

# How to Choose an Electoral System

The British Academy Policy Centre report on choosing an electoral system for the UK was launched on 10 March 2010. Its authors, **Professor Simon Hix**, **Professor Ron Johnston FBA** and **Professor Iain McLean FBA**, explain why it has turned out to be even more topical than it was when the Academy commissioned it.

**I**N THEIR 2005 election manifestos, the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats both called for the House of Lords to become wholly or largely elected. Prime Minister Gordon Brown has now promised that the same commitment will appear in the next Labour manifesto. Unless one of the parties backtracks, the commitment will therefore appear in the 2010 manifestos of all three major parties. The House of Commons has voted for either an all-elected Lords or an 80% elected Lords, and rejected all other options as to the composition of the Lords, in its last round of votes on the subject. The (unelected) Lords themselves have voted to remain unelected.

A profusion of different electoral systems is now in use in the United Kingdom: for the Scottish Parliament, and Welsh and Northern Irish Assemblies; for European Parliament elections (themselves different in Northern Ireland from the rest of the UK); for local councils in Scotland; for the Mayors of London and other places that have voted to have elected mayors; and for the London Assembly. No two of those systems are exactly the same, and voters have become confused when they have to vote using two electoral systems on the same day.

As to the Commons, the House itself voted in February 2010 in favour of a referendum, to take place in 2011, on replacing the current 'first-past-the-post' electoral system by the system known as Alternative Vote (AV). Other referendums are possibly on the horizon, including one on the constitutional future of Scotland.

There is no such thing as a perfect electoral system. Systems have different purposes, some of which are incompatible. The 'deep magic'

of social choice theory has shown that no system can meet certain sets of modest criteria simultaneously. Accordingly, every electoral system has some virtues; some defects; and some features which are virtues or defects depending on the speaker's point of view. The British Academy commissioned two political scientists (Simon Hix and Iain McLean) and a geographer (Ron Johnston) to produce a report for policy-makers, the media, and concerned citizens on the features of the different families of electoral systems. Almost every system we consider in our report is either in use somewhere in the UK or has been proposed for elections either to the Commons or to a future elected upper house.

## Three families of electoral systems

The report classes electoral systems into three families. First, there are *single-member constituency systems*. These include first-past-the-post and AV. Typically, these systems preserve a clear link between the MP and her/his constituency, and usually lead to single-party government. On the other hand, they can produce highly disproportional outcomes, with some parties gaining far more or fewer seats than their shares of the vote. These systems also encourage parties and governments to focus their attention on a handful of swing-voters in marginal constituencies, who can have vastly divergent opinions on key issues to the majority of the electorate. And whether these systems deliver a

Figure 1. The authors of the report, at its launch on 10 March 2010: Angela Cummine (research assistant), Iain McLean, Ron Johnston and Simon Hix. Photo: M. Crossick.



clear majority to a single party is about to be tested. We show that the answer to this last issue depends on electoral geography. Canada, which uses first-past-the-post, has recently had a series of minority governments.

Secondly, there are *multi-member constituency systems*, such as the Single Transferable Vote (STV) and List systems (which themselves divide into closed-list and open-list systems). These have the opposite features to single-member district systems: they preserve proportionality, but sometimes at the expense of coalition government or a clear link between the legislator and the constituency. Some people prefer the compromises that arise from coalition government to decisive single-party government, and so will not see this as a potential ‘danger’ of proportional representation (PR). Also, attributing the allegedly strong constituency-link in British politics to single-member constituencies might be mistaken, as many countries with multi-member systems also have strong links between MPs and their local constituencies, as in Ireland for example.

Thirdly, there are *mixed-member systems*, as in Germany, New Zealand, Scotland, Wales, and London. Under these systems, some MPs are elected in single-member constituencies, and others in (large in some cases) multi-member constituencies in a way designed to secure overall proportionality, or something approaching it. Like multi-member systems, the more proportional these systems are, the less likely they are to produce single-party government. Additional features of these systems are that they create two classes of members, one with a constituency link and the other without, and they can be complex for voters and parties to navigate.

**Technical issues**

Some more technical (nerdy, anorakish) issues are surprisingly important, and policy-makers need to understand them if they are not to be surprised by predictable outcomes they did not expect. One such is: how big should multi-member constituencies be (i.e. how many representatives or seats there should be from each constituency); and should they be drawn specially to be equal in electorate (to have the same number of voters in each electorate), or drawn from existing administrative boundaries such as Scotland, London, or Yorkshire & the Humber (where voter numbers will vary according to different population size)? The bigger a multi-member constituency, the smaller a party’s share of the votes cast before it wins its first seat. That is an obvious matter of arithmetic, neither good nor bad in itself, but with interesting consequences. More subtly, if constituencies have different magnitudes (i.e. numbers of elected legislators), the electoral chances of small parties will be better in big constituencies than small ones. This can be observed in elections to the European Parliament, where the constituencies are the UK’s twelve standard regions. The largest of these (London, and South-East England) have more than double the number of seats of the smallest (North-East England, and Northern Ireland).

The second subtle issue is what scholars call ‘apportionment’. MPs come in whole numbers. Vote shares, and seat shares in multi-member constituencies, are fractions. The task is to fit the one into the other, and is not as straightforward as it looks. We explain the basic maths of



Figure 2. An Australian example of a ballot paper using the Alternative Vote system.



Figure 3. At the launch of the British Academy Policy Centre report, the former Chancellor and Foreign Secretary, Geoffrey Howe, argued that the burden of proof rested with those who wanted to change the voting system for General Elections. Speakers at the launch also included Tony Wright MP (Chair, Public Administration Select Committee) and Paul Tyler (Liberal Democrat Spokesperson for Constitutional Affairs).  
Photo: M. Crossick.

apportionment. We show that there is only one fair system for assigning seats to each multi-member constituency, as the UK already has to do each time there is a European Parliament election. For the problem of assigning seats to the parties in a multi-member constituency after the votes have been cast, there are several different possible systems, each with its characteristic benefits and drawbacks, some of them not obvious on the surface, as we illustrate.

### Practical manual

Our report is designed to be a practical manual. We describe and illustrate the salient features of the main systems and set out, briefly and with minimal technical detail, what adoption of any system implies for:

- the electorate;
- the parties; and
- the system designers and administrators.

We do not advocate any particular system, and neither does the British Academy. At the next election, voters will be assailed on all sides by politicians claiming that one system is ‘the best’. You can bet that the best system for each political party is the system under which it calculates it will gain the most seats. Do not be taken in by such claims: check them against our report first.

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*Choosing an Electoral System*, a research report prepared for the British Academy by Simon Hix, Ron Johnston and Iain McLean, with research assistance from Angela Cummine, is available via [www.britac.ac.uk/policy/](http://www.britac.ac.uk/policy/)

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