

10.2 The case for and against electoral reform

What is an electoral system?
 In the British context, an electoral system is a set of rules by which popular votes are translated into seats in a legislature. Electoral systems can be broadly divided into those which are *majoritarian* (i.e. require the winner to secure a majority), those which are *proportional* (i.e. attempting to distribute seats in proportion to votes cast), and those which are a combination of the two – *hybrid* systems.



What should an electoral system seek to offer?

According to Lord Jenkins' Independent Commission on Electoral Reform, an effective electoral system should seek to address four main objectives. These scores (out of five) are only for purposes of discussion and are adapted from the report:

Objective	FPTP	AV	STV	List	AMS
Proportionality	1	2	4	5	5
Stable government	4	3	2	2	2
Voter choice	1	3	5	2	3
The MP-constituency link	5	5	3	1	3
Total	11	13	14	10	13

First past the post: arguments for/arguments against

Arguments for:

- The system is a part of our traditions.
- The system is cheap and easy to operate.
- The system is easily understood, which helps voters and contributes to greater confidence in the result.
- The single-member constituency allows for a close MP-constituency link.
- The system normally produces strong, majority governments, making coalitions less likely.

Arguments against:

- The system distorts the popular vote to an unacceptable degree.
- It leads to large numbers of wasted votes.
- It disadvantages small parties.
- It provides too little voter choice.
- It leads to artificially polarised adversarial politics. Coalition government would be more constructive in the long term.
- It perpetuates the current geographical strongholds of some parties.

Alternative vote and AV+
 AV is a *majoritarian* system whereas AV+ is a *hybrid* system.
 AV retains the single-member constituencies present in FPTP but requires the winning candidate in each constituency to gain 50%+ of the votes cast. Instead of putting a cross in a single box, voters have the opportunity to rank candidates in order of preference (1, 2, 3 etc.). Any candidate achieving 50%+ of the votes when the first preferences are counted is elected. If no candidate wins on first preferences, the bottom candidate is eliminated and their votes are transferred to the second preferences indicated on each ballot paper. This continues until a candidate crosses the 50%+ winning line. AV+ operates in the same way as FPTP-TU (with the voter voting once for candidates and once – the ‘+’ bit – for their preferred party) but the FPTP element is replaced with the AV system above.
 AV used in Australia.
 AV+ recommended by the Jenkins Commission.

Single transferable vote
 STV is a *proportional* system.
 STV is probably the most complicated system. Its aim of achieving clear proportionality and eliminating wasted votes requires a fairly complex system of counting and vote transference. STV replaces single-member constituencies with larger multi-member constituencies. Voters indicate their preferences for a number of candidates in order (1, 2, 3 etc.). In order to be elected, a candidate must achieve a quota. Once this quota is achieved, any surplus votes for that candidate are transferred in accordance with second preferences. If no candidate is elected on first preferences, then the lowest-polling candidate is eliminated and their votes are redistributed in the same way. This process continues until enough candidates have achieved the quota for all of the seats in the multi-member constituency to be filled.
 STV used in: Northern Ireland Assembly elections, Irish Republic.

Party list (regional or national)
 PL is a *proportional* system.
 Under PL voters cast their vote for a party, either on a regional (RL) or a national basis (NL). Each party draws up a list of candidates in the order (top down) that the party would want to see them elected. Each party will often include as many candidates on their lists as there are seats available. An ‘open list system’ allows voters to express preferences between candidates standing for the same party, whereas a ‘closed list system’ only gives the voter the chance to vote for their party of choice, the candidate order already having been decided by the party. After the voting process, the votes are totalled and the seats are then distributed in proportion to votes cast. In a closed list system, a party achieving a 20% share of the vote would achieve 40 seats in a 200-seat parliament. The top 40 names from that party’s list would, therefore, be elected.
 Used in: Israel (NL), European elections in UK (RL).

Additional members system
 AMS is a *hybrid* system.
 Under AMS a proportion of seats are contested using the FPTP system and the remainder are used to reward parties in proportion to the number of votes that they achieve. This second, proportional, element can be organised on a national or a regional basis. In Germany, for example, 50% of seats are elected under FPTP with the remaining 50% being distributed proportionally. In the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly elections another variant of AMS, FPTP top-up, was used (see Ch 10.1). In Germany there is a threshold of 5% which parties must cross before they are entitled to any of the additional/top-up seats.
 Used in: Germany, Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly, Greater London Authority.

Conclusions: Prior to the 1997 general election, the Labour Party offered an independent report on electoral reform, to be followed by a referendum on any resulting proposals. Lord Jenkins duly led the investigation, which selected AV+ as the most appropriate system. Had this system been operating in 1997, it is estimated that the actual Labour majority of 179 would have been reduced to 60. The Labour Government has not implemented the Jenkins Report but it has brought in a variety of new systems for elections to, amongst others, the European Parliament, the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and the London Assembly. Under many of these systems, Labour has fared worse than it did under FPTP in 1997. Some have argued that this has dampened the Party’s enthusiasm towards the introduction of PR for parliamentary elections. Many more feel that the introduction of so many different systems in such a short space of time has been counterproductive.

Electoral reform in favour of what?