

Report of the Independent Commission on the Voting System: Volume 2

Submissions and correspondence from Members of Parliament

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# **THE SUPPLEMENTARY VOTE**

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## Introduction

Britain needs a new electoral system that removes the strong majority party bias under current voting arrangements. Britain needs a system that does not *"waste"* the votes of millions of people and yet which focuses the attention of the electorate on choosing between alternative parties of government.

Under a fair electoral system major parties should:

- (i) receive seats broadly proportional to their votes
- (ii) voters for minority parties should not be denied influence over election outcomes because of *"wasted votes"*
- (iii) The artificial fragmentation of parties should not be fostered
- (iv) Voters should be encouraged to focus upon choosing a viable government.

In addition there are strong grounds for preferring a system which is familiar, simple to operate, easily understood and which entails only marginal changes in historical practice. Five major systems of Electoral Reform are currently under discussion in Britain.

**The Single Transferable Vote (STV)** has the advantage of strict proportionality but is based on multi-member electoral areas which would necessarily destroy the existing link between the Member of Parliament and his/her constituency. Whilst favoured by Liberal Democrats, STV is opposed by the vast majority of Labour MPs and I have found virtually no support for it amongst Conservative Members.

**List PR Systems** are widely used in Western Europe. Like STV they invariably dispense with single-member constituencies. In list PR systems, party leaders exercise vast patronage because, while electors choose which party to support, the central party machine basically determines the order in which their MPs are elected. On a more positive note its nature is such that it can be used to give women greater opportunity.

**The Additional Member System**, similar to that used in West Germany, creates two classes of MPs. Most are elected using first-past-the-post in local constituencies, but a minority, drawn from regional lists, are used to top up the seats of otherwise under-represented parties. This approach combines some of the worst features of first-past-the-post and the patronage difficulties of the list systems.

**The Alternative Vote:** existing constituencies are retained but voter's rank candidates in order of their preference (numbering them on the ballot paper - 1,2,3 etc). If a candidate wins more than 50% of people's first preferences, they are elected. If no candidate wins outright, the person at the bottom of the poll is eliminated and their second preferences are transferred to their second choice of candidate. If no one has still reached 50%, the candidate now at the bottom, is again eliminated and their votes, including their perhaps 3rd, 4th and other preferences, where cast, are all transferred. This process continues until one candidate's total of first preferences, plus votes transferred from eliminated candidates, passes 50% of the ballot. There are major problems with the Alternative Vote, however. In the context of politics in contemporary Britain, with four or even five major political parties, the system could allow a candidate ranked third (or even fourth) in terms of first preferences to overtake those ranked first and second - an outcome which cannot be justified or easily explained (see Table A).

Table A; A perverse result under the Alternative Vote

Party	Percentage of votes won on:			
	First count	Second count	Third count	Fourth count
Labour	37	37	39	40
Conservative	30	30	30	Eliminated
Democrat	21	24	31	60
Green	9	9	Eliminated	-
SDP	3	Eliminated	-	-

Democrat Elected with 60%

## THE SUPPLEMENTARY VOTE

The final system is called the *Supplementary Vote* and was devised by Dale Campbell-Savours to meet the criteria of greater proportionality, to reduce wasted votes, preserve party cohesion and yet concentrate voter's minds on the reality of the choice of government. The was system devised in 1989 after nearly a year's detailed work involving computer simulations of the affect of the system on different elections under a range of scenarios. In 1993, after two and a half years studying electoral systems, the Labour Party's *Plant Committee* recommended the *Supplementary Vote* to replace the current voting system for the House of Commons. Like the Alternative Vote it retains the existing single member constituencies. The difference starts with the ballot paper that voters receive, which is almost the same as the current one (see Table B).

Table B: A sample ballot paper under the *Supplementary Vote*

<p><b>PLEASE READ THESE INSTRUCTIONS CAREFULLY</b></p> <p><b><u>WARNING</u> :</b> You CANNOT vote for the same candidate twice.</p> <p><b>YOU MAY CAST ONE OR TWO VOTES, ONE IN EACH COLUMN.</b></p> <p><b>TO USE YOUR FIRST VOTE, ENTER AN 'X' OPPOSITE YOUR CHOICE OF CANDIDATE IN THE FIRST COLUMN (headed 'First choice').</b></p> <p><b>TO USE YOUR SECOND VOTE, ENTER AN 'X' OPPOSITE ANOTHER CANDIDATE IN THE SECOND COLUMN (headed 'Second choice').</b></p>		
Name of Candidate	First choice	Second choice
Frank T Alking (Green Party)	X	
Herbert G Brown (Conservative)		
Liam A Burke (Social Democracy Party)		
Anne Mary Jones (Labour Party)		X
David K Mason (Democrat)		

Voting could not be simpler. People place an X in the first preference column to show their most preferred party/candidate, and if they wish they can place another X opposite a different candidate in the second column to indicate their second choice of party. So how would the counting of votes work? First preference votes are counted, and if anyone passes the 50% level they are elected forthwith. If no candidate receives majority support, the top two candidates stay in the race, the rest are eliminated. Next the second preferences of voters who supported eliminated candidates are transferred to the top two candidates. Whoever now has the largest total of votes is elected. (Table C) Provides an example of how the *Supplementary Vote* works in practice:

Table C: *Supplementary Vote* example

Party	Vote won at the:	
	First count	Second count
Conservative	20,500	24,650
<b>Labour</b>	<b>19,400</b>	<b>25,050 * Winner</b>
Democrat	6,900	Eliminated
Green	3,250	Eliminated
SDP	350	Eliminated
Totals	50,400	49,700

*Note: I have assumed that Labour receives 3,500 second preferences from the Democrats, and 2,100 from the Greens and 50 from the SDP. The Conservatives receive 3,000 second preferences from the Democrats, 900 from the Greens and 250 from the SDP. Some 700 minority party voters did not give a second preference, or voted for another eliminated party.*

This method differs considerably from the Alternative Vote in the way candidates are eliminated. Under the Alternative Vote bottom placed candidates in the poll are eliminated and all their votes transferred to the remaining candidates, these votes are counted in at each stage when this transfer takes place. Under the *Supplementary Vote* only second preferences of the eliminated candidates are transferred and these additional votes are counted in at a single stage.

This method broadly resembles the French system of run-off elections, but without needing two rounds of voting on separate weeks (where the mass media heavily influence second round voting). Under the *Supplementary Vote*, people can always choose their first preference vote without worrying about wasted votes or tactical considerations. But if their candidate or party is unlikely to be in the run-off, then the system encourages them to choose between the front runners. So where a seat is basically a two-party contest, all a voter must do to influence the result is to cast either their first or their second vote for the viable party they like best.

In a closely fought three-way contest, voters are sure to influence the outcome if they give both their votes to the two viable parties they prefer most. Only in the extremely unlikely situation of four or more parties being evenly matched will voters face significant information problems in influencing the final result. Of course, voters can still decide not to exercise the extra influence given to them by their *Supplementary Vote* - for example, they may express no second preference, or they may cast two votes for parties likely to be eliminated.

The *Supplementary Vote* system guarantees that whoever is elected MP will be one of the top two candidates on first preferences. Assuming that voters wish to make effective use of their second preference for a viable party, the wasted vote syndrome would be substantially reduced. A large number of MPs would be elected with majority support. Candidates would not be elected against the wishes of a majority of their constituents on a split vote.

This paper sets out an innovative, much fairer and practicable voting system for the United Kingdom. The *Supplementary Vote* will fairly represent the balance of support between the major parties. It could help eliminate wasted votes ensuring much better minority party representation in the Commons. Minority party voters in areas where their first preference candidate cannot win could still use their second preference to shape election outcomes in their constituencies. MPs would be more likely to need a majority to secure election. Single member constituencies and local party choice of candidates would be retained. The system

would provide strong incentives for parties to cohere. It would force voters to focus on the key issue of 'Which party will actually run the government?'

### Proportionality

Traditionally, calculations of proportionality in electoral systems have been based on a crude ratio of votes to seats. It could be argued that second preferences under the *Supplementary Vote* should be given some recognition. A more sophisticated measure of proportionality would somehow take account not merely of first preferences but also of second preferences as further indicators of voters' wishes. One way of doing this could be by constructing a proportionality index that gives different weighting to first and second preference votes.

The question is how does one assess the weighting that should be given to second preference votes in relation to first preferences and what factors should be taken into account in making such assessments? In some seats it may well be that a second preference vote is actually the vote that expresses support for the elector's favoured candidate. Equally voters may feel that they wish to support a candidate with their first preference, for ideological reasons, who has no hope of winning and yet still influence the outcome of the election with their second preference. Under proportionality indices as presently constructed, such second preference votes would have no value.

It could also be argued that the second preference vote of an eliminated candidate might be used in conditions where an elector is seeking to block another candidate. The elector may feel that the only way to do this successfully might be to exercise a second preference vote for a particular candidate as a means of ensuring that another candidate is not elected. Surely such a second preference expression of opinion should have some weighting in an index of proportionality.

Another point that should be considered in relation to proportionality is that in most cases the *Supplementary Vote* requires that candidates are elected in each constituency with over 50% combined first and second preference votes. Unlike under first-past-the-post, candidates cannot be elected against the wishes of a majority of the voters. For example, under first-past-the-post a candidate could be elected with perhaps as little as one third of the vote if there were a number of candidates. In a sense the *Supplementary Vote* is more proportional in individual constituencies in these circumstances, as it provides for a higher test of across the board popularity than the first-past-the-post. Again when we come to construct more sophisticated measures of proportionality this benefit needs to be considered.

If second preferences were given some recognition in terms of weighting then historic methods of calculating proportionality have to be revisited. It may well be that in such conditions the *Supplementary Vote* would be seen to be a far more proportional system than current crude measures would deem it to be.