

The need for change

The 2015 UK Parliamentary Election saw 24.8 per cent of the electorate vote for parties other than Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrats. That's nearly a quarter of the votes cast – up from 11.9 per cent in 2010. Of those, 12.6 per cent, or 3,881,099 people, voted UKIP, yet remarkably this result delivered just one Member of Parliament (MP). The Conservatives on the other hand received three times as many votes, but also 331 times as many MPs. This is the result of an outdated First Past the Post (FPTP) voting system.

In recognition of the need for urgent electoral reform in the UK, the Independent Group at the Local Government Association (LGA) set up a task and finish group to consider alternative systems for both UK Parliamentary and Local Elections, from a Group membership perspective. This pamphlet summarises their views and recommendations for English elections only. As part of a consultation on these recommendations we hope our councillors in Wales can set out their views as well.

Why this again when it clearly failed in the 2011 referendum?

Not quite. The 2011 defeat was over a single prescribed voting system – the Alternative Vote (AV) – and cannot be said to represent a feeling against electoral reform or even proportional representation (PR).

Much the same, the referendum proposed a change of voting system solely for UK Parliamentary elections. It is not inconceivable that the public might support electoral reform for local elections even if they opposed it for UK Parliamentary elections.

Then there is the question of political context in which the referendum took place. Firstly, public attention was largely diffused by the decision to hold it in conjunction with the local elections yearly sweep. Secondly, it has been suggested that the result was a public demonstration of discontent towards a deal between the then Government coalition parties.

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Following the results of the UK Parliamentary election in May 2015, and the way it highlighted the huge disproportionality of votes cast to seats won, in July the LGA Independent Group set up a task and finish group to look at electoral reform for both UK Parliamentary and local elections. The group was asked to explore the options for potential preferential and proportional representation voting systems that would better ensure that councillors and Members of Parliament are accountable to residents and that the democratic make up of our councils and Parliament is on the whole more representative. This pamphlet seeks to contribute to the wider debate around a renewed demand for electoral reform by summarising the main arguments made on the final report of our task and finish group.

The LGA Independent Group represents councillors in England and Wales who are Independent or of a political affiliation outside of Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat parties. We are part of the Alliance4PR cross-party group and work closely with the Electoral Reform Society, Unlock Democracy and Make Votes Matter in campaigning for electoral reform.

Acknowledgements

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Calling for urgent electoral reform

Our view on voting system options for local and UK Parliamentary elections

Principles supporting electoral reform

- ✓ A voting system should encourage voting for individuals rather than a party.
- ✓ It should encourage positive voting, rather than negative. In other words, it should promote voting for the preferred candidate rather than voting primarily to stop another candidate from winning.
- ✓ Any system needs to have proportionate electoral constituencies.
- ✓ Differences between rural and urban areas must be taken into account.
- ✓ Assurance must be provided that Independent and traditionally smaller party candidates will not stand disadvantaged in an electoral contest.

Electoral systems explained: how do they fare?

Single Transferable Vote (STV)	Party List (PL)	Alternative Vote Plus (AV+)	First Past the Post (FPTP)	Supplementary Vote (SV)	Additional Member System (AMS)
<p>STV is a form of PR. Voters choose their representatives by placing numbers next to the candidates in order of preference. To get elected, candidates need to reach a set share of votes called the quota, which is determined by the number of positions to be filled.</p>	<p>PL is a form of PR. Parties present lists of candidates and seats are awarded according to their party's share of the vote. This is usually done using an electoral formula or a quota which prevents too many small parties from winning seats.</p> <p>There are two types of PL systems: Open List and Closed List, the difference being that with Open List the voter can choose individual candidates for a list and on Closed List, the order of candidates for election are pre-determined by the party.</p>	<p>AV+ is a mixed system, using AV (in which voters rank candidates in order of preference) to elect a candidate in each electoral area, and then a small top-up list to make the overall result more proportional. Voters can either select their favourite party or choose their favourite candidate from the top-up list and the votes are then allocated to represent each party's share of the votes proportionally.</p>	<p>FPTP is a majoritarian system. Voters put a cross on a ballot paper next to their favoured candidate and the candidate with the most votes in the electoral area wins. All other votes are wasted.</p>	<p>SV is a majoritarian system. On the ballot papers there are two columns – one for voters to mark their first choice and one in which to mark a second choice. All the first choices are then counted, and if a candidate has a majority, they are elected. If no candidate receives a majority, the top two candidates continue to a second round and all other candidates are eliminated. The second choice votes of everyone whose first choice has been eliminated are then counted. Any votes for the remaining candidates are then added to their first-round totals. Whichever candidate has the most votes after these second preferences have been allocated is declared the winner.</p>	<p>AMS is a mixed system, combining both PR and majoritarian elements. Each voter typically gets two votes – one for a candidate and one for a party. Each electoral area returns a single candidate. The votes for the party list candidates are then allocated on top of these seats to top up the number of seats won by each party to represent their share of the votes proportionally – the 'additional members'.</p>
<p>PR requires multi-member contests and thus larger, multi-member electoral areas, which are academically perceived as disadvantageous for Independents and smaller parties. If at the national level STV offers a poor guarantee of adequate representation of residents' local issues in large constituencies (note that the success in Ireland is associated with a far lower voter to MP ratio), lessons from its use in Scottish local elections seem to contradict the theory. STV proactively places the power in the hands of the voters, giving them more choice than any other and allowing for fewer votes to be wasted. The system brings voters closer to the individual they helped to elect, thus offering high levels of accountability, forcing the campaign much more around local issues and greatly supporting candidate diversity, as parties and groups are encouraged to put forward a balanced team of candidates.</p>	<p>Whilst this offers proportionality, PL, particularly the Closed List type, denies the voter any preferential vote options and by requiring large electoral areas, heavily penalises Independent candidates seeking to represent a smaller area. The value of such a system to smaller parties, and even to well organised groups of Independents, is that they get a more proportional result. However, the voters' influence is limited by their single vote for an increasing number of representatives. This is the point at which proportionality conflicts with accountable voting, and after discussion overall it was felt that STV is a better trade-off between proportionality and voter influence.</p>	<p>In comparison, we felt that AV+ would better guarantee PR at UK Parliamentary elections, by intensifying the link between MPs and local constituents.</p>	<p>This failed to meet the principles agreed at the outset by the task and finish group, namely to provide a representational system or to allow voters to exercise a preferential vote. Whilst FPTP can be said to favour Independent candidates, at a very local level, where personality and local experience count for more than in larger electoral areas, the overall result is that it tends to be hugely unrepresentative of the overall votes cast, to the cost of Independents and particularly smaller parties. It rewards parties with just enough votes to win in a particular geographical area rather than allowing for an allocation of seats to reflect actual voter intentions. It is a restrictive system which limits voter choice, wastes votes, encourages negative or tactical voting, discourages candidate diversity and generally perpetuates the status quo by allowing for high number of seats to be uncontested.</p>	<p>SV is too restrictive to be considered a truly preferential system and by limiting the choices to just two does not sufficiently discourage negative voting over positive voting. Furthermore, the outcome of such a system is unlikely to be much more representative of the votes than the existing FPTP.</p>	<p>This met many of the principles agreed by the task and finish group, but was felt it would only be truly effective if there was a significant increase in the number of elected representatives both nationally and locally. At the local level, it was felt that at least 25 per cent of the council needed to be 'list members' in order for the system to work, and that any compensatory enlargement of existing wards required to keep the overall number of councillors the same, would be undesirable and would penalise single-member Independent candidates. Nationally, it has the benefits of maintaining the direct link between elected member and constituents and would therefore potentially support both Independents and smaller parties in terms of getting a better representation. It would however require groups of Independents to draw up ordered lists of who would be elected on the list system, which was felt would not accurately reflect the nature of such groups.</p>
<p>Yes, for local elections at:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • district level with maximum of three members per ward • unitary level with maximum of five members per ward • county level with maximum of seven members per ward. 	<p>No</p>	<p>Yes for UK Parliamentary elections</p>	<p>No</p>	<p>No</p>	<p>No</p>

How it works

Considerations

Recommended?