf of the people, and approving legislation and taxation in their place. Parliaments are usually referred to as representative assemblies, and the political system that produces them as a representative democracy. What does "representation" mean here? Two different ideas can be distinguished, each of which corresponds to one of our democratic principles:-

- *Kicking the rascals out*

Under the principle of popular control, political representatives should in part be seen as agents of the electorate: appointed by them, accountable to them, and removable by them. How far do electoral systems differ in the degree to which they ensure effective accountability of representatives to their respective electorates? How easy it is to remove them if the electorate loses confidence in them, or simply decides it is time for a change?

To explore this criterion adequately, we need to decide whether the accountability of political representatives to their electorate is (or should be) primarily as individuals, exercising a personal responsibility for their conduct of office, or collectively, as members of a party following a distinctive programme and leadership.

The UK electoral system was designed in an era when the first of these was

paramount: candidates for election stood as individuals, and were chosen for their personal judgment and their capacity to promote the interests of the given locality. With the evolution of a strong party system in the late nineteenth century, however, elections became increasingly a matter of choice between competing national parties, their programmes and leaderships, and candidates were elected much more for their party labels than for their personal qualities. This does not mean that the performance of individual members no longer matters, only that it tends to be readily overridden by considerations of party affiliation, and that it is primarily as members of a given party that candidates now present themselves to the electorate, and are judged by them.

What significance does this change have for the political accountability and removability of representatives? Of primary importance is that there should be clear responsibility and accountability of party groupings within Parliament to the national electorate, and that their parliamentary strength should be sensitive to the increase or decrease in overall support within the country as a whole. In this way there is a clear and effective link between the collective performance of a party, and the electorate's judgment upon it. As a secondary consideration we should also look at how electoral systems enable voters to reward or penalise individual representatives for their individual conduct in office.

How does our present electoral system measure up on these criteria of accountability and removability of representatives, primarily collectively, but secondarily as individuals? Three weaknesses of the system present themselves:

- The connection between the electorate's judgment of parties, and the rise or decline in party strength in Parliament, it is at best a haphazard one, which can produce arbitrary or perverse results. Thus, depending on how other parties perform, a given party could see its overall proportion of the national vote decline, yet find its parliamentary representation stay constant or even increase; or, alternatively, it could maintain its electoral support, but suffer a significant drop in its parliamentary representation. Such arbitrariness is hardly conducive to collective accountability.
- Most seats are "safe" seats under the system of single member constituencies and changes in electoral support only have parliamentary effect in marginal constituencies. This not only leads to an imbalanced concentration of the parties' electoral effort on a small number of constituencies, but puts a high premium on how constituency boundaries are drawn. It also treats voters' switch in party support outside the marginal seats as of no consequence.
- The claim that single member constituencies make the individual representative accountable to their own distinct electorate is illusory, since most MPs simply cannot be removed by their voters, however badly they perform; and there is no way in which voters can distinguish between the collective accountability of party and the personal accountability of individual representatives.

Defenders of "first past the post" would insist at this point that, under alternatives to it, a party might have its parliamentary representation substantially reduced in proportion to a loss of electoral support, yet continue in government by virtue of an alliance it could make with other parties; and that this is hardly conducive to electoral accountability either. This argument will be considered in the context of electoral systems and government formation shortly.

- *Parliament as a microcosm*

The second aspect of representation is the idea that the elected assembly should be representative of the whole electorate in its most important characteristics - a microcosm of the country as a whole. This idea goes back to an original key argument for political representation: if it was too cumbersome and time-consuming for everyone to deliberate and decide on legislation in person, but you could find a group that mirrored the characteristics of the people as a whole, this group could be safely entrusted with the task, since you could be confident that their judgments would broadly reflect those that the whole people would make, if they only had the time and opportunity to do so. They would constitute the people in microcosm. On this principle, electoral systems should be assessed according to how far they produce a parliament that is representative of the electorate in this microcosmic sense.

But what characteristics of the electorate are most important to be produced in Parliament? It is usually advanced that a parliament should reflect three different types of characteristic:

1. *the geographical distribution of the electorate throughout the country.* This embodies the view that representation of the electorate by localities and regions is still important, and that the composition of parliament should reflect where the people reside, rather than be unduly biased towards particular centres or regions, or be indifferent to local or regional distinctiveness. The UK electoral system of single member constituencies, with broadly comparable numbers of voters, embodies this geographical conception of proportionality. So too would most alternatives to it, though their precise degree of "localism" will vary. Only systems which operate with a single national list of candidates have no regard to the local or regional distribution of electors, or to local and regional specificities and identities. These are not being seriously considered for the UK.
2. *the distribution of political opinion among the electorate, as expressed in their votes for the different parties.* This idea that parliament should mirror the political opinion of the country is obviously central to the conception of parliament as a microcosm: that its legislative decisions should represent what the people as a whole would decide, if they could assemble to deliberate on their own behalf. For this reason, many would argue that this is the most essential aspect in which the UK Parliament should be representative; and electoral systems which embody it are usually described as "proportional". Their aim is to ensure that a parliament reflects as closely as possible the national distribution of votes for the different parties, since voting for a particular party is the best single overall indicator of political opinion that we have.
3. *the social composition of the electorate.* Currently the most politically salient aspects of social composition are gender and ethnicity, in view of their comparative misrepresentation; and there is considerable demand that women and ethnic minorities should be represented in Parliament proportionally to their distribution among the electorate. This demand is associated with the view that shared identities and experiences are as important as shared opinions and beliefs, and that Parliament should reflect the identities of different social groups as much as the political opinions that may cut across them. There is no single electoral system, however, that can guarantee such representation, though it is usually argued that a list system, or one

with multi-member constituencies, can facilitate the representation of previously under-represented groups, by making it obvious if parties do not offer a "balanced" slate of candidates. Which social groups should be so considered must be a matter of their current political salience, and cannot be determined a priori. It is worth recalling here that one of the factors leading to the formation of the Labour Party at the turn of the last century was a widespread resentment at the lack of MPs from the manual working class.

The contention that Parliament should be microcosmically representative of the electorate - in its geographical distribution, political opinions and social composition - is closely bound up with our second democratic principle, that of political equality. If political equality were fully realised in an electoral system, and votes really did count equally, not only regardless of where people happened to live, but which party they happened to vote for, and which social group they identified with, then Parliament would indeed be representative of the electorate in all these respects, since each would have its due proportion according to its distribution among the population.

There is a further consideration here, however, and that is the issue of pluralism or diversity. Society in the UK contains a rich diversity of cultures, identities and regional localisms, as well as of political opinions. The argument that its representative assembly should be properly reflective of this diversity, and that such representation should not be monopolised, say, by metropolitan white males, operating under the banner of two monolithic political parties, is a strong one. Political representation requires not only that representatives be accountable and responsive to their electorate, but that, collectively, they should reflect its characteristics in their most politically relevant respects; that their assembly should be inclusive rather than exclusive.

How well does FPTP satisfy democratic criteria?

How, then, does our current system perform according to these different aspects of representativeness? Its single member constituency system, with broadly equal numbers of electors, makes it highly representative of localities, and of the geographical distribution of the electorate throughout the country. This is hardly surprising, given that it was primarily as representatives of localities and local electorates that MPs in previous centuries were elected. The subsequent efforts of the independent Boundary Commissions to make constituencies nearly equal in numbers, so that each vote counts the same, regardless of where people live, have produced parliaments that are only loosely proportionate from a geographical point of view (see further, *Political Power and Democratic Control in Britain*, Weir, S, and Beetham, D, Routledge, 1999: 48-53). There are therefore considerable inequalities as between voters both in individual seats and the nations and regions.

In terms of its representativeness of political opinion among the electorate, however, as measured by votes for the different parties, FPTP performs very poorly, both nationally and regionally; and it does so the worse, the more that third and fourth parties come into serious contention for popular support. Thus a party such as the Liberal Democrats, with a substantial minority of the popular vote spread evenly across the country, will find it difficult to win a proportionate parliamentary representation; while parties with more concentrated electoral support will be comparatively advantaged. Even the two major parties, which, by virtue of their relative concentration, are able to win parliamentary majorities on a minority of the national vote, are seriously disadvantaged in some regions of the country where their

support falls below a certain threshold. Labour across southern England, and the Conservatives in Wales and Scotland, are illustrative of this effect.

Why does this lack of proportionality between the electoral vote for parties and their parliamentary representation matter, from a democratic point of view? First, because by denying some sections of political opinion a numerically effective parliamentary voice, and excluding others altogether, it produces a Parliament that misrepresents public opinion and considerably understates its plurality and diversity. Second, because it considerably exaggerates the skew in the parliamentary representation of the parties towards particular regions of the country - Conservatives in the south of England, Labour in the north and in Scotland and Wales, the Liberal Democrats in the so-called "Celtic fringe" - with potentially damaging consequences for the national character of government policy. Third, because it makes the votes of electors count very unequally, depending on which party they vote for, and where they happen to live.

Finally, FPTP also performs very badly in terms of encouraging a more socially representative Parliament. As already argued, the degree of the social representativeness of Parliament is a product of many factors, of which the electoral system is only one. Yet because the choice of candidates in each single member constituency is carried out in isolation from the others, and from any knowledge of an overall outcome, it is much easier to reproduce a standard type of candidate than where the electorate has to be presented with a number of candidates, whether on a party list or in multi-member constituencies.

So far we have been considering the criteria for assessing the impact of electoral systems on the composition of parliament in relation to the electorate. The democratic principles of popular control and political equality, we have argued, require that representatives should be readily accountable to, and removable by, the electorate; and that parliament as a whole should be representative of the electorate in a number of relevant respects. In both these main aspects of representation, we have concluded - the agential and the microcosmic - our present system performs badly, though we have yet to consider alternatives to it.

Elections and government formation

OUR SECOND MAIN area for assessment concerns the effect of electoral systems on the process of government formation. Here the issue is at first sight relatively straightforward. Our present electoral system has the distinctive feature of virtually guaranteeing single party government in the UK, whereas most alternatives to it would give us government by a coalition of parties. What are their respective merits from a democratic point of view?

The case for FPTP

Defenders of FPTP use a number of arguments which can be related to our two democratic principles of popular control and political equality. First is that the system gives the electorate direct control over the formation of government, and direct choice of its programme, since the party winning the biggest share of the popular vote usually has a majority of seats in Parliament, and so can form a government on its own. Most if not all other systems make the link between the election and the process of government formation more indirect, by making the latter subject to negotiation between the parties in parliament.

A second argument is that single party majorities offer more decisive (or strong, or stable) government, and ones that are thereby more able to carry through a

programme mandated by the electorate. Associated with this is a third argument about accountability: if the government reneges on its mandate, or it proves a failure in some respect, the electorate knows who to blame, and can remove them from office. It is the case, however, that under proportional systems the responsibilities of coalition partners may be unclear, or a party which loses electoral confidence may still remain in government through the support of another party. Finally, by giving power in government formation to minor parties, proportional systems give disproportionate weight to their voters in comparison with the voters of much larger parties. The first three of these arguments concern aspects of democratic control and accountability, the last concerns the principle of political equality. How sound are these arguments? Let us consider each of them in turn.

First is the argument about the direct control which the plurality system gives to the electorate over the formation of government, with a known programme, rather than surrendering it to the parties and their leaderships in Parliament. The price of this "directness", however, is a very high one indeed. It is subject to all the distortions in the translation of votes into parliamentary seats that have already been noted. And the outcome is a government and a programme which is at best (but not always) supported by only the largest minority of voters, a minority which could be a comparatively small one (39% for Labour in October 1974).

It is impossible to justify on any democratic grounds the exclusion of the representatives of other minorities from any share in governmental power, when together they are supported by a substantial majority of the electorate. Even more indefensible are those bizarre results such as 1951, when the governing Labour Party increased its share of the popular vote, which was larger than for the Conservatives, but it still lost office; or February 1974, when the Labour Party lost a further six percentage points of the popular vote from its defeat in 1970, yet was able to form a government.

The objection to minority-supported administrations gains additional weight when we consider the constitutionally unchecked power that the Westminster system grants to the government of the day, with no effective method for ensuring that it takes note of alternative voices in the country at large. The old idea that majority governments representing a minority of votes are made tolerable by their readiness to listen to other points of view has been sufficiently discredited by the experience of the last quarter of a century of British government. Elective dictatorship on behalf of a minority would be a fair description of such a system.

Coalition versus single party government

On the other side, supporters of different electoral systems have to face the possible problems involved in coalition formation. In principle there is nothing undemocratic about minority parties having to compromise on some aspects of their programme, so that others can be implemented, within a package that is acceptable to a majority in a parliament. After all, such compromise is the normal way in which minorities achieve majority support; and it would help to moderate the strongly adversarial character of our public politics if parties were seen to be engaging in it. Yet there is a widespread fear that the process of coalition formation may take place out of public view, and involve secret deals that are never made public at all.

How justified are these fears? Ian Budge's study of coalition systems shows that, in some countries, possible coalition partnerships are worked out in advance of an election, while, in others, parties have distinctive profiles in specific policy areas which are well understood, and which are readily complementary to those of possible

coalition partners (see Budge, I, *Stability and Choice: Review of Single Party and Coalition Government*, Democratic Audit Paper No. 15, Human Rights Centre, University of Essex, 1998). So it depends on the conventions of the given country, not on coalition government per se, how transparent and accountable the process of coalition formation proves to be.

Similarly, Budge's study shows that how far the election directly determines which parties form the government under coalition arrangements depends upon how fragmented the party system is. Where there are a large number of parties with almost equal electoral support, then the election is likely to be less controlling of government formation than where there are two main parties tending to the left and right respectively, which is the position at present in the UK. Here the respective proportions of the popular vote (and hence seats under proportional representation) obtained by Labour and Conservatives are likely to prove decisive for government formation. So again it depends on local conditions how a coalition system works in practice.

Of the other objections to coalition government, the argument that it produces weak or unstable government, or governments that are unable to carry through their programmes, is not sustainable against the evidence. Most established European democracies with coalition-producing electoral systems have highly stable governments. And the research of Budge and his colleagues shows that they have at least as good a record, if not better, at carrying through their initial programmes than countries with the plurality system. If by "strong" government we mean government that is able to ride rough shod over the weight of informed or majority opinion in the country, then perhaps we would be better off with an executive that was more constrained by backbench parliamentarians from the governing coalition parties, and by an opposition whose chance of replacing the government was not so long-dated as under our present electoral system. Indeed, the much-vaunted superiority of FPTP, that it enables the electorate "to throw the rascals out", is no longer working effectively. We have had only one change of the ruling party in 25 years, and the current bias of the electoral system in favour of Labour means that the Conservatives, the main alternative party, would have to win a much larger proportion of the popular vote than Labour to form a new government.

Undue influence of smaller parties?

Finally, there is the argument that coalition politics disproportionately advantages the voters of smaller parties, especially those of the centre, whose party may have a permanent share in government, as the Liberal FDP used to do in Germany. Does this not reintroduce a basic inequality in a system whose justification, among others, is that it treats all voters equally? However, the shifts in party competition and advantage in post-reunification Germany (as set out in this website analysis of the effects of AMS there) demonstrate that it is by no means inevitable that a pivotal third party, such as the Liberal Democrats, would always hold the balance of power under a reformed electoral system in Britain.

More generally, minor parties in coalition governments typically get only one or two cabinet posts, and are very much junior partners in decisions over the shape of the government and its programme. This is hardly an unfair weight given to minor party electorates, when compared, say, with the fact that the electorates of parties other than Labour and Conservative have had no share in governmental office at national level in the UK for more than half a century, often for prolonged periods.

In conclusion

In conclusion, we can agree that the process of coalition formation may have its problems, from a democratic point of view, in the more indirect effect of elections on government formation, and a possible lack of transparency in the coalition process. However, these are only possible consequences of a more proportional electoral system, not inevitable ones. Against them has to be set the known absence, under FPTP, of any limiting or moderating force on single party governments which have failed to win a properly democratic mandate from a majority of the electorate. From the standpoint of the effect of electoral systems on government formation, which of these two problems, the known or the possible, is the more serious is the key question to make up one's mind about.

Elections and the empowerment of voters

FINALLY IN OUR LIST of aspects of electoral systems to be considered from a democratic point of view, is the question of their potential empowerment of voters. Many of the relevant issues have already been touched on, but it will be useful to review them systematically under this heading.

The degree of choice

First is the degree of choice which different systems allow the voters. Choice here has two dimensions: one is effective choice between parties and their programmes; the other is effective choice between candidates as well as parties. "Effective" choice means here, for parties, the chance that your chosen party will achieve representation in Parliament, and, for candidates, that judgments on individuals can make a real difference to their prospects of being elected. As we have seen, it is choice between parties that is most important in the current practice of national politics, but we should not overlook choice between individuals as a significant secondary consideration.

Expanding effective choice in both respects is valuable from a democratic point of view: as to the first, because enabling citizens to find a party that closely conforms to their own political priorities is important for the representativeness of Parliament; as to the second, because of its relevance to both the individual accountability of representatives, and the potential identification of electors with their distinctive characteristics (gender, ethnicity, etc.).

As we have already seen, FPTP performs poorly in both respects, as does the Alternative Vote favoured by Peter Hain, which also uses single member constituencies but requires candidates to achieve a majority rather than merely a plurality of constituency votes. Both these systems make it exceedingly difficult for smaller parties to achieve any representation in a parliament at all, and both give the voters no choice between candidates of the same party, since the single candidate presented to the electorate is already pre-selected by the party itself.

Of the other systems, the more proportional they are, the greater the range of effective party choice available to the electors. And of these, the Single Transferable Vote system in multi-member constituencies allows voters to choose between candidates of the same party, and so exercise some judgment about individuals as well as parties.

Defenders of FPTP sometimes object that other systems allow second or lower order preferences to count in the election of representatives, and that this favours colourless candidates or parties rather than those that inspire strong feelings, whether positive or negative. However, this overlooks the prevalence of tactical

voting under FPTP, whereby electors in constituencies which their favoured candidate or party has little chance of winning, vote for their second preference in order to defeat the one they really dislike. Under alternative systems, including AV, voters do not have to second guess other voters' preferences, but can order their own in a transparent and coherent manner.

Encouraging participation

The question of political equality between electors, and of their votes counting equally, has already been discussed above and does not require further elaboration. However, it does relate to a further issue, and that is the degree to which electoral systems encourage voters to participate in the electoral process, and to take an interest in it. It is fairly self-evident that systems under which every voter knows that their individual vote will count towards the result offer a greater incentive to participate than those in which the majority of voters live in "safe seats", where their individual vote cannot make a difference to the outcome. By this criterion, even the Alternative Vote system comes a poor second to more genuinely proportional ones.

Access to representatives

A final issue to be considered concerns the extent to which voters are able to access their representatives for conveying opinion or seeking redress when they need to do so. How far do electoral systems affect the accessibility of representatives to their constituents in this way? Defenders of single member constituencies argue that they are uniquely advantageous in this respect. Clearly they have an advantage in terms of their relatively small size, and the faint possibility of the elected representative becoming a familiar face in the locality.

Mixed-member systems represent a half-way house, since they retain constituency members, albeit in larger constituencies. There is also evidence from Germany, New Zealand and Scotland, where such systems are in operation, that list members are willing to take on such more direct representative roles and that they can supplement the work of constituency MPs (though this can lead to tensions and conflict).

At the other end of the scale, national or regional list systems offer a far less inadequate conduit for individual opinion or redress, since there is no readily identifiable representative for constituents to access, or any guarantee of one available locally for consultation.

In between comes the multi-member constituency system of, say, half a dozen representatives or so. Although much larger, this offers two signal advantages over the single member constituency. First, because of the variety of representatives, constituents are more likely to find one in their area who is sympathetic to their point of view, or with whom they can identify. Secondly, because at election time voters are able to make a choice between representatives of the same party, each has an incentive to make themselves as accessible as possible at constituency level, since they know that their electoral chances will be improved by doing so. To citizens of the UK who have lived most of their lives in constituencies held by MPs of an opposing political persuasion, or who are notoriously lax about their constituency responsibilities, the supposedly unique advantages of the single member system in terms of accessibility appear grossly overstated in comparison.

Electoral systems and democracy

THIS COMPLETES the discussion of the democratic criteria against which the different aspects of electoral systems are to be assessed, including a provisional evaluation of

the UK's existing electoral system in the light of them. It is now time to make a more systematic evaluation of the different electoral systems, both present and proposed, against these democratic criteria. Six systems will be looked at: plurality, or "first past the post"; the Alternative Vote in single member constituencies; the Single Transferable Vote in multi-member constituencies; the closed list proportional representation system; the Additional Member (or Mixed-Member) System; finally, the Jenkins Commission's hybrid AV-Plus system combining the Alternative Vote with a small proportion of additional members. After a brief account of each system (see also Table 1), its advantages and disadvantages will be itemised according to the democratic criteria outlined in the first part of this paper.

Plurality rule or FPTP

Political parties present one candidate each in single-member constituencies, and the candidate with the largest number of votes is elected, regardless of the proportion of the vote obtained. The respective advantages and disadvantages of this system as currently in operation for the Westminster Parliament have been sufficiently discussed already, and can be summarised as follows:

Advantages

- ✓ It usually produces single party majorities in Parliament, thus making the formation of government the direct outcome of the election.
- ✓ The relatively small size of constituencies gives localities a readily identifiable representation in parliament, and may make for easier access to individual representatives on the part of their constituents.

Disadvantages

- ✗ The accountability of parties to the electorate is reduced by the potential arbitrariness of the relation between any rise or fall in the popular vote and gains or losses in parliamentary seats.
- ✗ The accountability of individual representatives to electors is weak, given the large number of "safe seats", and the lack of choice between candidates of the same party.
- ✗ It encourages the concentration of party electoral effort on marginal seats and their "swing" voters.
- ✗ The composition of Parliament is usually highly unrepresentative of the distribution of political opinion in the country and its regions, as measured by the distribution of the popular vote for the different parties.
- ✗ It excludes minor parties with widely spread support from representation in parliament, and so narrows effective electoral choice.
- ✗ It does not encourage a more socially representative parliament.
- ✗ The value of the vote is very unequal as between voters for different parties and in different regions.
- ✗ Voters in many constituencies are encouraged to vote "tactically" for a second preference, without knowing how other electors will vote.
- ✗ There is less incentive to vote when the outcome in many seats is already known.

The Alternative Vote

As under the plurality system one candidate is put forward by each party in single-member constituencies. However, here voters can list candidates (and thus the parties they stand for) in order of preference; and lower order preferences are taken into account if no candidate has a majority of first preferences. The principle behind this system is that no candidate should be elected who does not command a majority of support in their constituency. This considerably reduces the number of "safe seats" to those where a party has a clear majority, rather than merely a plurality, of first preference votes.

A number of comments are in order here. The first is about the status of the majority principle at constituency level, and how far it can be considered more democratic than the plurality principle of "first past the post". An unthinking identification of majoritarianism with democracy must surely make it so. Yet majoritarianism is a winner-take-all device, which is arguably more appropriate to determining which party or parties should form the government, than in deciding which should be represented in Parliament in the first place. Coherent government requires a predictable majority support (though not necessarily a single party majority) in Parliament. But Parliament itself, to be properly representative as we have seen, should reflect the distribution of political opinion in the country. Electing candidates by majority support in separate individual constituencies is little better than the plurality system in producing a representative Parliament, since it can exclude losing minorities from any representation at all.

This can be seen by considering a hypothetical case in which there was an even distribution of support for three parties across all constituencies in the proportions of 55, 30, 15. Here the two minor parties would end up with no parliamentary representation at all.

Of course such an extreme situation is unlikely to occur in the UK. But we might consider instead what are the probable effects of such a system on party representation, given what is currently known about levels of party support in the country. On the one hand, such a system would rectify the present gross imbalance between votes and seats suffered by the Liberal Democratic Party and its voters. This is because the party would win many second preference votes from Labour and Conservative voters, where neither party wins an outright majority. This would enable the Liberal Democrats to hold the balance of power in many Parliaments.

However, in years when electoral opinion is running very strongly against one of the major parties, as against the Conservatives in 1997, so that they win few second preference votes, the system could enormously distort the respective parliamentary representation as between the two main parties. It was calculated in the Democratic Audit study of the 1997 general election that under AV, Labour would have won 436 seats to 110 for the Conservatives in 1997, although their respective proportions of the popular vote were 44 and 31 per cent (see *Making Votes Count: Replaying the 1990s General Elections under Alternative Electoral Systems*, Dunleavy, P, Margetts, H, O'Duffy, B, and Weir, S, Human Rights Centre, Essex, 1997). This was an even more disproportionate outcome, considered in terms of first preferences, than actually occurred under the plurality system. In Australia, the use of AV for elections to the House of Representatives has produced a number of perverse outcomes.

Apart from redressing some of the inequality suffered by Liberal Democrat voters, the only other advantage of the alternative vote over the plurality rule under present conditions in the UK is that it allows electors to order their preferences between the parties explicitly, and so eliminates the need for tactical voting, or having to second guess what other voters will do. But AV does little to extend the voters' effective choice of parties, since smaller parties with evenly spread first preference support find it hard to gain any representation, especially if they do not attract many second preference votes. Nor does the system allow any choice between candidates of the same party. The overall balance of advantages and disadvantages for this system from a democratic perspective can thus be summarised as follows:

Advantages

- ✓ A substantial minority party of the centre, such as the Liberal Democrats, enjoys more proportionate representation in parliament, through its ability to attract second preference votes.
- ✓ By enlarging the number of potentially marginal seats, it encourages the parties to spread their electoral effort more widely.
- ✓ Voters are able to rank their preferences for party candidates explicitly.
- ✓ The relatively small size of constituencies gives localities a readily identifiable representation in Parliament, and may make for easier access to individual representatives on the part of their constituents.

Disadvantages

- ✗ The accountability of parties to the electorate is reduced by the potential arbitrariness of the relation between any rise or fall in the popular vote and gains or losses in parliamentary seats.
- ✗ The accountability of individual representatives to electors is weak, given the still considerable number of safe seats, and the lack of choice between candidates of the same party.
- ✗ The composition of Parliament can be highly unrepresentative of the distribution of political opinion in the country and its regions, as measured by the distribution of the first preference vote for the different parties.
- ✗ It excludes minor parties with widely spread first preference support from representation in Parliament, unless they can attract substantial second preference votes.
- ✗ It does not encourage a more socially representative Parliament.
- ✗ The value of the first preference vote can be very unequal as between voters for different parties and in different regions, though this is partially compensated by the weight given to second preferences.
- ✗ There is less incentive to vote when the outcome in some seats is already known.

STV in multi-member constituencies

This is a system of multi-member constituencies, in which voters list candidates in order of preference. STV gives the voters the greatest range of choice, both between candidates of the same party, and between candidates of different parties if they wish to "split" their vote. It also produces a Parliament that represents more accurately the popular vote for the different parties, both nationally and regionally, than either FPTP or AV; though it is a preferential, not a proportional system as such, and in this respect produces less proportional results than a list PR system, or the "classic" AMS/MMS.

STV however broadly shares the typical advantages of proportionality from a democratic point of view: all votes count towards the result, and count more equally; Parliament is more representative of political opinion in the country; parties are encouraged to make their selection of candidates more socially representative; and so on. Coalition government is a highly probable consequence. The advantages and disadvantages of this system from a democratic point of view can thus be summarised as follows:

Advantages

- ✓ The accountability of parties to the electorate is strengthened by the more direct relation between the rise or fall in the popular vote and the gain or loss of parliamentary seats.
- ✓ The accountability of individual representatives is increased by the ability of voters

to choose between candidates of the same party or different parties.

- ✓ Parliament is more broadly representative of the distribution of political opinion in the country.
- ✓ A more socially representative Parliament is encouraged by the incentive for parties to offer a balanced slate of candidates, and the ability of voters to choose between them.
- ✓ Votes broadly count more equally, regardless of which party electors choose and in which region of the country they happen to live.
- ✓ Voters have an effective choice for minor parties, knowing that they can secure parliamentary representation once they cross a constituency quota of votes.
- ✓ The electoral effort of parties has to be equally spread across the country, and the precise boundaries of constituencies have much less political salience.
- ✓ Voters can access a representative of their choice for constituency purposes.

Disadvantages

- ✗ Electoral accountability may be reduced by a more indirect link between the election and the formation of a government.
- ✗ The accountability of governing parties may be obscured if there is a lack of transparency in coalition arrangements.
- ✗ The larger size of constituency may diminish the accessibility of members to their constituents.

Closed list proportional representation

This system involves multi-member constituencies, in which electors have one vote for a party list of candidates. Candidates are elected by means of a quota system which ensures broad proportionality between seats and votes cast. Because securing proportionality is the explicit aim of the system, it achieves it more surely than a non-list system. By the same token, it has all the advantages of proportionality from a democratic point of view, together with any disadvantages that might come with coalition government.

However, under List PR voters have no choice between candidates, since their order on the list is determined by the party; and this can make prospective candidates particularly subservient to party bosses, whether local, regional or national. This last drawback would be minimised under an "open list" system, in which voters were able to order their own preferences for candidates on the party list.

Advantages

- ✓ The accountability of parties to the electorate is strengthened by the direct relation between the rise or fall in the popular vote and the gain or loss of parliamentary seats.
- ✓ Parliament is more broadly representative of the distribution of political opinion in the country.
- ✓ A more socially representative parliament is encouraged by the incentive for parties to offer a balanced list of candidates.
- ✓ Votes count more or less equally, regardless of which party electors choose and in which region of the country they happen to live.
- ✓ Voters have an effective choice for minor parties, knowing that they can secure parliamentary representation once they cross a constituency threshold of votes.
- ✓ The electoral effort of parties has to be equally spread across the country, and the precise boundaries of constituencies have much less political salience.
- ✓ Voters can access a member of their choice for constituency purposes.

Disadvantages

- X** Electoral accountability may be reduced by a more indirect link between the election and the formation of a government.
- X** The accountability of governing parties may be obscured if there is a lack of transparency in coalition arrangements.
- X** The accountability of individual representatives to voters is weak, given the lack of choice between candidates of the same party.
- X** The larger size of constituency may diminish the accessibility of members to their constituents.

AMS/MMS

This system is a combination of party list and single member constituencies. Electors cast two votes, one for a constituency candidate to be elected under the plurality rule, and one for a closed party list. The number of the latter to be elected is determined by the number required to make each party's representation in the region as proportionate as possible to its share of the vote. How proportional the system is depends on the ratio of list to constituency seats; here we assume a 50/50 split, which is highly proportional in its effects.

The advantage of this system over List PR (see above) is that it retains the single-member constituency, and so makes its member readily identifiable for constituency purposes. Voters are also able to make some judgment on individuals in the constituency election, by voting for a preferred candidate from their second preference party, knowing that this can be offset overall by their vote for the party of their choice in the list election. However, the system creates two types of representative, those with constituency responsibilities and those without; and the former have to serve up to twice as many electors as under a simple single-member system.

Advantages

- ✓ The accountability of parties to the electorate is strengthened by the direct relation between the rise or fall in the popular vote and the gain or loss of parliamentary seats.
- ✓ The accountability of individual constituency representatives is increased by the ability of voters to "split their ticket" between constituency and list votes.
- ✓ Parliament is more broadly representative of the distribution of political opinion in the country.
- ✓ A more socially representative Parliament is encouraged by the incentive for parties to offer a balanced list of candidates.
- ✓ Votes count more or less equally, regardless of which party electors choose and in which region of the country they happen to live.
- ✓ Voters have an effective choice for minor parties, knowing that they can secure parliamentary representation once they cross a regional threshold of votes.
- ✓ The electoral effort of parties has to be equally spread across the country, and the precise boundaries of constituencies have much less political salience.

Disadvantages

- X** Electoral accountability may be reduced by a more indirect link between the election and the formation of a government.
- X** The accountability of governing parties may be obscured if there is a lack of transparency in coalition arrangements.
- X** Having two kinds of representative (constituency and list) creates a sharp division in responsibility and individual accountability between members.

X Constituency members are responsible for up to twice as many constituents as under a simple single-member system.

AV Plus

This hybrid product of the Jenkins Commission is exhaustively examined in *The Politico's Guide to Electoral Reform*, by Dunleavy, P, Margettes, H, and Weur, S, Politico's, 1998. It is an additional member system which combines single-member constituencies elected under the Alternative Vote (see above and Table 1) with relatively small party list members drawn from fairly small sub-regions. The *Politico's Guide* analyses how the three alternative models the Commission offered would work and compared the results with those of a similar system based on FPTP constituency elections.

Here some general comments can be made. First, either element on its own would only offer a marginal improvement, from a democratic point of view, on our present plurality system. The relative advantages and disadvantages of AV can be seen above. And AMS with a relatively small ratio of list to constituency MPs would, on its own, only iron out the worst disproportionalities of the present system, rather than produce a genuinely representative Parliament.

It is the combination of AV in constituencies, however, with a relatively modest "top-up" list, that is the distinctive feature of this system. In elections and regions where AV on its own produces disproportionate results between the main parties, the list will rectify the worst of these anomalies. However, in elections and regions where AV produces relatively proportional results between the main parties, the list element will allow smaller parties with a thin but widely spread vote to achieve parliamentary representation. It thus represents a compromise which sacrifices some proportionality to the desire to allow the parties still sometimes to win a majority of parliamentary seats as a minority of the vote, and to keep constituency size as near as possible to the present. How significant these latter factors are must be a matter of judgment. This system is also likely to do less to rectify the lack of social representativeness of the current single-member system.

Advantages

- ✓ The accountability of parties to the electorate is strengthened by a more direct relation between the rise or fall in the popular vote and the gain or loss of parliamentary seats.
- ✓ Parliament is more broadly representative of the distribution of political opinion, especially "centre" opinion, in the country.
- ✓ Votes count more equally than under plurality-rule or AV, regardless of which party electors choose and in which region of the country they happen to live, but not so equally as under STV or AMS.
- ✓ Voters are able to rank their preferences for party candidates in the constituency section explicitly.
- ✓ The electoral effort of parties has to be equally spread across the country.
- ✓ The relatively small size of constituencies may make for easier access to individual representatives on the part of their constituents.

Disadvantages

- X** Electoral accountability may be reduced by a more indirect link between the election and the formation of a government.
- X** The accountability of governing parties may be obscured if there is a lack of transparency in coalition arrangements.

X The accountability of individual representatives to electors is weak, given the lack of choice between candidates of the same party.

X It may exclude minor parties with widely spread support from representation in parliament.

X It does little to encourage a more socially representative Parliament.

X Having two kinds of representative (constituency and list) creates a division in responsibility and individual accountability between members.

Conclusion

The purpose of this analysis is to allow people to draw their own conclusions, both about the democratic criteria developed in this file and about the comparative assessment of electoral systems deriving from them. They will need to determine for themselves the degree of weight they give to the respective advantages and disadvantages identified for each system. It seems that Labour, if they are returned to government after the next election, may hold the long-delayed referendum on the choice of an electoral system for elections to Parliament. It is to be hoped that the government would initiate a wide-ranging and open debate about such a choice between different systems; that the choice will not be confined to what MPs think is to their best advantage; and that the views of the public and electors will predominate over the interests of the Labour party or of political parties in general. We now have some comparatively brief experience of different electoral systems in the UK and we can learn more from the longer experience of other nations – such as Australia, Germany, Ireland and New Zealand – that use different systems for elections to their legislatures.

One immediate conclusion, however, seems pretty unavoidable. There is comparatively little to be said from a democratic point of view on behalf of our existing electoral system for parliamentary elections; and a change to a different one would make an important contribution to the renewal of democratic politics in this country.