T O U C H S T O N E

EXTRAS

Getting it in Proportion?

Trade unions and electoral reform

TUC

Contents

This report has been prepared by the TUC as a discussion paper for the trade union movement.

Getting it in Proportion?

This Touchstone Extra pamphlet sets out the arguments for and against changing Britain's electoral system. It puts the debate in context by summarising the political and historical background against which our democracy has developed, examines how well the existing system works and looks at possible reasons for change. It describes the various alternative electoral systems, discusses the practicalities of change and concludes with a useful comparison of different systems and their advantages and disadvantages. It is not intended to draw any final conclusion about whether or not electoral reform is needed, but rather to be used as a starting point for further debate.

Touchstone Extra

These new online pamphlets are designed to complement the TUC's influential Touchstone Pamphlets by looking in more detail at specific areas of policy debate raised in the series. Touchstone Extra publications are not statements of TUC policy but instead are designed, like the wider Touchstone Pamphlets series, to inform and stimulate debate. The full series can be downloaded at **www.tuc.org.uk/touchstonepamphlets**

Foreword
Brendan Barber

At our 2009 Congress, delegates voted in support of a motion calling on the TUC to stimulate debate about electoral reform for Westminster elections. This Touchstone Extra report is designed to start that debate.

It does not come to any conclusion, but sets out both the arguments for change and for sticking with the status quo. Without getting bogged down in detail, it describes the various alternative electoral systems and sets out their advantages and disadvantages. It argues that there is no perfect electoral system that suits every part of government in every country, but rather that different electoral systems all have their own strengths and weaknesses.

It draws out one factor that is sometimes missing in what can be a rather abstract debate about voting systems. This is that a country's electoral system will shape a country's politics. Politicians want to get elected and hold power, and they are bound to act in a way that maximises their chances of doing this.

For example, whatever the strengths of our present system it encourages the major parties to concentrate their efforts in marginal seats, and on the floating voters within them who are most likely to switch their votes. Safe seats and core voters end up getting taken for granted.

That is not to say that this is a sufficient argument for change. That would be to pre-empt the debate. But it does make the case that voting systems can have a real impact on the lives of ordinary people, and is not just a 'chattering class' issue.

Of course we should not change our electoral system without much debate and thought. There needs to be a very strong case before we change it. It is up to those who want to see a change make the case and win the support of those who have not yet been convinced. Inevitably perhaps this paper spends more time discussing the case for change, how it might work and what it would mean. This is because the case for the status quo is simply and straightforwardly put: the argument for change is not strong or convincing enough. I know that many people in the trade union movement feel this, just as there are passionate advocates of change.

The paper also discusses the practicalities of change. Few people seem to disagree that if we are to have a change then there should be a referendum.

While no-one knows what the result of the next election will be, with the Conservatives opposed to a referendum the only sure way to secure a popular vote on the voting system is for this Parliament to legislate for a referendum.

No-one is calling for a snap referendum that could change the electoral system for the next general election. But if we want change then either a referendum on polling day, or a requirement to have one shortly after the general election, is the best way to achieve it.

Of course we may conclude that the existing first-past-the-post system is the right one for the UK, but if so, then my strong view is that we would need to look at other political reforms or changes to our political system.

The MPs expenses scandal, the declining turnout and the relatively small share of the popular vote required to form a government, while the vote for third and other parties rises, all point to something wrong with our democracy. We have an unelected second chamber. Our Parliament remains unrepresentative of the population particularly in regard to gender and ethnicity. Parties can become dependent on limited numbers of super-rich donors, who do not even have to be resident for tax purposes.

The evidence suggests we need a major clean-up and reinvigoration of our politics. It is very unlikely that there is a single measure that can do this, and it will take action in a number of areas. Electoral reform may or may not be part of what is required, but unions – as the largest mass democratic organisations in our society – must make their contribution to analysing what is wrong and helping reinvigorate our political system.

Unions have democracy built into our DNA; it is how we conduct our internal business. The basic justification for unions is that the power relationship between employer and employee is fundamentally one-sided, and that employees need to join together to restore some balance.

But the same argument holds for wider society. Power and wealth become concentrated in fewer and fewer hands without countervailing pressures secured through democratic institutions, law and regulation, quality public services and a strong, vibrant civil society. None of those are possible without a democratic society. This is why it is right for unions to play a part in this important debate.

1 Introduction and background

Britain's early trade unions played a crucial role in the battle to give every adult the vote. As one author puts it:

> Union contingents were already in evidence during the demonstrations in favour of the Great Reform Act, which took the first step to extend the franchise in the borough constituencies in 1832. Then, in 1867, the unions were one of the major elements in the extra-parliamentary alliance which agitated successfully for the male householder franchise, a contribution to democracy which they repeated in 1884 when they campaigned for the extension of that franchise to the county constituencies. Even then, other aspects of constitutional reform remained high on the agenda of the TUC and its growing parliamentary group which eventually became the Labour Party: the state payment of MPs' salaries, for example, along with full manhood suffrage and the extension of the vote to women, which eventually came in 1918 and 1928.[1]

Trade unions had an obvious interest in extending the vote. Unions were formed to give the unorganised and unrepresented a voice in the workplace to counter arbitrary employer power. Extending the franchise extended the same principles to society. A Parliament elected by, and accountable only to, property-owning and wealthy men would never act in the interests of the majority.

There was a healthy debate about the best way of organising the electoral system as the vote was extended. In the early years of the twentieth century, unions tended to back a proportional system. In 1913 the Labour Representation Committee (the early form of the Labour Party, whose votes were predominantly from unions) passed a motion saying "no system of election can be satisfactory which does not give opportunity to all parties to obtain representation in proportion to their voting strength."

Of course the early Labour Party was a small third party at that stage. Small third parties normally support electoral reform as a first-past-the-post system favours big parties. Without a change to the electoral system it still managed to replace the Liberal Party to form a majority government – though it had to wait until 1945 to do so.

Trade unions have also changed since those pioneering days of arguing for votes for all. The TUC now represents, in a single body, a range of unions with very different approaches to politics. Some are affiliated to the Labour Party, some involve themselves in electoral politics in other ways and some remain strictly neutral when it comes to party-political matters.

Modern electoral politics can be said to have started with the election of the 1945 Labour government. For much of the time since then, politics has been dominated by the two big parties. With the TUC careful to maintain maximum unity between unions with different political traditions, and having a full agenda of workplace-based practical issues to pursue, there was little formal union interest in the voting system or other constitutional issues for many years.

But that has changed. Starting in the 1980s, there has been rising union interest in constitutional change, including electoral reform. The departure of the SDP from the Labour Party, and its eventual merger with the Liberal Party, produced a significant third party vote for the first time in many years. This made it easier for Margaret Thatcher's Conservatives, with their hostility to trade unions, to achieve substantial majorities at elections without anything like majority support among the electorate.

This experience helped drive the campaign for devolution in Scotland and Wales. The Conservatives were in an electoral minority in each country, yet were running both from Westminster. Trade unions played an important role in the campaign for devolution, particularly in Scotland, where the STUC had a key and highly visible role in the Scottish Constitutional Convention that drew up the plans for devolution. These included a proportional electoral system for the Scottish Parliament.

In England too, more people started to point out that, whatever the size of the Conservative majority in the House of Commons, many of their policies failed to command majority support among the electorate. This led to the formation of campaign groups such as Charter 88.

Labour's big majority in the UK general election in 1997 marked a break with the policies of the previous Conservative governments, but it did not stop the growing debate on electoral systems. In part this was due to the new government's big programme of constitutional change including Scottish and Welsh devolution; an elected mayor and assembly in London; and a new system for European elections. All involved the introduction of various kinds of voting systems more proportional than the traditional first-past-the-post we still use for parliamentary elections.

Labour's 1997 manifesto promised a referendum on whether to change the Westminster system. The new Labour government set up a commission under Roy Jenkins, which reported in September 1998 and recommended a change to a new so-called 'AV+' electoral system. (See section 3 for an explanation of the alphabet soup of different electoral systems.)

Once in power Labour did not honour their pledge to hold a referendum. Opponents won the upper hand, although there continue to be prominent supporters of change within the government. Subsequent Labour manifestos did not repeat the manifesto pledge but have all said: "A referendum remains the right way to agree any change for Westminster."

The issue has grown in importance again in the last few years for a different set of reasons. There is a widespread sense that there is something wrong with British democratic politics. Turnout in elections is now at a record low. Fewer than one in four eligible voters backed Labour – the winning party at the 2005 election. The MPs' expenses scandal has led to great disillusionment and even disgust with democratic politics. This was reflected in the 2009 European elections, which saw both a fall in turnout and the further advance of multi-party politics.

There have been many suggestions about what to do about this – and why it has come about. Many say that changing our electoral system should be one response. Campaigners have pressed Labour to honour its 1997 commitment to a referendum by either holding one on the day of the next general election or by passing a paving bill that would require a referendum sometime after the general election. Gordon Brown told the 2009 Labour Party Conference that he wanted to see a pledge to have a referendum on a move to AV in Labour's manifesto for the next election. At the time of writing there is talk of legislating for a post-election referendum.

While interest in electoral reform has ebbed and flowed, some trade unionists have always backed first-past-the-post. They say it produces strong governments, discourages extremists and puts issues before the voters rather than leaving them to post-election deals between different parties.

But although there have been both enthusiasts for change and stout defenders of the status quo within the trade union movement, neither side has taken their case directly to the TUC, and electoral reform has not been on the agenda of the annual Congress in living memory. That changed at the 2009 Congress. There unions agreed a resolution, by a substantial majority, which called for a debate on whether the electoral system should change.

The relevant section reads:

> *Congress recognises that democratic renewal also requires elected politicians to be properly representative of, and accountable to, their constituents and therefore calls on the General Council to instigate a debate within the trade union movement on change in the current parliamentary electoral system towards a system of proportional representation*

This discussion document is the product of that resolution. It draws no final conclusion about the best electoral system for the UK, but aims to encourage and inform a debate about electoral reform within and beyond the trade union movement. Insofar as it can be said to argue a case, it makes four points:

1. There is no perfectly democratic electoral system. We expect our democratic system to balance a number of different objectives that are not fully compatible with each other. No system can therefore meet them all, and any practical system is a result of compromises and choices between these objectives.

2. Different countries and communities have different political cultures, history and institutions. These can dramatically change the context in which an electoral system operates and the demands made on it. What is appropriate for the USA's two-party system may be quite wrong for countries with multi-party traditions or those making the transition from a non-democratic system without strong existing parties.

3. Circumstances can change. People may decide that they now want the electoral system to reflect different priorities. The political system can evolve – for example a strong two-party system can break down if parties split or new parties gain support. Many supporters of reform would argue that the UK's political landscape has changed markedly from the strong two-party politics of the years after the Second World War.

4. A country's electoral system will influence its politics. The way that parties and individual politicians behave will be influenced by the electoral system in which they seek to win power. What electoral system we have is therefore not some free-floating abstract debate, but can make a real difference to people's lives.

2   Is there a case for change?

Changing an electoral system should not be done lightly. Our present system for electing the House of Commons has not changed substantially for many years. It would be dangerous to make it easy or routine for the government of the day to change the electoral system in order to increase its chance of winning the next election. This is why most people involved on either side of this debate recognise that a referendum should decide change.

Some people oppose first-past-the-post on principle and would argue that it has always been wrong, but many of those who now advocate alternatives argue that change is necessary because politics have changed. What once worked well, they say, no longer serves us today.

They argue that, in the Britain of the 1940s–60s, a two-party system reflected political reality. Most people thought two parties an adequate choice, and identified with one or the other. As those two parties had to win the middle ground to win an election the system prevented extremism, though it did not prevent radical change of the kind introduced after the Second World War when the Attlee government had wide electoral support for a substantial reform programme.

But these conditions no longer apply in the UK, the argument continues. Identification with the two major parties has fallen. The rise of third and other parties make it possible for parties to win a first-past-the-post election with a relatively low level of support and therefore introduce radical change that does not have broad support. Fewer voters elect the government of the day, many feel unrepresented and many argue that their vote has no influence on the result. Analysis of voting trends confirms that electoral politics today is very different from half a century ago.

Voting trends

Voting patterns have changed. Chart 1 (page 10) shows the proportion of votes cast for parties other than Labour or Conservative since the 1945 election. This not only includes the traditional third party of Liberalism in various guises over the years, but also nationalists in Scotland and Wales and parties in Northern Ireland (which was once mostly represented by Conservative and Unionist MPs). In addition, in recent years the Greens, UKIP and the BNP have enjoyed significant support, particularly in the European elections. The proportion of the electorate who have voted for the party who wins the election has declined, as Chart 2 (page 10) shows.

The charts demonstrate how two trends have reinforced each other. First, turnout has fallen. In 1950 84 per cent of the electorate voted. That fell to 61 per cent in 2005. Second, the rise of support for parties other than Labour or Conservative, despite their continuing dominance of seats in the House of Commons, means that the winning party needs a smaller proportion of votes to get more seats than the other parties.

Chart 1: Support for parties other than Labour and Conservative has grown
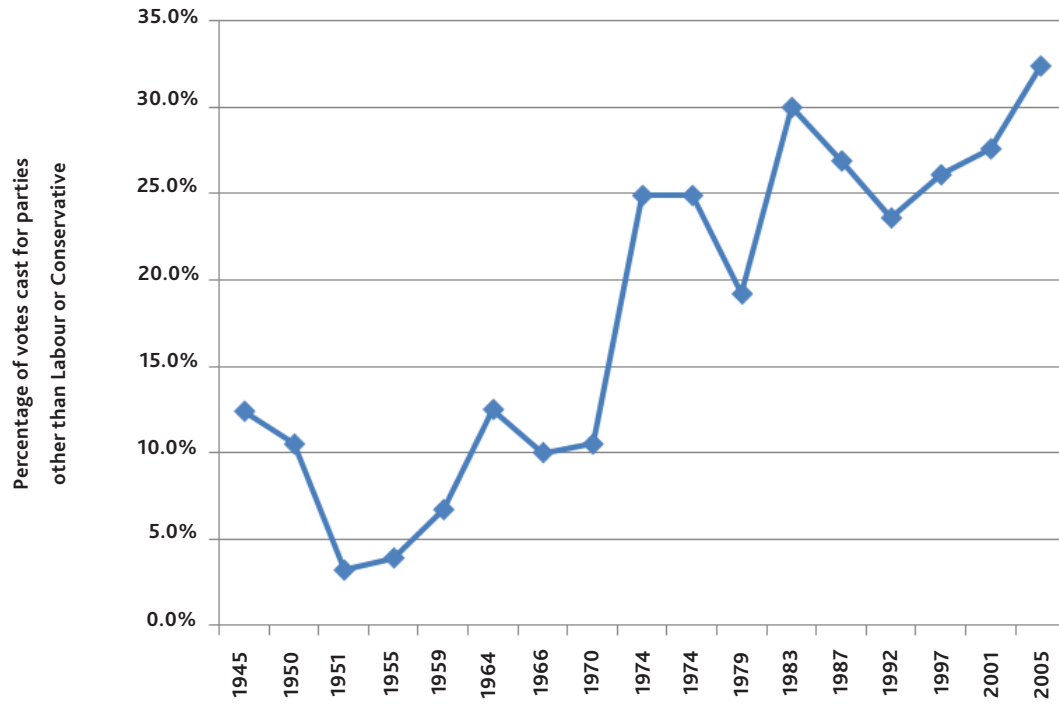
Source: Charts 1–3 are TUC calculations from raw data found at www.election.demon.co.uk/ and www.electoralcommission.org.uk/publications-and-research/election-reports

Chart 2: The proportion of the electorate voting for the winning party has declined
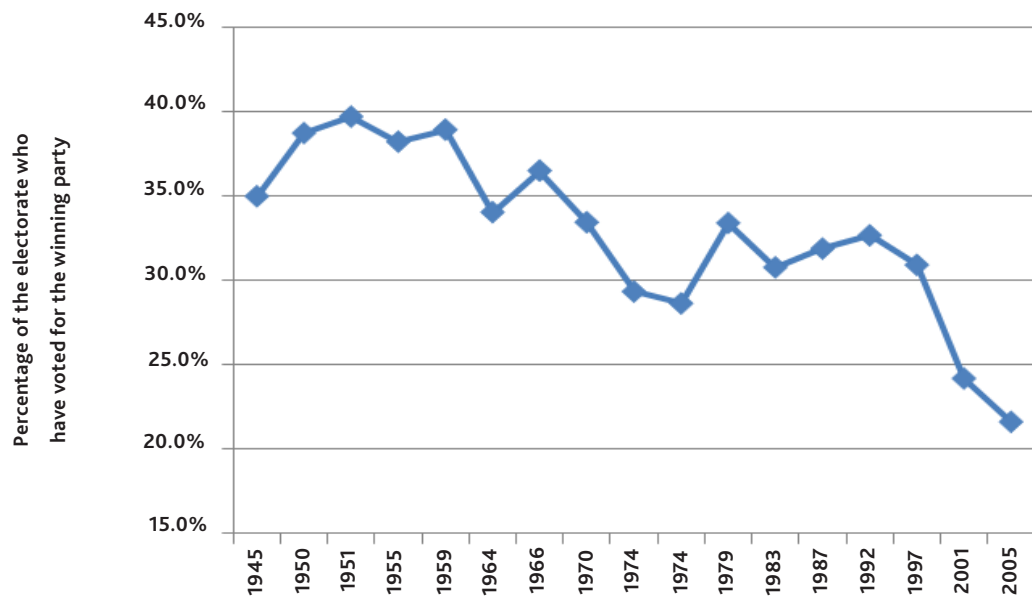
Putting those two trends together produces a big fall in the electoral winning post – that is to say, the number of votes needed to win an election. In 1951 the winning party got 40 per cent of all the population eligible to vote, but in 2005 the proportion had fallen to 20 per cent. Supporters of change would argue that a government elected with just 20 per cent of the electorate is not as legitimate as one with 40 per cent.

This reduced winning post may be one explanation for the growing cynicism among voters. If you vote for a winning party you feel some small sense of ownership over the result, and thus may be more inclined to give your electoral choice the benefit of the doubt. But with four out of five voters not backing the winning party in 2005, it is not surprising that levels of cynicism were higher, even before the expenses scandal.

Many electoral systems – including some that are designed to be more proportional than first-past-the-post – over-represent the winning party to some extent. This can aid the formation of a government and discourage the fracturing of politics.

But reform supporters argue that this now goes too far in the UK. Chart 3 shows this 'over-representation gap' – the difference between the share of seats won by the winning party and the share of the vote won by the winning party. On this measure, 1951 was the most proportional election and 2001 was the least (although there are better mathematical methods for measuring proportionality that look at all parties, they tell the same story).

It is not sensible to divide electoral systems into those that are proportional and those that aren't. A few systems are strictly proportional (though many think they have other drawbacks), but any democratic system has to produce governments that are seen to reflect the political will of the people. It must therefore have some degree of proportionality, even if it is not built in to the system.

Chart 3: The gap between the winning party's proportion of Commons seats and its proportion of the popular vote has grown.
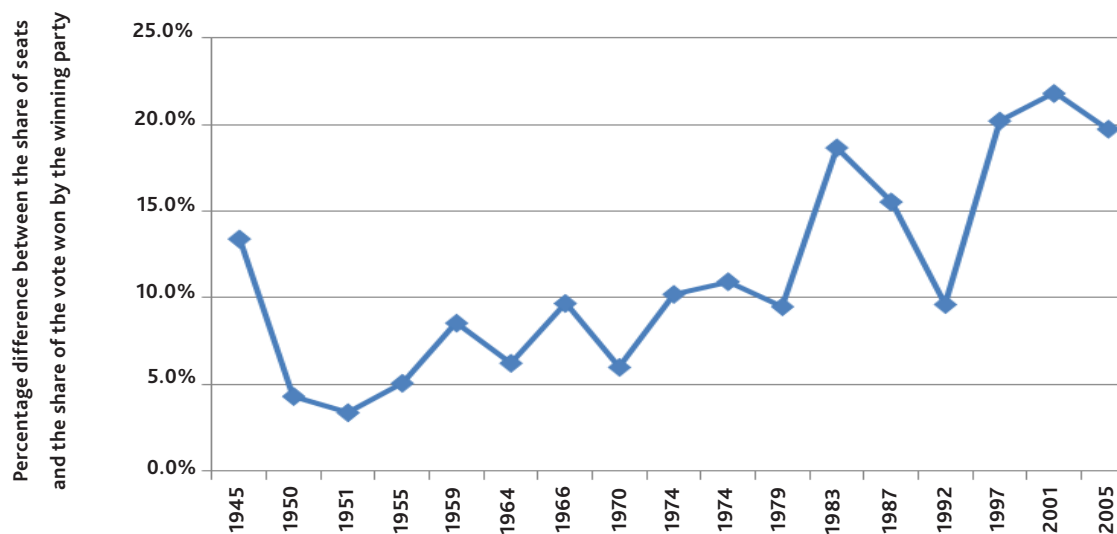
First-past-the-post is not designed to be proportional, but usually the party with the most votes across the country forms the government (this was not the case in 1950 or the first election of 1974 – though neither government lasted long). In other words, for many people it is proportional enough. But Chart 3 does show that it has been getting less proportional over time.

Another factor with first-past-the-post is that decisions about constituency borders and size can affect the result. Some constituencies, such as the Isle of White or the Western Isles, can be bigger or smaller than average because of geographical factors. As party support is not evenly distributed, drawing constituencies differently can produce different results. This has been a huge issue in parts of the USA (where the phrase 'gerrymandering' was invented).

While the UK has avoided US extremes, it is certainly the case that periodic and properly independent boundary reviews of UK constituencies are normally said to end up favouring one or other of the two big parties. Most recently analysts say Labour has done well from current boundaries. Changes that have come into force for the next election do not eliminate this bias, but make it less pronounced.

Electoral systems and the wider political landscape

A country's electoral system is not something neutral that lies above its politics. Politicians want to win elections and therefore will conduct their politics in ways likely to maximise their support in the current electoral system. Change the electoral system and it will undoubtedly change politics. For some this is part of the attraction of a new system, but such a change could result in unforeseen and unintended changes.

To provide an example, the introduction of proportional elections for the European Parliament provided an important boost first to the Green Party and UKIP and, more recently, the BNP. (We will discuss electoral reform and extremism in more detail later.)

Some of this may be due to the sense among voters that they are not choosing a government and that this leaves them freer to express their own preference. But some will also reflect the better chance of minority parties getting elected in a more proportional system – voting for a significant third or fourth party is much less likely to be a 'wasted vote'.

But our current first-past-the-post system also influences the way we do politics in the UK, perhaps in ways that are not obvious as we take our existing system for granted. This should be an important part of the debate about change. Both sides of the argument have important points to make.

Status quo supporters say that first-past-the-post encourages big parties, and thus prevents a fracturing of politics into many small parties. This is because in what is mainly a two-party system, there is a big disincentive for a party to split.

Under first-past-the-post, a split in one party benefits the other big party (who presumably the two sides of the inner-party dispute still oppose) by splitting the vote against them in each constituency. In addition, the smaller of the split factions would find it very hard to win any seats unless its support was geographically concentrated. While its members may feel very strongly about whatever caused the split, they will arguably have less influence in an under-represented third party than they do as members of a big party.

Of course some third parties and independents win seats under first-past-the-post. But while there have been a few three- and even four-way marginal seats, more often the battle ends

up being between two parties as supporters of other parties vote tactically against their least favourite party. For example, the Labour vote has been squeezed in many seats in the south-west, which are now closely contested by the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats. There are similarly seats – mostly urban - where the battleground is between Labour and Lib Dems. In Scotland and Wales there are some two-party marginals involving the nationalists.

Supporters of changing the electoral system often say that first-past-the-post is bad for democracy because it makes parties concentrate on swing voters in marginal seats. Most parliamentary constituencies are safe seats. Because they are unlikely to change hands, the argument runs, parties ignore and neglect them. Similarly core voters are, by definition, unlikely to change their votes so their views can safely be discounted.

Instead parties concentrate on the voters most likely to change their vote in those seats most likely to switch allegiance at an election. A high proportion of swing voters are among the people least interested in politics, polls suggest. Few seem to fit the role of the idealised floating voter taking care to weigh up the pros and cons of the detail of party manifestos.

Critics say this has driven focus-group politics where gimmicky policies are developed to appeal to this small group at the expense of the interests of core voters and of developing a coherent appeal to the whole country.

This argument is strongly supported by many of the trade unionists who support electoral reform. They argue that the interests of Labour voting trade unionists, who make up a substantial proportion of the party's core support, have been neglected as they do not live in marginal seats and are not swing voters. Electoral reform, they say, is not just an issue for the London chattering classes, but could make a big difference throughout the country, particularly those regions dominated by safe seats.

Turnout and engagement

Although the argument that the current system ignores the interests of core voters is of particular interest to Labour-affiliated unions, there is a wider connected complaint. This is the argument that votes are not of equal value under first-past-the-post in the UK.

If you live in a safe seat constituency, your vote does not affect the outcome of the election. Whatever you do, the same party as usual is almost certain to win. Even if you live in a marginal seat, your vote only makes a difference if you support one of the two leading parties in that constituency. If you support another party you have the choice of either 'wasting' your vote on your preferred candidate or voting tactically against the party you dislike the most. Many people would prefer both to be able to back their chosen party and be able to minimise the chances of their least preferred option winning. The current system does not allow this.

Some would say this is the worst of both worlds:

- In a safe seat the result is a foregone conclusion. You can back your chosen party even if they can't win as however you vote it won't affect the outcome. Your vote does not count.

- In a marginal seat your vote has most influence if you vote for the candidate most likely to beat the major party that you dislike the most. Your vote can count, but only if you vote tactically. For many that will mean not supporting their favoured party.

These arguments have led electoral reformers to say that we need a more proportional system to 'make votes count'. This may be one reason why turnout has fallen and why there is growing alienation from politics, reformers say. This argument is set out in detail in the Power Commission's Report[2] (which had strong input from the trade unions). They refute the assertion that turnout has fallen because of growing voter apathy, and say that it is instead due to a growing alienation "felt towards politicians, the main political parties and the key institutions of the political system." They point to evidence of high levels of involvement in community and non-party political involvement, even among those who do not vote.

A fall in turnout is clearly undesirable, but it also has a political effect. It is not the case that everyone is equally liable to stay at home on election day. It is older and more affluent voters who are more likely to vote. This can be seen in other countries too. In the US, Barack Obama was in part able to win because he persuaded people who are traditionally less likely to vote – basically the young, ethnic minorities and the poor – to turn out.

There is some polling evidence that looks at non-voters. The BBC asked ICM to investigate who non-voters would have preferred if they had voted (see Table 1). ComRes's regular polls for the *Independent* ask people how likely they are to vote. In a poll conducted at the end of November 2009[3] they found that equal proportions of men and women were "absolutely certain to vote" but the likelihood of their voting varied by age and class (see Table 2).

The poll results suggest that the older you are, and the higher your social class, the more likely you are to vote. (The blip for DE voters probably reflects that many DEs are pensioners who are more likely to vote.)

Table 1: Non-voters' preferences, by party

Party	2001 (%)	2005 (%)
Conservative	19	24
Labour	53	41
Liberal Democrat	14	19
Others	13	16

Source: ICM surveys of non-voters
(base: all non-voters expressing a party preference)

Table 2: Proportion of population certain to vote, by class and age

Absolutely certain to vote	AB	C1	C2	DE	-	-
%	61	53	41	46		

	18–24	25–34	35–44	45–54	55–64	65+
%	61	53	41	46		

Source: ComRes poll for the *Independent*, November 2009,
http://www.comres.co.uk/page1901302536.aspx

Of course simply changing the electoral system on its own is unlikely to fix the issue of low turnout. People need attractive policies, leaders to whom they can relate and parties with which they can identify. But many reformers argue that a voting system that encourages politicians to campaign everywhere because every vote counted was more likely to encourage parties along this road. And while there are other ways of encouraging greater diversity among candidates, parties may be more likely to field a more diverse range of candidates in order to maximise their appeal to voters.

Coalition governments?

A more proportional system would be more likely to lead to coalition governments. First-past-the-post usually gives the party that wins the most votes more seats than a strictly proportional share-out would allow. It thus has more chance of forming a 'strong' single party government.

That is not to say that such an outcome is guaranteed. First-past-the-post general elections will not always produce a clear winner – and we have had hung parliaments before, most recently after 1974. Indeed, in the last century only two in every three years had clear single party government. But the more proportional the system, the more likely it is that we would have a minority or coalition government.

Strong governments are somewhat in the eye of the beholder. People may understandably be rather keener on a strong government with a working majority from the party they back, and less keen on one from parties they oppose. Margaret Thatcher's government was both strong and unpopular.

Supporters of first-past-the-post often argue that coalitions are undemocratic because the government's programme is determined by horse-trading after an election rather than the party whose manifesto has the most support – even if only backed by a minority of voters – getting the chance to implement it. Electoral reformers counter that most parties are coalitions (and indeed first-past-the-post encourages this) and that there is just as much horse-trading in such parties but it is done behind closed doors – some before an election, but quite a lot afterwards too.

The more proportional systems used in Wales and Scotland have produced both coalitions and minority governments. Trade unions have managed to influence both kinds in important ways, though this may have as much to do with strong trade union traditions in the devolved parts of the UK as their electoral arrangements. Trade unions played an important role in the campaigns for devolution.

In other European countries where more proportional systems tend to produce coalition governments, unions tend to be influential players within a social partnership system where policy-makers often look to produce consensus where possible.

While electoral systems are only one aspect of this European model, it may well be that political systems in countries that produce coalitions are more open. Because issues are not resolved within a single party, there is inevitably more debate in public and that gives unions more opportunity to influence discussions and help shape consensus.

On the other hand, in a single party system a determined government will find it easier to implement a radical programme of change that may – or may not be – union-friendly. Consensus systems may do better than producing a lowest common denominator compromise, but it is rare for any group to get it all their own way.

Extremists and small parties

One issue that is hotly debated as part of the electoral reform agenda is whether a new electoral system would help the far-right. There are arguments on both sides of this question.

The BNP has gained seats in Europe and in the London Assembly under their more proportional systems. But they first gained a bridgehead in democratic politics by winning council elections run on a first-past-the-post basis.

Electoral reformers argue the real problem is not that the BNP has won seats, but that their support has grown. Their electoral success is a symptom of the problem, not the root cause. They say that one factor in the growth of the BNP is that our current electoral system allows the political parties to neglect parts of their electorate in safe seats. The kind of people who vote BNP are not the swing voters in marginal seats that our current system rewards parties for targeting. The election of BNP candidates should therefore alert the other parties that their policies are not speaking to a significant group of voters. It is better to have this challenge revealed and responded to, than for it to fester and express itself in other ways. 'You don't cure a cold by breaking the thermometer', as reformers say.

But there is a counter argument that says allowing the BNP to win seats gives them a platform and helps legitimise views that should not be part of the political mainstream. It has given them more access to the media, and thus helped them reach voters that they would normally not be able to target.

Of course the only sure way to ensure that extremist parties are not elected is to ban them from participating in elections. But whether that is the right thing to do is a different argument and not within the scope of this document. Whatever electoral system or legal framework for parties we have, there is still a need for constant vigilance against the far-right and their poisonous and divisive ideas. Unions will need to continue to campaign actively against them while encouraging the other parties to implement policies that will reduce the appeal of the BNP.

Many people who support a more proportional electoral system accept that it is perfectly reasonable to have a threshold that stops parties with very small levels of support from getting elected. This is not just a guard against giving a platform to dangerous extremist views with little support, but also prevents the fracturing of politics into many small parties and the election of single interest or frivolous parties.

Some systems therefore have a formal threshold. For example a party needs five per cent support before it can claim any seats in Germany. In many other systems there are effective thresholds. There is no set percentage of votes that a party has to achieve, but the system works in such a way that any party needs a significant level of support before it can achieve representation. (In section 3 the comparison of different practical proportional systems looks at whether they have an effective threshold.)

Effective thresholds are normally a desirable by-product of other features of the electoral system, particularly a desire for geographical representation. The smaller the area in which you apply a proportionality test, the higher the effective threshold becomes. For example if you were to make the whole UK a single constituency and elect 500 MPs, you would need around 0.2 per cent of the vote to elect a single MP. If you break that down into 50 constituencies of 10 MPs, then you would need a much higher proportion of votes in that constituency – just under 10 per cent – to win a single MP.

3 Different electoral systems

There are many electoral systems used in different elections, even within the UK. Whole books have been written about their pros and cons, and electoral reformers have often been sharply divided about the merits of different alternative systems in debates, that can become very technical – and sometimes rather tedious.

But if we accept that different systems can be valid in different circumstances then it is important to understand broadly the various options and their strengths and weaknesses. Even if people generally accept that there are problems with first-past-the-post, it would not be right to change our system unless an alternative one can win wider support. Any system has advantages and disadvantages.

We have not covered multi-round elections here – although they are used in France. This system requires people to vote in a first stage election with the most successful candidates going through to a run-off in a second round. There is very little support for this approach in the UK, and with turnout a problem there are clearly risks in expecting people to vote more than once.

Non-proportional systems

First-past-the-post

Our current system needs least explanation. The country is divided up into roughly equal constituencies and the candidate that receives the most votes is elected. Its strengths and weaknesses have already been described.

Alternative vote

As with first-past-the-post the country is divided into roughly equal constituencies that elect a single MP. But in the alternative vote (AV) system voters put candidates in order of preference.

When the votes are counted, candidates' first preferences are tallied. If one candidate has more than half the first preferences, they are elected. If not the candidate with the fewest first preferences is eliminated and their second preferences are added to the other candidates' totals. If necessary this process is repeated until a candidate gets more than half the total vote.

One strength of this system is that people no longer need to vote tactically. They can vote for their top choice of party, but do not have to worry that it will be a wasted vote as they can continue to express their preferences. The other strength is that every MP can claim that they have the support of half of those voting. Australia has an AV system.

But AV is not designed to be proportional. If only one person is being elected (such as the London Mayor) it is fair to call this a proportional system as the winning candidate has more than half the voters' support (though strictly speaking voters can only express two preferences in London).

However if there are many constituencies, as in a parliamentary election, there is no guarantee that the House of Commons will be more proportional under AV than under first-past-the-post. Sometimes it would be more proportional but sometimes less, and AV has a tendency to help one under-represented party at the expense of another as we shall see below.

AV favours centre-ground parties because they are the most likely to get second preference votes from big party supporters. In first-past-the-post many Labour supporters will tactically vote for the Lib Dem candidate if Labour is likely to be third, but others will stick with Labour. (The mirror image occurs in seats where the Conservatives are third.)

Under AV, Labour or Conservative supporters whose party is likely to be third can also cast a tactical second preference, thereby making it more likely the Lib Dems will win. Given that the Lib Dems get a smaller proportion of seats than votes, this can – in a 'rough justice' kind of way – make the Commons more proportional. But not every constituency has the Lib Dems in likely second place. In seats where they are third, AV can end up making the election result less proportional.

This depends on how Liberal Democrat second preferences divide. If there are equal numbers choosing Labour and Conservative for their second preference then they will not affect the result. But Lib Dem second preferences are not always evenly divided. If they back one of the two big parties over the other, it can make the winning party even more over-represented. This is because in seats where the losing big party might just hold on under first-past-the-post against the winning big party, then they could well lose the seat under AV. This is because more Lib Dem second preferences go to the winning big party. AV has in this situation led to the winning party becoming even more over-represented than it would have done under first past the post.

AV can therefore make an election result more proportional by boosting the third party, but less proportional by benefiting the winning party at the expense of the second party. In some UK elections – probably the majority – the first bias will have made the bigger difference if they had been run as AV. The result will therefore have been more proportional than first-past-the-post. But in some the second bias may have more effect and the result would have been less proportional.

The Electoral Reform Society modelled the 2005 election to see what the House of Commons might look like with different voting systems. Their results suggest both these effects would have come into play. Labour and the Lib Dems would both have got extra seats at the expense of the Conservatives.

While AV helps centre-ground parties as they are likely to be popular second choices, it does not help parties with significant support evenly distributed across the country but who do not win second preferences as easily. For example, the Greens could win 15 per cent of the vote in each constituency but not win a single seat under AV or first-past-the-post.

Under AV there would still be safe seats. While AV makes it easier and perhaps more likely that seats will change at elections, there are still large parts of the country dominated by one of the two big parties. These areas would continue to be 'safe' for those parties.

The expenses scandal and rise of the far-right has led to questions being asked about whether safe seats are good for democracy. AV does not meet this concern.

Proportional systems

Very few electoral systems are designed to be strictly proportional. This is for a range of reasons, but there are two in particular:

- Proportionality only deals with parties. Most systems also consider it desirable to give voters a say over candidates and/or give them the duty to represent particular geographical areas. If voters only get to choose between parties then it is likely that the party machines decide the candidates.

- Strict proportionality encourages a multiplicity of small parties. There is a danger that these will be single-issue, extreme or flippant. This can make politics so fractured that it makes it hard to form a government and can lead to a cacophony of different voices that confuse voters. Most systems therefore either have a deliberately chosen threshold (for example Germany's formal 5 per cent threshold) or have an effective threshold. This is normally done by having constituencies of some kind that return only a limited number of candidates – rather than a single constituency covering the whole country.

Most practical electoral systems, even those designed to be much more proportional than the UK system, are therefore not strictly proportional to the last degree. They also incorporate other factors, such as wanting constituency representation or having a threshold to exclude very small parties.

There are many varieties of practical system that deliberately aim to include a degree of proportionality, but they are broadly divisible into three general types:

Party lists

In a party list system, voters vote for the party rather than the candidate. Seats are then divided between the parties in proportion to the votes cast. The winning candidates are drawn from lists submitted by the parties.

In Israel there is a single national constituency, making it easy for very small parties to get elected. In the UK we use a list system for the European elections with regional constituencies. This introduces an effective threshold that excludes very small parties, but has allowed UKIP, the Greens and now the BNP to get elected. The most populous regions have more MEPs, thus making the effective threshold a bit lower in those regions.

One variation on the party list system gives voters the chance to express a preference between candidates on the party list, but in practice voters tend not to do that.

Party list systems centralise the selection of candidates. To get elected a candidate needs to be high on their party list, rather than make an appeal to the electorate. Once elected, representatives need to keep in with their party machines rather than with voters.

Multi-member constituencies

Unlike the party list system, this approach is still based around candidates rather than parties. It is based on big constituencies that elect more than one candidate. Voters order their candidates in preference, and can therefore choose between candidates from the

same party. The votes are counted in most multi-member constituency systems by the single transferable vote (STV) method.

STV is too complex to explain in full here, but in brief it initially allocates an elector's vote to his or her most preferred candidate. After this candidate has either been either elected or eliminated, surplus or unused votes are transferred according to the voters' subsequent preferences.

Supporters of STV say that it produces reasonably proportional results, allows voters to choose between candidates of the same party and has an effective threshold that discourages small parties.

Critics argue that multi-member seats undermine the traditional UK relationship between a constituent and an MP. It can be divisive within parties by encouraging candidates to campaign against other candidates from the same party to ensure that they are the winning candidate. The counting system is complex and won't be understood by most people. To be genuinely proportional it needs big constituencies. The Jenkins Commission estimated that they would need 350,000 voters in the UK. In more sparsely populated parts of the country this would make for very large constituencies.

Top-ups

A system with top-ups starts by electing representatives from traditional constituencies. Any system can be used including first-past-the-post or AV for this first stage. Further representatives are then added from party lists to make the overall result more proportional. These top-ups can be chosen in various ways.

Technically this family of systems is known as either an additional member system (AMS) or mixed member system. It is often described as a hybrid system because it combines two approaches, and there are two types of representative – those elected from constituencies and those coming from party lists.

Multiple variations are possible as there are many different approaches to electing both the constituency and party lists. The methods chosen and the balance between the two types of representative can give AMS systems many different characters. Some give highly proportional results, others will be less proportional. Some have high effective thresholds, and other low. In some, constituency voices will dominate; others look more like purely proportional party list systems. The Scottish Parliament, London and Welsh Assemblies are all elected using variants of AMS.

The Jenkins Commission also recommended an AMS system for UK general elections. It proposed single member constituencies elected by AV on slightly bigger boundaries that we now have. These would be topped up by additional members. Voters would have two parts to their ballot paper. They would express preferences for their constituency MP and then have a single vote they could give either to a party or an individual candidate. This kind of system is commonly known as AV+.

The Commission recommended that the top-ups should make up only 20 per cent of MPs and that they should be calculated on areas largely based on traditional counties. In other countries AMS systems can have much higher numbers of top-up MPs. In Germany half the MPs are top-ups from a regional party list (with a 5 per cent threshold) making the system highly proportional.

But while the relatively small number of top-ups and the relatively small area of counties make the Jenkins variant of AV+ less proportional than some other country's systems, it

does guard against some of the criticisms directed at proportional systems. Most MPs would still have a constituency link. There would be a high effective threshold that would exclude small parties. National or even regional party machines would not be given an automatic dominance in candidate selection (though of course individual parties set their own rules). Even the top-up MPs would still have a defined geographical area that they represented, albeit one rather larger than current constituencies.

Supporters of Jenkins argue that this is a good compromise between the UK's traditional constituency based system and a desire for proportionality. Every voter would still have their own MP with the added advantages that AV brings, but the additional top-up MPs would ensure that the House of Commons more accurately reflected voting preferences, and guard against those AV results being less proportional than first-past-the-post. It has a high effective threshold, making it hard for small parties to get elected.

It is probably true to say that most UK supporters of reform recognise that this is the proportional system most likely to find favour. This is because it maintains the traditional constituency link which is thought to be highly valued by voters, while allowing the House of Commons to more accurately reflect the level of support for parties. Of course other proportional systems also have their supporters.

But AV+ also has its opponents. From one side AV+ does not escape the general critique of AMS systems that they introduce two types of MP – those with constituency duties and those without. And from the other side AV+ is less proportional than other systems – although larger top-up areas or more top-up MPs could remedy this.

And of course many are happy to stick with the first-past-the-post status quo. You do not have to think it is perfect to argue that other systems could be worse and have unintended consequences.

What difference would a new system make?

The Electoral Reform Society modelled the 2005 election to see what the House of Commons might look like with different voting systems. Any such exercise comes with a very big health warning. We do not know how politics might change if we had a different electoral system. Nor do we really know how people would vote if they could express preferences when they come to vote. There is some polling evidence available, but we still need to make some assumptions.

There are different ways of introducing the different systems. Fewer, larger STV constituencies would produce more proportional results than an STV system with more, but smaller, constituencies. AV+ is a kind of AMS system, yet an AMS system designed to maximise proportionality has also been modelled.

Interested readers are therefore encouraged to read the report in which the modelling is set out, together with the assumptions and opinion poll evidence used. While these are reasonable, such an exercise can never be definitive. Peter Snow memorably introduces any attempt to project election results from opinion polls or a small sample of results on the BBC's election results programme as "just a bit of fun". This should be taken in the same spirit.

Table 3: 2005 general election – the vital statistics

Party	Votes	% vote	% of electorate	% seats	Seats	No. of votes needed to elect an MP
Labour	9,552,436	32.5%	21.6%	55.0%	355	26,908
Conservative	8,784,915	32.4%	19.9%	30.7%	198	44,368
Lib Dem	5,985,454	22.0%	13.5%	9.6%	62	96,540
Others	2,825,705	10.4%	6.4%	4.8%	31	91,152
Total	27,148,510				**646**	

Source: Electoral Commission[4]

Table 4: Modelling the 2005 general election using different electoral systems

Party	Actual result	AV	AV+	STV	AMS
Labour	356	367	308	264	242
Conservative	198	175	199	200	208
Lib Dem	62	74	110	147	144
Natis	9	10	8	13	16
UKIP	0	0	0	0	10
Green	0	0	0	1	3
BNP	0	0	0	0	2
Others	20	20	21	21	21
Outcome	**Lab maj 66**	**Lab maj 88**	**Lab short 15**	**Lab short 61**	**Lab short 81**

Source: Electoral Reform Society[5]

4 The practicalities of change

It does not make sense to discuss whether a change in our electoral system is needed without also thinking about how change might come about. There are two issues at stake: how we decide whether we want to change our electoral system, and how we choose a new replacement system.

There is wide agreement that a referendum is the right way to determine whether there should be change. There are two broad arguments for this. First, it would be wrong to ask MPs to decide on the future of an electoral system in which they have won seats. As individuals they thus have a vested interest in the status quo. Second, a change to our electoral system is a fairly fundamental change to our unwritten constitution and it is right that this should be decided by citizens as a whole.

However, Parliament would need to decide to hold a referendum. The prime minister told the 2009 Labour Party conference that he favoured Labour's manifesto for the next election promising a referendum on introducing an alternative vote system. The Conservatives however have always been strong supporters of first-past-the-post and it is highly unlikely that a future Conservative government would support a referendum.

This is why there has been a strong campaign for there to be a referendum on the polling day for the next general election. Others say that this is not practical or would not work well if the arguments about electoral reform were mixed in with normal election campaigning. They favour a paving bill that would be passed in this Parliament that would require a referendum to be held later this year in a new Parliament after election day. At the time of writing this looks as if it may happen, through an amendment to a wider constitutional reform bill. With current opinion polls showing the Conservatives in the lead it certainly seems that supporters of change are more likely to succeed if action is taken in this Parliament to approve a referendum.

But while ending first-past-the-post might be the consequence of a referendum, it is harder to work out what should replace it. There are a number of different ways of deciding the best alternative system.

Parliament could simply decide to offer an alternative in a referendum. This is what Gordon Brown has promised with his proposal. If the then cabinet had decided to act on the Jenkins Commission report, it is likely that its proposals would have been put to a straight referendum.

Alternatively there could be a referendum that offers multiple choices. There are basically three alternative approaches that have support:

- the status quo of first-past-the-post

- the alternative vote of single member seats but with preference voting

- a system designed to be more proportional.

But there are problems with having a three-way choice in a referendum (not least the issue of which voting system to use for the referendum!). First, a three-way choice is likely to confuse many voters – and make the public debate in the run up to the election more difficult. A clear choice between two options is likely to be much livelier and more straightforward. Second, this still does not establish which is the best proportional system for the UK. There also needs to be a mechanism to do this, unless the Jenkins Commission proposals are taken as the best option for the UK. However not every reform supporter thought that Jenkins got it right, and its conclusions were drawn up some years ago.

But as MPs have a vested interest in the current electoral system, it is probably not a good idea to ask them to decide an alternative. A number of suggestions have been made about how best to decide an alternative, more proportional, system.

Some favour a citizens' jury. This would be a group of citizens chosen at random, though probably many more than twelve, who would deliberate and decide the best system. The alternative approach would be some kind of constitutional convention similar to the one organised in Scotland. This brought together the political parties and representatives of civil society such as trade unions, employers and religious leaders. It could of course also include a citizen's jury element if this were thought to be appropriate.

A further issue is the order of a referendum and any constitutional convention or citizen's jury. There are three broad approaches:

- set up a constitutional convention first and puts its recommendation to a referendum

- hold a referendum to set up a convention with the aim of changing the current system, and with Parliament bound to implement its recommendations

- hold a referendum to set up the convention, and then hold a further referendum on its recommendations.

5 Conclusion

This is a discussion paper and therefore does not come to firm conclusions about the best electoral system for the UK – or how to make any changes if they are thought to be necessary.

But it does make the argument that there is no perfect electoral system. There are a range of requirements that can be made of voting systems, but they cannot all be achieved in a single system. History, culture and politics all play a part in determining a country's favoured electoral system.

Nor do electoral systems stand in some neutral way above a country's politics. Politics will shape the electoral system that works best for a country but, equally importantly, electoral systems will also affect politics. Politicians will seek to maximise their representation; as that is secured in different ways in different electoral systems, if a country changes its voting system it is likely to change its politics.

So rather than finish with a recommendation and call for change, Table 5 summarises the pros and cons of different electoral systems. In the left hand column are some criteria that people may want from an electoral system. Each system is then scored against each criterion. The best option (or options) is awarded three stars. Two stars means it goes some considerable way towards meeting the criterion, one star means it goes a little way, and an X means it does not meet it at all or even works against it.

This is somewhat rough and ready. There are variations in all the proportional systems that will affect their scores. For example we have given AV+ and STV two stars for proportionality, but they can be made more proportional by having more top-ups or bigger constituencies respectively. Nor can we work out the ideal system from totting up the stars in each column as some of these criteria are contradictory and others overlap. If you want strong government, for example, then you will favour over-representation of the winning party, which will mean you cannot have proportionality.

Table 5: A comparison of different electoral systems

Criteria	First-past-the-post	AV	Party lists	STV	AV+
Strong constituency link	***	***	X	*	**
Proportional	X	X	***	**	**
Avoids coalitions	**	X	X	X	X
Excludes extremists and small national parties	***	***	X	**	**
Is based on candidates rather than parties	***	***	X	***	**
Doesn't concentrate power in party machine	***	***	X	**	**
Discourages infighting	***	***	**	X	**
Allows independents and local parties to be elected	*	*	X	***	**
Avoids power being exercised by a minority	X	X	***	**	**
Easy to understand	***	***	**	X	**
Every vote can affect the outcome		*	***	***	***
Ensures government has majority support of voters	X	X	***	**	**
Eliminates safe seats		*	*	***	**
Decisions about boundaries don't affect results	X	X	***	*	**
Discourages party splits	***	*	X	*	*
Encourages party to engage with all voters			***	**	**
Simple ballot paper	***	**	***	*	X

6 Voices on electoral reform

Our voting system is the source code of the power wielded by MPs. It bestows the authority of the people on their representatives. Yet few MPs can claim support from more than 50% of their electors. AV enables preference (ranked) voting, ensuring an MP can claim authority of a majority of their voters. AV also allows voters to protest – through the support of small and single-issue groups, while also choosing to support a larger party, if they so wish. Unlike some other voting systems, it allows the retention of a geographic link between MP and electors.

Though Westminster watchers often overlook this relationship, most MPs believe that the responsibility to be a local area advocate is what keeps a system rooted in common sense.

Many MPs who currently support first past the post do so because they want to retain a local link. I believe that when they explore the merits of AV more fully, they will be reassured that this important element of our democracy will be preserved.

Tom Watson MP, *Guardian* June 2009

Recently there has been some pressure from politicians and from sections of the media to change the election system for the House of Commons from first-past-the-post to some form of proportional representation (PR). But far from restoring confidence in politics, PR could well have the opposite effect. Most PR systems would not have single member constituencies and thus the vital direct link between MPs and their voters would be lost.

PR almost always produces coalition governments which are often unstable. In other words, they produce governments which no one has voted for. And these coalitions are usually stitched together through backroom deals between party leaders with no reference to their party members, let alone the voters. And many PR systems are list systems with the list centrally controlled by the leadership and not by the members.

Above all, PR would mean the end of majority Labour governments, which is the main reason why our Party was formed in the first place and is the main reason why the Party continues as an effective political force with the support of the Unions and millions of voters. We should firmly resist the Siren Voices!

Campaign for Labour Party Democracy 2009

The first past the post system we have in the UK is not democratic enough and does not properly serve the interests of the people that my union represents.

For a start it allows minorities to capture power. Most of my life has taken place under a Conservative government that loathed trade unions. We were, to quote Mrs Thatcher,

"the enemy within." Public policy and the law were used to undermine trade union membership, effectiveness and legitimacy.

At its worst basic human rights were denied with the banning of unions at GCHQ. But everywhere the ability of unions to defend the interests of their members was whittled back to the extent that it became quite hard to answer a question from prospective members as to what could a union do for us…

And it wasn't as if there was no alternative. Across the channel in the rest of Europe were a range of very different countries, but none treated trade unions in the same way as they were in Britain. And most had stronger welfare states, less inequality and more successful economies too. What they had in common was an electoral system that did not allow a right wing minority to capture all the power of the state.

Billy Hayes, General Secretary CWU, writing in a
personal capacity for Make My Vote Count

The label 'proportional representation' emphatically does not provide any extra level of fairness over first-past-the-post. PR systems can, and often do, give disproportionate power to small minority parties. This is inherently less fair than first-past-the-post, which tends to favour the party with the largest share of the vote, even if it is in a minority (a problem which can be overcome by the alternative vote).

Those who favour PR must face this truth: you can have proportional voting, but you cannot have proportional decision-taking. At some stage, the round peg of the casting and counting of the electors' votes has to be fitted into the square hole of the choices which face governments.

There is no logical sequence, no algorithm to achieve this. This is the disjunction which has to occur at some point in all systems between polling booth and power.

The issue, then, is at what stage a coalition of votes and representatives coalesces into a bloc capable of making yes/no decisions. Under first-past-the-post, this transition takes place at the time of the election. In proportional systems, where no party can typically gain a clear majority of seats, the transition takes place after the election.

Jack Straw MP, *Independent* June 2005

Four years ago PCS launched the Make Your Vote Count campaign. We didn't recommend any party or candidate, but in order to engage with the parties and their candidates, on issues relating to the public services, we asked them questions and published their views to our members.

It has been a revealing experience in many ways. It exposed the democratic deficit at the heart of the electoral process. The outcome of general elections is really decided by the behaviour of 'swing voters' in marginal seats rather than by the majority of the electorate. This undermines democracy. At the moment polls are showing a huge disenchantment with the three main UK political parties, yet we can be certain that between them they will win in just about every English parliamentary constituency.

Our experience of campaigning in defence of public services led to a debate about the need for fairer voting systems. Our conference last year came down decisively in favour of a more proportional system so that every vote counts.

Mark Serwotka, General Secretary PCS, *Red Pepper* September 2009

References

1   Alastair J Reid, "Trade unions: a foundation of political pluralism?"
www.historyandpolicy.org/papers/policy-paper-05.html, accessed 11 January 2010

2   The Power Inquiry, *Power to the People: the report of power: an independent inquiry into Britain's democracy* (March 2006) www.powerinquiry.org/report/index.php, accessed 11 January 2010

3   Political poll for the *Independent* 1 December 2009, www.comres.co.uk/page1901302536.aspx, accessed 11 January 2010

4   The Electoral Commission, *Election 2005: constituencies, candidates and results* (March 2006), www.electoralcommission.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/47185/Election2005_constituencies,candidatesandresultsFINAL_20719-15241__E__N__S__W__.pdf, accessed 11 January 2010

5   The Electoral Reform Society, *The UK General Election of 5 May 2005: report and analysis* (July 2005), http://tinyurl.com/yfgwh2h, accessed 11 January 2010

The TOUCHSTONE Blog

Go to **www.touchstoneblog.org.uk** for informed and lively progressive comment on the big policy issues of the day. Blog posts are written by TUC experts with a passion for social justice.