

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

Findings of focus groups

Report by NOP Research Group

PUBLIC ATTITUDES TO ALTERNATIVE ELECTORAL SYSTEMS

Qualitative research findings

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1. RESEARCH BACKGROUND

- ✱ Independent Commission on the Voting System set up December 1997 to consider alternatives to Westminster's first-past-the-post system
- ✱ Commission considering appropriate systems or combination of systems to be put before the people in the Government's referendum, observing
 - the requirement for broad proportionality
 - the need for stable government
 - an extension of voter choice
 - the maintenance of a link between MPs and geographical constituencies
- ✱ NOP has already investigated public attitudes to four systems (AV, STV, AMS, and closed Party List system) for the McDougall Trust, whose report has been submitted to the Commission
- ✱ NOP requested by the Commission itself to provide further information about alternative electoral systems

Primary research objectives

- ✱ To examine attitudes to the likely national outcomes of alternative electoral systems, and their perceived advantages and disadvantages for different political parties, and to what degree this affects voters' preferences between them
- ✱ To investigate whether concentration on national outcomes rather than the mechanics of election of individual members involves different definitions of fairness on the part of voters
- ✱ To explore perceptions of fringe parties' role in a more proportional Parliament
- ✱ To assess whether party affiliations affect preferences between alternative systems
- ✱ To explore attitudes towards party selection of candidates

- * Six qualitative group discussions
- * Groups two hours duration
- * 7 - 8 respondents per group discussion
- * Groups conducted in South-East (Croydon), and Midlands (Birmingham)
- * Groups moderated by Neil Lovell and Alison Palmer
- * Fieldwork dates: 7th - 9th June 1998
- * All discussions tape recorded for analysis purposes
- * Analysis by Neil Lovell and Alison Palmer

Research sample

GROUP 1

Female
22 - 35
BC1
Croydon

GROUP 2

Male
40 - 70
C2DE
Croydon

GROUP 3

Male / female
30 - 60
C1C2
Croydon

GROUP 4

Female
40 - 70
C2DE
Birmingham

GROUP 5

Male
22 - 35
BC1
Birmingham

GROUP 6

Male / female
30 - 60
C1C2
Birmingham

- * Respondents whose occupations or political interests were likely to involve prior knowledge of proportional representation were excluded
- * Within each group, two did not vote in the 1997 General Election
- * Within each group, the three major political parties were represented by at least one and no more than three voters

Discussion outline

Brief explanation of
background

Voting behaviour and motivational
process

Parties, candidates and policies

First past the post - open
discussion

Alternative systems -
discussion and
comparisons

Round-up

2. OVERVIEW

In the research conducted for the McDougall Trust, attention was devoted to the *theory* of alternative electoral systems

- * imaginary parties were used in the stimulus material
- * voters were encouraged to put their party differences aside in the discussions
- * discussion concentrated on the delivery of single constituency results
- * explicit comparisons of likely national outcomes were not made

In this research, alternative electoral systems were presented so as to encourage their projection into *reality*

- * real parties were used in the stimulus material
- * voters were encouraged to examine how systems might benefit different parties, and whether this might influence their preferences
- * concentration was given to national outcomes and proportionality

Specific differences
emerge

The UK context

Encouraging voters to consider systems within the specific context of the political and geographical structure of the UK produces

a weaker preference for a preferential system

a stronger preference for a simple system

a stronger preference for a proportional system

BUT

How parties will fare under different systems does not affect preferences

3. RESEARCH FINDINGS

- ★ Those systems in which the relationship of the MP and constituency remains relatively unchanged are favoured
 - AV, SV, local MPs for AMS
- ★ Larger, multi-member constituencies beg serious questions
 - MPs are not expected to be able to form a strong relationship with such a large area
 - there are doubts as to whether and how MPs from different parties, with different agenda, can legitimately represent the same constituents in Parliament
- ★ The reason for larger constituencies is difficult to appreciate, and produces fear that the constituency-MP link will be weakened
 - STV, regional MPs for AMS
- ★ Although they claim to pay little attention to candidates in Elections, voters still display marked hostility towards party lists
 - they expect the lists to be populated with yes-men whose allegiance to the party takes priority over that to their constituency

Preferential systems

- ★ Voters recognise that preferential systems increase voter choice, but believe that **reality in the UK** does not support the requirement for such choice
- ★ Ranking all the candidates with AV raises serious questions
 - marking a preference, even bottom, for a disliked party (BNP, NF, Loony) is thought to indicate acknowledgment of its legitimacy on the paper, and this meets strong resistance
 - there is an expectation that after indicating the first choice, the rest of the ranking will be executed flippantly or at random, like filling in a Lottery ticket
 - while indicating preferences for Labour *and* Tory on the same paper seems acceptable in theory, in practice the suggestion strikes voters as ridiculous
 - having to rank all the parties, when personal preference may be for just one, irritates voters
 - but if all voters do *not* rank the same number of preferences, voter believe both that the system may not operate, and that it is unfair
- ★ SV is more acceptable - ranking two choices is closer to UK voters expectations of their own needs
 - LibDem and Tory / LibDem and Labour / Labour and Green, etc.
- ★ STV is strongly rejected
 - voters dislike being forced to rank candidates, when in their own minds they are concerned only with electing parties - and are unprepared to change their attitude

- ★ Voters understand alternative electoral systems with relative ease
 - but the rationale of STV is not understood - its objective remains unclear
- ★ Voters' ease of understanding the mechanics of a system, however, is different to their expectations of **how easy it will be to vote** using it
- ★ There is reluctance to make an unqualified vote - and, considering their existing information supply, this is what voters expect with STV and AV
 - assessing candidate preferences for STV is expected to depend on virtual guesswork, since existing candidate information is considered so vague
 - voters rely on party information from the media - and this coverage is uneven, making it difficult to rank all parties
- ★ SV and AMS have strong appeal, because they do not demand excessive preparation from voters

- ★ Voters can believe proportionality is not an important issue - because **they can believe they already have a proportional system**
- ★ Misconceptions about first-past-the-post can lead voters to believe it is itself proportional
 - the belief that party votes are already counted up on a national level, and that seats are consequently allocated according to vote share
 - the expectation that constituencies are evenly distributed in terms of size and population
 - the assumption that whichever party becomes the Government must have achieved the most votes
 - the expectation that even allowing for constituency differences, national results will approximate proportionality
- ★ Even when the principle is explained, expectations are of a small differential
- ★ Only when the possible differential between first-past-the-post and pure proportion is specifically demonstrated are these misconceptions corrected
- ★ As soon as this is understood, proportionality rises in importance as a requirement of a system - voters regard themselves as electing a national Parliament, so regard **national consensus** as key
- ★ AMS is consequently believed to best satisfy this need

- ★ While voters believe that stable government is an important requirement, they believe that landslide majorities are bad for democracy
- ★ Landslides are thought to create an **unaccountable governing executive**
 - allowing a Government to steamroller bills through Parliament
 - obviating the perceived function of Parliament as a forum for discussion
 - allowing a Government to disregard its pre-election pledges
- ★ There is support for systems which would necessitate greater accountability on the part of Government
 - less temptation to be complacent in the security of its position
 - greater need to observe pre-election pledges
 - less ability to steamroller bills
- ★ First-past-the-post is disliked on this basis - and *all* the other systems are regarded as likely to produce an improvement
- ★ AMS, however, is thought to present the risk of hung Parliaments and coalitions - which can strike voters as unsuitable government for the UK

Minority parties

For voters, that a system has potential to elect more or less minority party Members is a superficial consideration in terms of system preference

- ★ Voters are not accustomed to considering minority parties seriously, and encounter difficulty adapting their thinking

- only exception is the Green Party, who are perceived as registering sufficient support to represent a plausible contingent
- other parties are often a cause of some irritation

- ★ Although they are never expected to wield executive power or interfere with the everyday dynamics of Parliament, minority parties are viewed as potential contributors to Parliamentary dialogue
 - they are expected to raise questions outside the familiar remit of adversarial politics

- ★ There is resignation that if 'disagreeable' candidates are elected (by whichever system) responsibility lies with voters, not with the system in question - they have chosen them

- La Ciciolina, BNP, NF, Loony

- ★ If voters cannot rationalise how their vote will contribute to an eventual result, they tend to reject the system - the process by which votes translate into results must be understood
 - STV is strongly rejected for this reason

- ★ Voters are enthusiastic about systems in which the result appears to reflect the views of the whole electorate, not just the 'winners'
 - first-past-the-post is thought to encourage tactical voting in this respect
 - AMS, AV (SV to a lesser extent) are attractive in this regard

Voters prefer systems in which there is a traceable route from vote to outcome

Choice

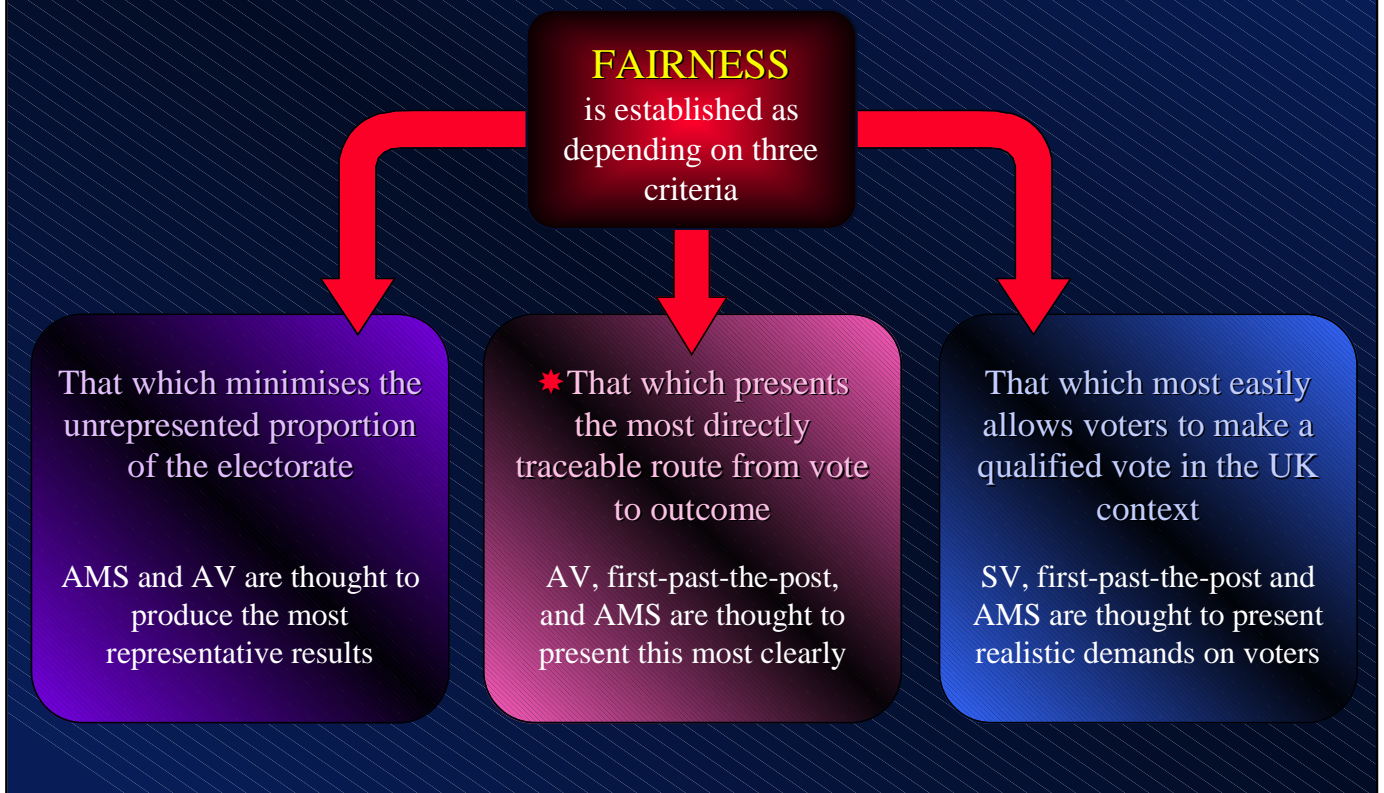
Although increased choice is favoured in theory, projecting such choice onto their expected practice in reality leads voters to question its value

- ★ More choice must be good
 - more candidates
 - more parties
 - preferential party rankings
- ★ Choice surmounts the problem of favouring more than one party
- ★ It facilitates indication of lowest preferences as well as highest

Favoured in theory

Rejected in practice

- ★ In the political context of the UK, such choice is thought unnecessary
- ★ Pinning colours to one party mast is thought acceptable
- ★ Selection of candidates is expected to be simply too time-consuming and difficult



Conclusions

When considering electoral systems within the practical context of the UK, voters' requirements and preferences can be different to those they entertain on the theoretical level

Residual misunderstandings about first-past-the-post are such that until its potential disproportionality is demonstrated, voters see no need for any change - but once this is clarified, there is a demand for proportionality
AMS is attractive in this respect

Increased choice can be regarded as unnecessary or even impracticable in the reality of traditional UK politics, so preferential systems are generally not favoured
STV and AV are rejected, SV and AMS attractive

A concern for stable government is offset by a concern with reducing the potential for landslide victories, thus producing more accountable governments
all the systems are considered improvements - there are some doubts about AMS

Despite voters' professed lack of consideration of candidates in General Elections, concern about the weakening of the MP-constituency link is high
STV is rejected, and the regional aspect of AMS is viewed with caution

PROPORTIONALITY
AMS attractive

CHOICE
STV and AV rejected
SV and AMS attractive

STABLE GOVERNMENT
all attractive
some doubts about AMS

MP-CONSTITUENCY LINK
STV rejected
regional aspect of AMS viewed
with caution

4. VERBATIM QUOTATIONS

PARTIES, CANDIDATES AND POLICIES

To pick a leader to run the country. The people have an input into who they want to run the country.

Group 1

If you are not into it in a particularly big way you might not even know anything about your personal MP. You might get a bit of glitch about them through the post, if you've bothered to read it, or you don't. They are very remote. You vote for the bigger issues rather than what they are willing to do for your area.

Group 1

Of STV: You are particularly voting for them (*candidates*) there. When I go down and vote, I vote for the party. I don't know who the bloke is or the woman or what they stand for. But there I am expected to go down and vote for somebody to represent me. *Group 1*

All the years we've voted, you do vote for a party. You don't really think about what your local MP does for you.

Group 1

I voted for Harold Wilson's party but it was on one thing. I lived in a leasehold house and the Labour Party were doing the Leasehold Reform Act. I lived then in a leasehold home and I wanted to buy my freehold, so I voted Labour...

Group 2

Voting for a party: I think this is why there was such a poor response for the local bi-elections (*local Council elections*) in comparison to the General Election. People are not bothered because, as has already been mentioned, it doesn't matter who gets in. *Group 2*

If I was going to vote Conservative next time and I hated the guts of the person who was in, then if I vote for somebody else and somebody else gets in, I'd think, "What did I do that for? I have voted for them and I don't like them".

Group 2

Years ago, because you never had TV, you didn't actually know the policies of the government. Now you know everything because it is on TV. It's thrown at you all the time. I think that's why we're more educated in that way. So you go out to vote more because you know the policies, whereas before you never.

Group 2

A few years ago when you used to have a Labour Party conference you used to see them standing up there, and I thought, "No way would I ever vote Labour".

Group 2

I go in there and I haven't the foggiest idea who my candidate is.

Group 2

I think that you are voting for the candidate within your own area, but you don't actually look at it that way. You look at it that it is a vote that's going toward the main body and it's going to be that party that's going to run the country. When I put down my cross I feel that it's going towards not so much the candidate you voted for in your own constituency, as much as the whole country.

Group 3

If you actually decide to vote for the candidate then you've really got to go into it deeply, because 90% of the candidates that you'll vote for for your constituency, nine times out of ten don't live there. They live somewhere else. So therefore the only time you ever see them is when it comes round to the General Election time and they are on site. Other than that, they don't live anywhere near where you live.

Group 3

When I choose for the General Election it boils down to listening to the party leaders talking, because they're presenting everything that their party says and what they're going to do and everything.

Group 3

(If describing a General Election to a foreigner) You would tell them that you are voting for who you think will do the country the best. You have got so many parties and all the rest of it.

Group 4

They might as well put the leader on the paper, because that's initially who you are voting for.

Group 4

You're not voting for him *(the candidate)* as an individual, even if you hated him. You vote for the policies of the party.

Group 4

With the General Election you think more of the country as a whole rather than local issues.

Group 5

You use your opinion. You have got three basic parties and you use your opinion to say, "That is the people I want to run the country".

Group 6

The Conservative candidate around here was a waste of space. He didn't even live in the area. He lived over in the posh bit of Birmingham. But at the end of the day I still voted for him, because it was the party I wanted.

Group 6

THE ROLE OF MPs

Of regional and local MPs with AMS: With that one they would need to explain the difference between what the local and the regional MPs are going to do. At the moment I can't quite see what the difference is.

Group 1

It is a bit like if you go to a doctor. If you're ill, you phone up for an appointment. You don't mind which doctor you go and see. So obviously you go to whoever is available. Now if you need to see your MP or your councillor then you make a point of finding out names, because you've got an interest and a reason to go and see him.

Group 2

Of party selection of candidates: He (*Tony Blair, for example*) is going to pick who he wants. He is going to pick him because he is going to follow his policies. He says to this guy in the local, "I want you to close that hospital down". I would pick a guy who said, "I'm not closing it down", and has an argument with him or sorts it out. But if he picks his guy you haven't got a hope in hell.

Group 2

Of expected candidates on party lists: Their bigwigs that they want to make sure get the seats.

Group 1

Of party lists: You wouldn't want a situation where you only got the yes men. It's interesting if you've got your Ken Livingstones because if people like that never got a chance to climb up the ladder then what is democracy?

Group 1

If you are sympathetic to that particular party's views, that guy is going to be representing those views anyway, so the views go together. I don't think I would vote for one particular party representative if I wanted a different party to get in, because the views are going to coincide. The Conservative chap is going to be representing the Conservative point of view anyway. You are voting for the ideals of that particular party.

Group 3

On big issues they are pretty much told what to do. You've got your whips and stuff. If there's a big deal going down in the government, they will make sure that all their boys toe the line. The area where they might have some influence is the little things like the little stuff that gets discussed in the House when there are twenty people there. You put the TV on sometimes and it's blah blah blah about fish net sizes or something like that. If you guy's representing Grimsby, he's got a chance to put something forward for his area. Or there may be some industry in the particular area which somebody can argue the case for. In situations like that your local MP can take a local issue and make some sort of stand. Certainly on national issues like the economy, education, defence, stuff like that, they are always going to have to toe the party line.

Group 3

Of party selection of candidates: I don't like the fact that they can put up their favourite people. I don't like that... it's going to be the hierarchy of each party. They're going to get the first few slots in every region so they are going to make sure that they always get in if they are a minister or whatever they are.

Group 6

MPs AND CONSTITUENCIES

You get one representative, because if you had them sharing the responsibility you wonder if they would spend so much time arguing amongst themselves in their one constituency that some important issues would never get resolved.

Group 1

Of STV: I think it is much too complicated. Also changing the constituencies enormously will cause all kinds of problems, depending on how they decide to split them up. If they decided to mix Croydon and Southwark, the issues in Southwark are completely different to the issues in Croydon. If you ended up with four different candidates from four different parties battling out the issues of Southwark and Croydon...

Group 1

Of multi-member constituencies: People write to their MP about things. You would get people who supported the Labour MPs writing to them about things, and a completely different set of people writing to the Conservative MP about things. They would get completely different views of everything, wouldn't they?

Group 1

Of AMS: What are they hoping to achieve by having that local constituency and then regional MPs?

Group 1

You have got to keep the areas as they are, because what are they going to do if we get rid of the areas and get rid of all the little parts? We've got to still vote for the local MPs.

Group 2

Of the ability to vote for candidates and parties with AMS: There might be a candidate from the Liberal party who is on the side of disabled people. Brilliant, gets everything done. You get cheap beer down your local so you vote for her in your region. You might say that she's good at that, but she's no good in Parliament, so I'll vote Labour. So you would tick Labour, but you'd have a LibDem.

Group 2

Of multi-member constituencies: It is hard enough knowing what your local MP wants to do, let alone several.

Group 2

Of multi-member constituencies: You're not going to know all the MPs. You're not going to know what they want, because you aren't worried about what he's doing miles away, are you? Are he's not going to know what's going on in your area because he has got too much to do.

Group 2

Of regional MPs: He won't be coming round so you could have a chat, a bloke who lives thirty miles away.

Group 2

Of multi-member constituencies: Also you've got to know what more of the MPs' policies are. Now it's bad enough just working on your own one, without worrying about all the others.

Group 2

I think you really should have someone in your area that you can go to if you knew them.

Group 3

You need to have your (*constituency*) MPs because they are talking for you.

Group 4

I don't see the point in that, to have two people in the same constituency.

Group 5

You still need the face of an MP. If you've got a major problem tomorrow, you want to go and see the MP.

Group 5

If you're going to make constituencies bigger, I don't think that is such a good idea, because it gets less personal.

Group 5

PREFERENTIAL SYSTEMS AND CHOICE

Too much choice is a bad thing.

Group 1

In the shop there are so many different types of something to buy. Washing powder!

I would say that casting 1, 2, and 3 is too much. 1 and 2 is about right.

Group 1

There are three serious parties in the country.

Group 1

I wouldn't want to vote for two parties, because that is basically what you're getting.

Group 2

We don't want anything to do with another party, do we, and we don't want to put our cross against any other party. There's only one party that we want to support.

Group 2

Either you are Labour, Conservative, or Liberal. There is only one party you are voting for, so it doesn't matter what else you are voting for.

Group 2

Of why SV is preferable to AV: It's still better than the last one, because you haven't got to give votes to people that you don't really like. You've got to have another preference... I know everybody has got their one preference, but there must be some sort of policies that another party has got that you wouldn't mind voting for.

Group 4

Of AV: I think it might lead to a bit of wishy washy sort of political ideas. I'll vote for that one, and maybe I'll go for that one second, and that one third. Oh no, maybe I'll have that one second and that one third, and you seem to lose track of what you're actually voting for in the first place. It's almost like betting or something.

Group 5

Of indicating all preferences: I don't think that is very fair, because you could be totally against their policies and to have to vote for that person, it's just not on in my book.

Group 5

I think you should have the option to just put marks against the ones that you want to. That would be a better system.

Group 5

Of AV: I think it's too wishy washy. It's too vague. People should be voting for an objective view and not just, "These are good. Maybe these are a little less good, so I'll vote for them". I think you should have an objective with your votes for one specific goal rather than treating it like some sort of racehorse.

Group 5

Of STV: It's putting an onus on the candidate, so with that system you would need to know the candidate and why they are better than the other Labour candidates. It's trying to put the onus on the candidate more than the party, but still the party is important.

Group 5

I think voting for every candidate is really going out of all proportion.

Group 6

Of AV: The problem with this system is that there is a percentage of people who are staunch Conservative, Labour, and Liberal. They are not going to bend either way. Then the rest are flexible, probably within two parties. They may like the Liberals in if the Labour party doesn't get in, or vice versa if you are Conservative.

Group 6

You may put them (*a disliked party*) as your fifth choice, so the fact that the party you don't like could get in on votes that really you don't want but you are having to put down... that to me is against all democracy of freedom of voting. You're forced to put it down, which is putting a party in that you don't want.

Group 6

When you go and cast your vote you're only putting a positive thing, aren't you?

You're not saying, "in order of preference".

Group 1

If you vote Labour you wouldn't put Conservative as your second choice, would you? So the LibDems come very well out of that.

Group 1

There would always be a danger of people just putting their number one, and then just writing numbers behind all the others without even caring what they were doing.

Group 1

Of bottom placing for objectionable candidates: It is almost like accepting them as a choice and I wouldn't be happy with that.

Group 1

Of supplementary vote, as against alternative vote: I think that is better from the point of view that you are only expected to cast two votes. If my husband had to think about seven parties, then he just wouldn't bother. I think that would affect a lot of people. That is much better. You would be in danger of frightening people off if you've got too much to think about.

Group 1

You will think about your first two or three choices but then the rest...

Group 1

Of indicating preferences for candidates (STV): But I wouldn't know what I was voting for. If someone gave me that choice I wouldn't have a clue what I was saying.

Group 1

Of indicating as many choices as preferred with AV: If some people only put two and some people put four, then it is going to knock that on the head.

Group 1

I can't see how your first choice would be Conservative and your second choice would be Labour.

Group 2

If I am a conservative why should I be made to vote a second time for Labour or Liberal or anybody else? Because that is what it's doing.

Group 2

If you are going to go in there and vote 1, but you don't put a 2 down, then they throw your ballot out. Why should that be a spoilt vote because I voter for that?

Group 2

If we all put 1 down, then they would call it void and throw it away, and the mass wouldn't have a voice.

Group 2

A lot of Labour supporters and Conservative supporters would probably put the other main party as their fifth (*i.e. last*) choice.

Group 2

Of why AMS is better than a preferential system: That is better than the 1, 2, 3, 4 because that way we vote for whoever we want, where the other way we are forced to vote for a second vote that we didn't want.

Group 2

Of AV: The trouble with that is that people would go in and think they're going to vote for so-and-so, and then they've got to think, "Who shall I make second?"

Group 3

Of AV beyond first choice: I think the people will be guessing. I don't think it would be a fair representation.

Group 3

Of AV beyond first choice: You might not want to vote for any of those other people. People are not really interested who their second, third, and fourth vote is for. They are just going to put them in any order.

Group 3

If you are forced to give a second choice, it's someone that you really don't care for, but you've got to put it down anyway.

Group 3

Of AV: I can see a flaw in that straight away. A lot of people go in with the idea that they're going to vote Labour. How many people are going to go from 1 to 5 and know what these people represent? You have got to go into it. You've got to know the lot. So every individual has really got to go into the system of voting, and who represents what, and what their views are, from 1 to 5. A lot of people would just go (*randomly*), "1, 2, 3..."

Group 4

I just think you vote for one party and that is it. I don't want a second choice, I want the party that I am voting for.

Group 6

SIMPLICITY

Of AV: I don't think that it's difficult to understand that. It's not getting so complicated that people would think, "Christ, instead of a cross I've got to put a number", because most people would understand that you are putting choice of preference with 1 being your first choice and 4 being your lowest choice and that you didn't have to put a number by all of them. You could just put one or two if you wanted to.

Group 1

Surely an issue is not only how it turns out, but the fact that you have got to get people there in the first place. If you make it too much choice, or too complicated, although it is a fairer system, they are in danger of not getting the same number of people out voting in the first place.

Group 1

Of STV: I was saying about thinking the Lottery is complicated. If we look at nineteen names, where do we start?

Group 1

Of STV: I think so many people would think, "Oh, my God, I don't understand this, I'm staying indoors". Think about the amount of people that don't understand what we've got now, let alone (STV).

Group 1

It's not how it's sorted (*that presents the difficulty*). I think you've got to make it simple when you go into that ballot box.

Group 2

It's a bit like McDonalds. You don't go in there and expect to have to queue and think about it. You go in there. You know what you want. You want to get in and get out. Who enjoys going to the doctor's surgery, or into a bank? How many people do you see standing around, saying, "Nice to see you again"? You don't, do you? You just get in there and do your bit, and off you go.

Group 2

I don't understand half of it anyway. I don't think just my tick counts anyway, although they say it does.

Group 3

Of STV: If how you do that is more complicated, that must be incredibly complicated because this is so complicated in the first place. So if the next bit is more complicated, it is an absolute nightmare. It just seems so ridiculously contrived.

Group 3

These systems may work, I don't know. But the voter has got to go and put the mark on a box in the voting booth and they want simplicity. It's so easy now, isn't it?

Group 4

PROPORTIONALITY

The country is divided up into squares and whoever gets the most squares wins.

Group 1

In the West Country, they're such a Liberal Democratic stronghold that you can drive along the road and everybody's got a LibDem sign outside, and you'd think that they were going to win, but you come further east and it just doesn't seem fair. The people who live in the West Country are farmers, and they've got their reasons for wanting a certain party in, and because of the way that it goes they end up getting outvoted all the time because there are less of them.

Group 1

I thought it was the percentage rather than the seats.

Group 1

Of AMS outcome: Most people would say that is how they thought it was anyway, i.e. a percentage of the vote and that went to the party, and they were allocated that proportion of seats in Parliament.

Group 1

Of first-past-the-post: They count all the local votes and how many has voted Conservative and how many has voted Labour. Then they collate that with all that has gone on all over the country. The one that has come out with the most gets it.

Group 2

It should be counted on numbers and how the majority vote all over the country.

Group 2

The way it's done now, you get three million people voting and two and a half million would vote Labour but they wouldn't get in because of the way it's situated in that area. It's a whacking great area and you only get one seat but this little area gets two seats. *Group 2*

Everybody in this little village might be Conservative so the Conservatives will work on areas and really hit them hard. There might be twenty little areas all getting their own little seat. There might only be a million people in them twenty little towns, so there are twenty seats that the Conservatives or Labour have got, and in this massive area of Croydon you get just one seat, which isn't really fair.

Group 2

They should do it so for the General Election it is an overall vote. The majority gets it from the whole country. You vote Labour, Conservative, or Liberal or whatever. Then the votes are counted at the end. If they got five million, they get it. If they got four million, they won't get it. And then you have local elections and in your local elections you pick your MPs.

Group 2

Do away with all the areas at the moment and put in a grid system which works out 600 odd throughout Britain and then each one represents one MP.

Group 2

Of proportional representation: You are getting a true reflection of what everybody wants in the whole of the country and not what certain seats want.

Group 2

Of how a proportional result might encourage potential LibDem supporters:

When people see that going up (*the number of seats*) they are maybe going to push their boat over and say, "They might have a chance this time".

Group 2

Of AMS and proportional outcomes: That way is getting slightly more to the proportional representation, isn't it. than the other two (*AV and SV*). You can see, how they are all coming down level. They are all sort of coming out where the votes went. *Group 2*

When you actually look at the number of votes that have been cast for other parties ... Liberal Democrats is a very good example. They get a very high vote but they get very few seats. That's wrong, because if you have got that number of votes then they should deserve more seats.

Group 3

I thought they just counted and whoever got the most votes was in.

Group 3

It seems a truer representation of what was actually voted on the day and will be represented in Parliament.

Group 3

Overall around the country it is every Labour vote and every Conservative vote (*which determines who forms the Government*).

Group 4

All the votes are added up and it is the one with the most vote in the ballot box (*who forms the Government*).

Group 4

When Labour got in, you think they've got the majority, but when you see that they didn't get as many votes as you think they did, it seems a bit unfair that they got in when there were so many people that didn't even want them. If there's a fairer method of doing it...

Group 4

I have heard that scenario before on watching campaigns - more people vote against the party that are getting in power than the party getting in power.

Group 4

I don't really understand everything about it, but the counting system seems a bit unfair at times.

Group 6

STABLE GOVERNMENT AND LANDSLIDES

You end up having so much choice that when it comes to making difficult decisions nobody wants to make them because everybody is represented and nobody wants to be the bad guy.

Group 1

Of more proportional systems: It would make the party who was in government work harder, "Wow, we haven't got much of a majority".

Group 2

Labour have such a big majority that they can put everything through. If you've got a big enough majority, you're not going to get outvoted.

Group 2

If you did what was suggested (*proportional system*) it would never be agreed. we would just procrastinate wouldn't we? We would go backwards. You've got to have a majority that can say, "We don't care what the rest think. We are going to go forward regardless".

Group 2

Although I voted Labour at the last election, I'm not really in favour... I feel that a government should be in, but with a very small majority, because with too large a majority they can do exactly what they want. But if you get more of a borderline where there's not an awful lot of votes in difference...

Group 3

You can argue the point more (*with a small majority*) and you can't get away with as much. Having a landslide like this one did, and previous elections, I feel that it is not doing the country any good because one particular party's views come across all the time... it's too big a majority, so therefore you can't really do anything about it. If it was more of a borderline thing, it would be argued, and it would be the "fors" and the "against".

Group 3

They've got a system (*i.e. first-past-the-post*) where there are three hundred or something and the ones first past that are the winners. I don't agree with that, because if you get a landslide where it all goes one way, then you get one particular party's views right the way through and they can do what they want. If it was done on a different system, and they brought the parties closer so they could only have a smaller majority, then they wouldn't be able to do exactly what they want.

Group 3

Of alternatives to first-past-the-post: In the Commons itself you haven't got that big a majority, you get more opinions, and it's not a monopoly of the government again.

Group 3

You want more of a balanced House of Commons... I just feel that it is fairer for the country as a whole not to have any party in such a big majority that they can completely control everything.

Group 3

I feel that you should have a party in with an overall majority but not to such a great extent that they can decide on stupid issues.

Group 3

With that way of voting (*a more proportional system*), don't you think it would keep them on their toes if they realised there wasn't that much difference between the two? There it looks as though they've got such a big majority, and they think, "We are in", but, if there's less between the amounts, they would probably think, "We've got to keep on our toes because it was such a close thing", and they've got to try and stick to some of their policies.

Group 4

I would like to see an alternative from Labour and Tory. We've only got two parties in this country who are going to really win realistically, and if these are going to give another chance to somebody else, I'm all for it.

Group 5

Of hung Parliaments: You've got no leadership. If you've got a hung Parliament, you've got no leadership... no one party have got a majority so two parties would get together and overrule. That's like a vote of no confidence in the government.

Group 5

Of coalition governments: Then you're getting a bit more debate. You are getting a bit more of a mix. It's not just everybody going all in one direction. Different ideas are being thrown around. Unless they start talking to each other about different ideas, rather than if you've just got the power...

Group 5

With that idea (*increased proportionality*) it would make it a lot harder for the government or whoever is in control to steamroller their ideas through Parliament because they haven't got such a big majority. And that is a good idea.

Group 6

MINORITY PARTIES

There are other countries where if the fringe parties at least get some sort of percentage of the vote, they get somebody into the parliament. In Italy a porno queen got into parliament because she had got 1% of the vote, so she got a seat. At least here (*with AMS*) it doesn't appear that you would get that situation.

Group 3

I know if proportional representation was the system that was being used, you would probably find that you might get a couple of Green politicians in the Houses of Parliament. But the way it is at the moment...

Group 4

VOTE TO OUTCOME

Of not seeing a vote in an outcome: If everybody thought, "it doesn't work", nobody would go there, would they? The only thing where I think a vote is a waste of time is Liberal because you know they are never going to get in. I know they are not going to get in so I think I'm wasting my vote putting down Liberal, so I go for one of the others. *Group 1*

Of how a more proportional result might encourage voters to place more confidence in the Liberal Democrats: Look how Liberal has come up there now. If Liberal were that high, and you knew that they had more chance of getting in, more people would vote for them.
Group 2

Of why how the present system disincentivises potential Liberal Democrat voters: I think their problem at the moment is that they are fighting to be taken seriously... I think that a lot of people think that they are not going to vote for them because they are never going to have a big enough majority... it shows that quite a lot of people do actually support them but they never have much chance of winning.
Group 3

I don't (*think first-past-the-post is fair*) because so many votes are ignored. If everybody's vote was taken into consideration and all added up together...
Group 4

Of why proportionality is preferred: At least they're taking everybody's vote into consideration... and at the end of the day that is what voting is about. Everybody and every individual.
Group 4

If you know the Tories are going to win hands down, and they're 90% in front - then you think, "What's the point, I'm a Labour bloke? Why should I go out and vote because it's obvious?"
Group 5

It's cut and dried, so why bother going up there in the first place? Everybody else will be voting, so it doesn't matter if I don't vote because the vote is going in my direction anyway.
Group 5

(*With first-past-the-post*) you always have doubts, don't you? You think, "That was a wasted vote because I know they're going to get in", or, "I should have voted for them". *Group 5*

Does this have to be about party? I would love to vote LibDems if they were going to get it. But realistically, when I go into that booth, I think, "It's got no chance". I know if everybody thinks like me, but I don't think everybody thinks like me, so... I'd vote for them. I would love to see Paddy Ashdown have a go.
Group 5

I think a lot of people would vote Liberal but they always think they are on a loser. They would like to see the Liberals in if they knew they would get in or a good chance. It is a wasted vote to some extent. I think a lot of people would go down probably thinking of voting Labour or Conservatives but would give the Liberals a chance.

Group 6

5. DISCUSSION TOPIC GUIDE

PROJECT SYSTEM J47639
DISCUSSION GUIDE
Approved version (4 June 1998)

1. INTRODUCTION

- ◇ Explain purpose of research: different ways of voting for MPs, Commission's task etc.
- ◇ Reassure: confidentiality, tape recorder, observers, MRS Code of Conduct
- ◇ Equal contributions from each respondent important, respecting one another's views, not talking over one another
- ◇ Remind: need for honesty, especially if concepts not understood – not speaking up may mean the Commission end up making the wrong decisions, better to say openly if something seems complicated, don't be embarrassed
- ◇ First name from each respondent, occupation (if any), place of residence, family set-up, hobbies and interests, who voted for at last Election

2. VOTING BEHAVIOUR

Aim here to establish understanding of motivating and inhibiting factors re: voting through discussion of current practice

NB Groups include some respondents who did not vote last time - make sure they get their say

Pay close attention to differences which may arise from political allegiances - and tease these out

We're going to be talking about General Elections. I know the Election in 1997 last year is going to be the one you can remember best, but as we go through - and I know this may be difficult - bear in mind that we're talking about your general experience of elections, and not just the last one! It would be really good if you could think about other elections as well, because there's always the chance that the last one wasn't that typical. I know it's a bit of a strain on your memories, but let's see how we do. To kick off, then:

- ◇ When in the day do you usually go and make your vote? Why then?
- ◇ Do you go by yourself or with other people? Why?
- ◇ What is it actually like when you get there? What's the atmosphere? How do you feel when you make your vote? How long does it take?
- ◇ How do you feel once you've made your vote?
- ◇ Is voting something you look forward to, something you don't look forward to, or neither? Why?
- ◇ Have you definitely decided before you go who's getting your vote? Anyone ever changed their mind at the last minute? What happened?
- ◇ Anyone ever felt uncomfortable or dissatisfied after they've made their vote - have you ever come away from the station not entirely sure that you've done the right thing?

Move on to motives

- ◇ Why do you vote (or not vote)? Why is voting or not voting important? What do you feel voting is all about for you?
- ◇ Do you think everyone feels the same way about it? How might other people feel differently to you?
- ◇ Are there any specific things which make you think either that your vote is important, or that it isn't? What are these, and why do they make you feel like this?
- ◇ Are there any situations in which you feel voting is more or less important? What are these - what's the difference?

What do you think voting really *means*? Is it:

- ◇ An opportunity to give your verdict on past performance
- ◇ A civic duty / responsibility
- ◇ A waste of time and energy
- ◇ Having your say about how the country is run, etc.
- ◇ If you went home and on the news it said that it's been decided to scrap the idea of elections, that voting isn't going to happen any more, what would your reaction be?
- ◇ On the other hand, how would you feel if you didn't have the choice *not* to vote? Some countries are like this - you have to vote or you're breaking the law. Would this be a good idea or a bad idea?
- ◇ Do you think there's any difference between the way Tories go about the voting process - or what Labour supporters do? Or the LibDems? Or other parties? What are these differences?

How much difference do you think your vote actually makes?

Consider

- expecting the result to be cut and dried without really needing your vote
- not believing anything will actually change
- not knowing enough about candidates, parties, or policies
- not having a strong opinion either way
- not thinking the system is fair

3. PARTIES, CANDIDATES, and POLICIES

Aim here to gain understanding of whether voters concentrate on issues or individuals, the local or national perspective

When you vote in a General Election, what do you feel you are voting *for*?

- ◇ Are you saying which person you want to represent you in Parliament?
- ◇ Or are you saying which party you want to run the country?
- ◇ Are you thinking of who is the best person for your area?
- ◇ Do you think of yourself as voting for a particular person, or for a party? How? Is it always like this, or was the last Election a case in point?
- ◇ What kind of issues do you consider - and how much do these have to do with the way you end up voting?

Probe for examples of the above

- ◇ Can you remember the names of the people who stood in your area last time?
- ◇ How much attention did you give to what they were saying? Did you concentrate on what they said, or what the party leaders said on television and in the papers?
- ◇ How would you feel if instead of people's names on the ballot paper, you just got the parties - in other words, if you just got to say which party you wanted and left them to pick the people for you afterwards?
- ◇ How does this relate to what we've just been talking about?

Do you think that your vote allows you to say what you actually *want* to say at an Election? Why? Why not?

- ◇ How much choice do you think you actually get?
- ◇ Is it as much choice as you want?
- ◇ What is the choice you do have?
- ◇ Do you always feel that you get to vote for the "best" choice or does it ever turn out to more like be the best of a bad bunch? Any stories here?
- ◇ Do you think MPs do represent the people in their areas? Or do they just do whatever everyone else in their party does? Why do you think this?

4. **FIRST PAST THE POST**

Aim here to establish areas of satisfaction and frustration with present system - elaborating on aspects already discussed

Do not introduce other systems into the discussion yet

- ◇ Who can explain the first past the post system?
- ◇ How does it actually work?
- ◇ Where does your vote actually go in this system?
- ◇ What are the *good* points about this system? What do you like about it? How important are these?

Allow for spontaneous responses as far as possible, and if necessary prompt

- ◇ How do you feel about there only being one winner?
- ◇ Is this system easy to understand?
- ◇ Does this system make you feel your vote is important or not? Why?
- ◇ What do you think of having one MP per constituency? And what do you think about the whole idea of constituencies anyway?
- ◇ How do you feel when your vote is not one of those which 'wins'?
- ◇ In this system, a winner sometimes gets less than 50% of the votes – so there are actually more voters who *don't* want that person to be their MP, but they end up being the winner anyway. What do you think of this?
- ◇ Countrywide, more people might actually vote against a party than for it, but that party might still end up winning an Election and going into Government. So the Tories might get 33% of the vote but still end up being the Government - with 67% saying they don't actually want them. How do you feel about that?

One thing critics of this system say is that it doesn't show what the whole country really thought - in other words, if you looked at how many people in the country voted Labour, and how many voted Tory and LibDem, and so on, that might not be the same as the way the seats turn out. Labour might get 32% of the vote across the country, but that doesn't mean it's going to get 32% of the seats in Parliament. It could get more than 32% of the seats, or it could get less.

Show stimulus material illustrating deviation from proportionality

If the seats had just been allocated according to proportion, the last election result would have looked like this (*indicate*). Under this system, it actually looked like (*indicate*). What's your reaction to that?

- ◇ Does it matter that this system might not turn out to be proportional? Why? Why not?
- ◇ How does this relate to what we've been saying about the national picture and the local picture?
- ◇ Imagine the system that we use, with one MP per constituency, and with the one with the most votes winning, wasn't there, and you were given the job of deciding how we picked people to run the country. Do you think this is the system you'd come up with? Why? Why not?
- ◇ If you did have to come up with a system, what bits of this system do you think you'd keep? Why? What bits would you get rid of? Why?
- ◇ Is this system fair? Why/ Why not? Fair to whom exactly - to you, or to the parties?

5. ALTERNATIVE VOTING SYSTEMS – WARM UP

Aim of this section to gain spontaneous responses from groups as to possible changes in voting system, and so to identify salient areas of concern

The Commission we talked about is currently looking at other systems of voting. I have some to show you but before we look at them I'm interested in what ideas you might have.

- ◇ What would your system definitely have to do?
- ◇ And what would it have to try not to do?
- ◇ What ideas do you have about how a different system might work?
- ◇ Would it have to be proportional?
- ◇ Would it have to deliver a majority verdict?
- ◇ What bits of first-past-the-post should it hang on to?

*Allow for maximum spontaneous responses – give respondents free rein
Compare and discuss respondent suggestions*

FOR NEXT SECTION, ROTATE THE SYSTEMS DISCUSSED:

ALTERNATIVE VOTE

SUPPLEMENTARY VOTE

SINGLE TRANSFERABLE VOTE

ADDITIONAL MEMBER SYSTEM

6. **ALTERNATIVE VOTING SYSTEMS**

Aim is to gauge reaction to, and relative understanding of, alternative voting systems

Allow for maximum spontaneous response – do not lead respondents until their own thoughts have been exhausted!

Repeat for each voting system, and rotate across groups

Describe system (from stimulus)

Gather first reactions, and then prompt:

- ◇ How does this system differ from the one we use now?
- ◇ Do these differences make sense to you?
- ◇ What do you not understand about this system?
- ◇ What kind of results do you think this system might produce? How would this be different from what we currently get?
- ◇ Does this system seem like an improvement on what we have already? Why?
- ◇ Would this system make you less or more likely to vote? Why?
- ◇ Does this system strike you as fair? What does 'fair' actually mean to you?
- ◇ How much choice does this system seem to give you?
- ◇ What problems do you imagine this system might present?
- ◇ With this system, do you think you'd vote on the basis of party, of individual candidates, or a bit of both?
- ◇ Do you feel this system is about electing a Government, or electing an MP?
- ◇ Do you have any feelings about how the role of your MP might change with this system?
- ◇ Where do you think independent candidates would come in?
- ◇ There might be more parties with this system - what's your reaction to that?
- ◇ Do you think politics in general would operate differently if we used this system? How? Is this a good thing or a bad thing? Why?
- ◇ Do you feel this system would give you more opportunity to vote on issues, or to give your vote to women, or to any minority groups that currently might not be that well represented? What are these? How important a consideration is this for you?
- ◇ How much do you think this system would 'suit' different parties? For example, would it be really beneficial to Labour or the Tories? Or would it, for example, really do the LibDems a disservice? How much does this affect your reaction to it?
- ◇ What differences do you expect this system to make on a *local* level? What about on a *national* level? Do you think it would produce a proportional result?
- ◇ How much of a chance do you think this system would give to minor parties? Is this a good thing or a bad thing? Do you think the Loony Party might get in with this system? Or the National Front, or something like that? How do you feel about this?

Show stimulus material demonstrating deviation from proportionality

- ◇ This is how this system would have turned out at the last election - compared with what would have happened if it were done by pure proportion. What's your reaction? Is it what you were expecting?
- ◇ (*For preferential systems - AV, STV*) How do you feel about perhaps giving a party a 'point', even if you put them in bottom place - does it seem right that you give them *anything* when you are opposed to that party?

7. *PROPORTIONALITY*

Aim here to establish specific attitudes to proportionality

We've been talking a bit about whether results are proportional, and I'd now like us to look at that in a bit more detail. The Commission is really interested in attitudes to this, so this is really important.

What I'd like to do is for you to split up into two teams. The first team, I'd like you take a few minutes to think about putting together a case for why we should have a proportional system - and for that you can pick any of these you like, whichever you think would end up being the most proportional. In a minute you'll have to state your case to the rest of us.

The other team, I want you to think about the cases *against* having a proportional system - I need you to think about any problems it might end up producing, and why the trade-off with the other things we've been talking about is too heavy and we shouldn't bother.

Once we've done that we'll hear what you've put together and see which we think is the most convincing case.

Revisit stimulus material for each system demonstrating deviation from proportionality

Compare responses

If the following have not arisen spontaneously, prompt with cards

Pros

- ◇ Everyone's vote would contribute to the result, not just the winners
- ◇ Most people would have an MP for the party they voted for
- ◇ The share of seats in Parliament a party gets is the same as the share of votes they received
- ◇ There would less need to vote tactically

Cons

- ◇ Possible loss of a single constituency MP
 - ◇ Hung Parliaments
 - ◇ Greater chance of fringe parties getting elected
 - ◇ Risk of dangerous minority parties - NF, BNP, etc.
- ◇ Now we've done that, how important is proportionality to each of you? What's the trade-off and is it worth it?

8. ROUND UP

Summary of systems

Alright, we're nearly done. Now what I'd like to do is have a really quick whizz through these systems just once more and we'll decide whether it's a definite, a maybe, or a definitely not. I don't want a handcount, we've just got to come to a consensus between us. And then I want just two or three reasons why it's a runner or not.

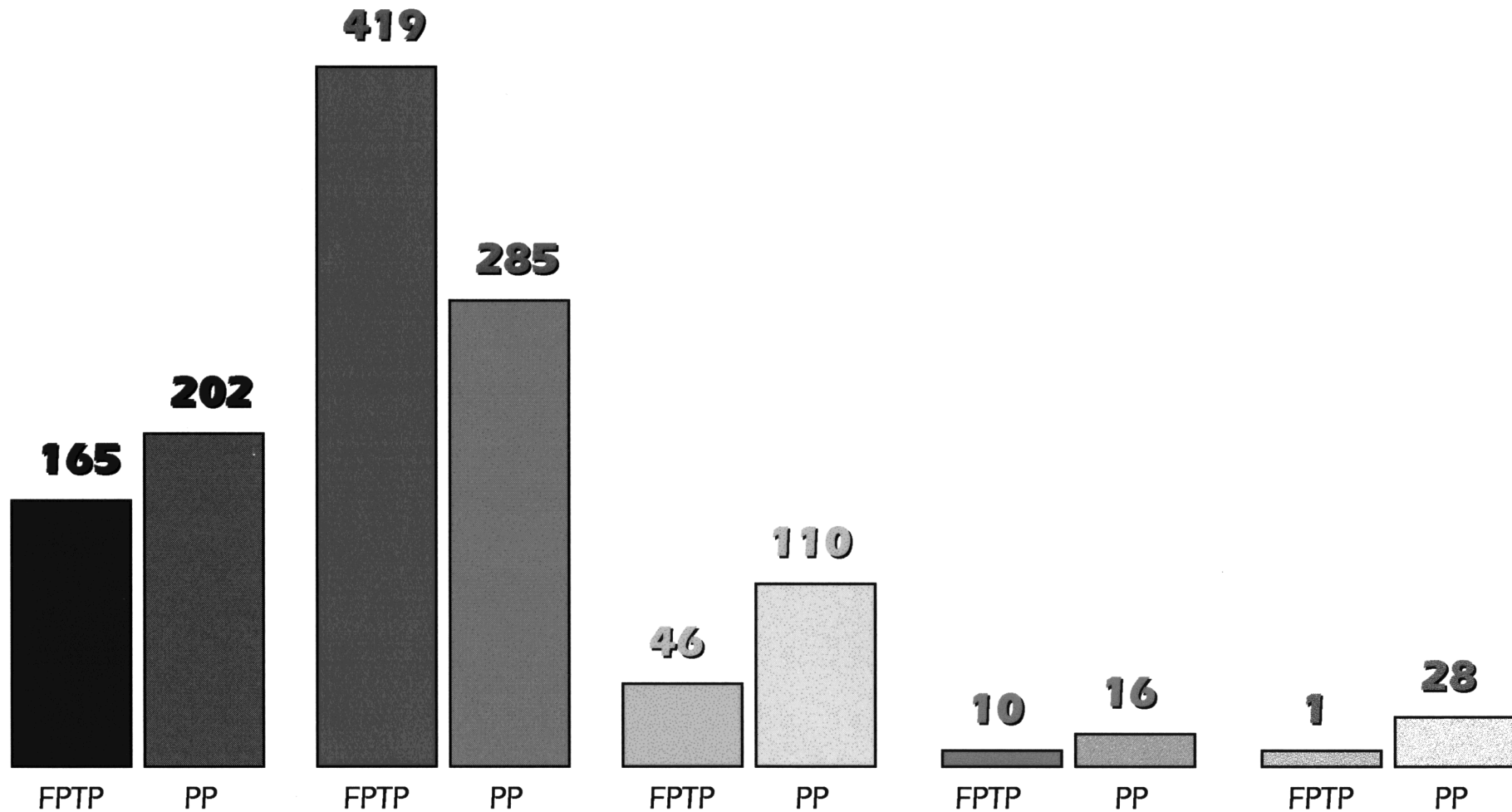
Revisit each system, and gain reasons

- ◇ Now we've looked at these other systems, how do you feel about the one we have now?
- ◇ Have you heard anything which has changed your mind about voting in any way?
- ◇ There's going to be a Referendum giving everybody in the country the choice between first-past-the-post or one of these systems we've looked at? What do you think will happen?
- ◇ We've looked through these systems and understood them. What's the best way of getting this across to everyone else so they can make up their minds in the Referendum?

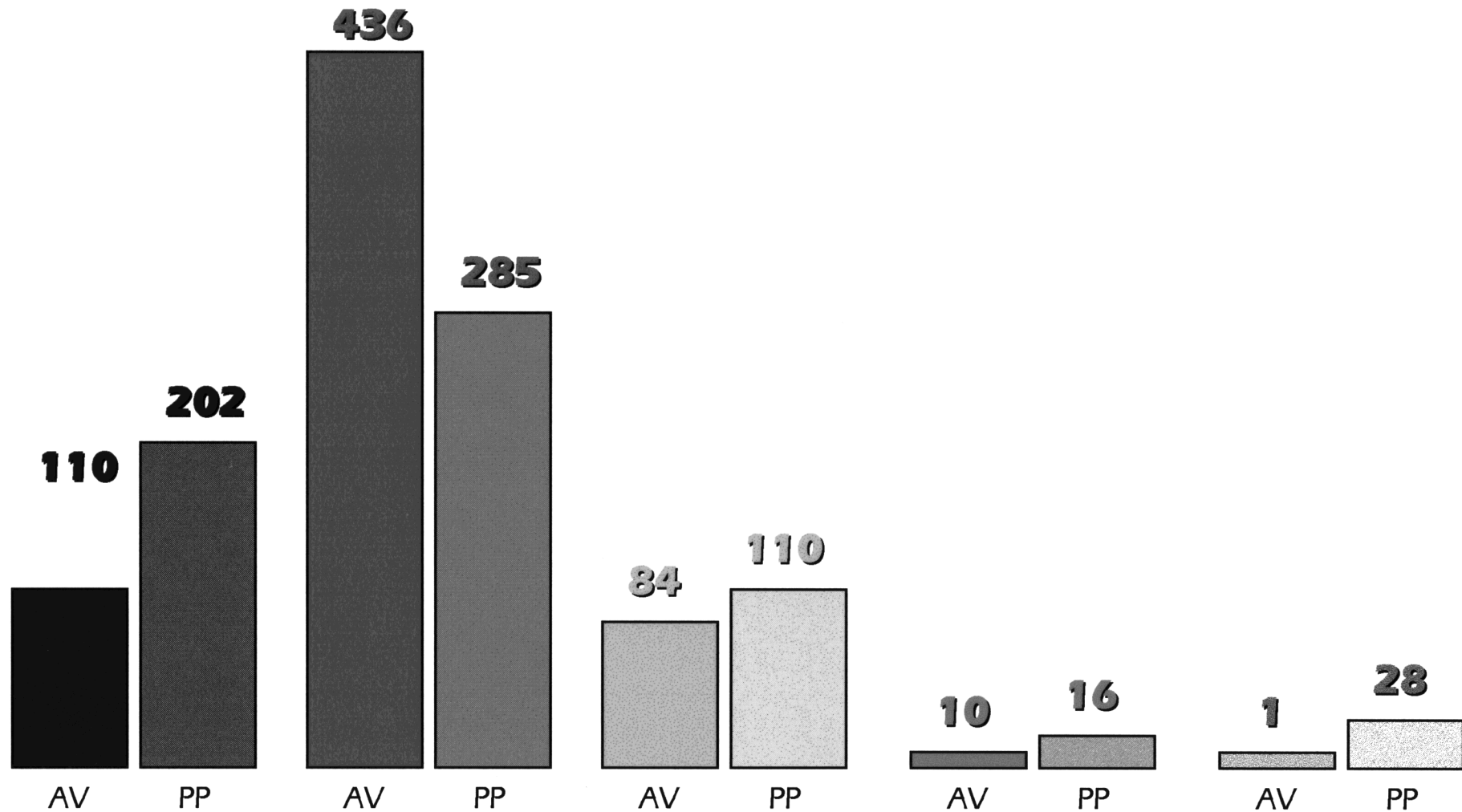
Allow respondents to offer any additional comments - then thank and close

6. STIMULUS MATERIAL

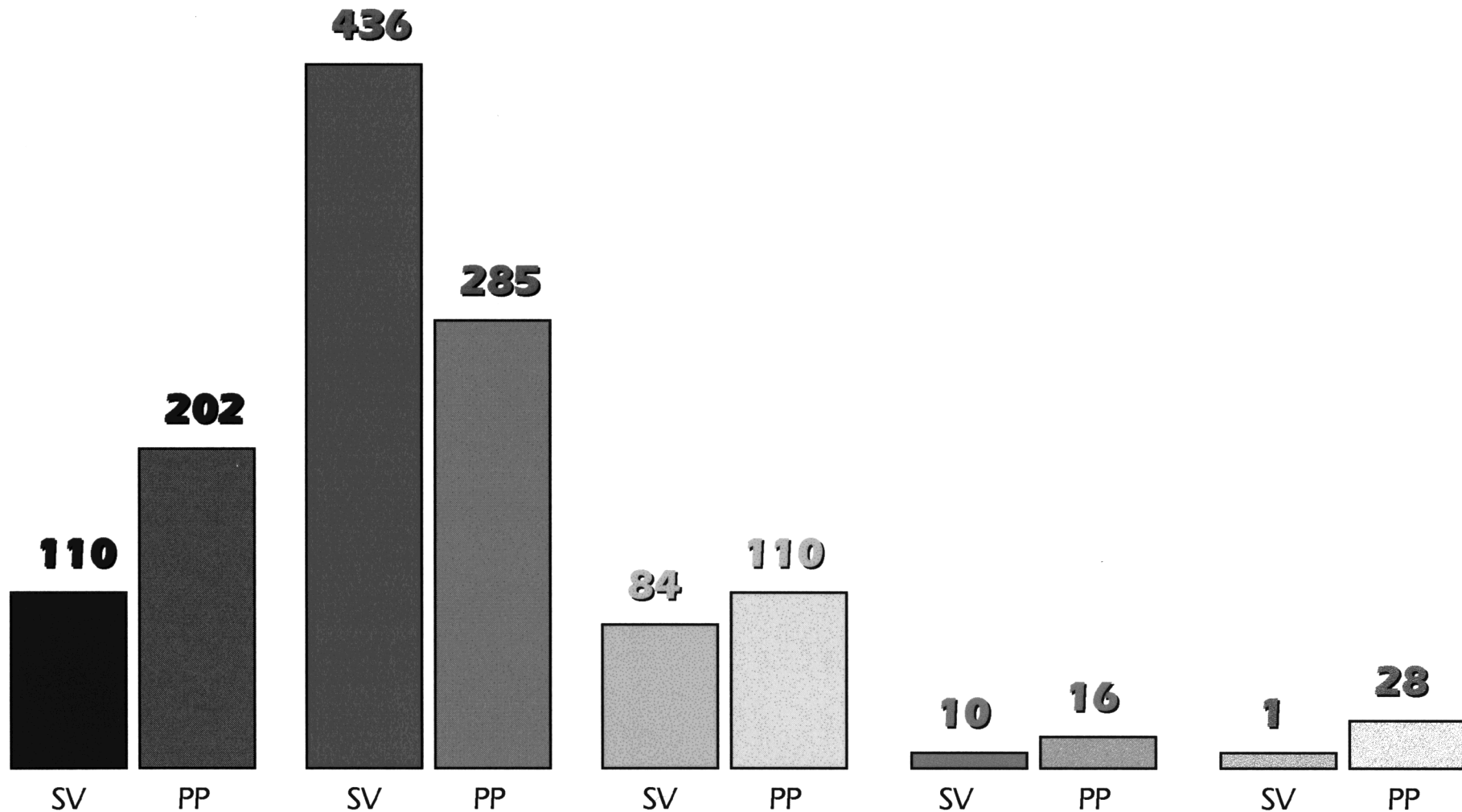
How the 1997 FPTP result compares to pure proportionality



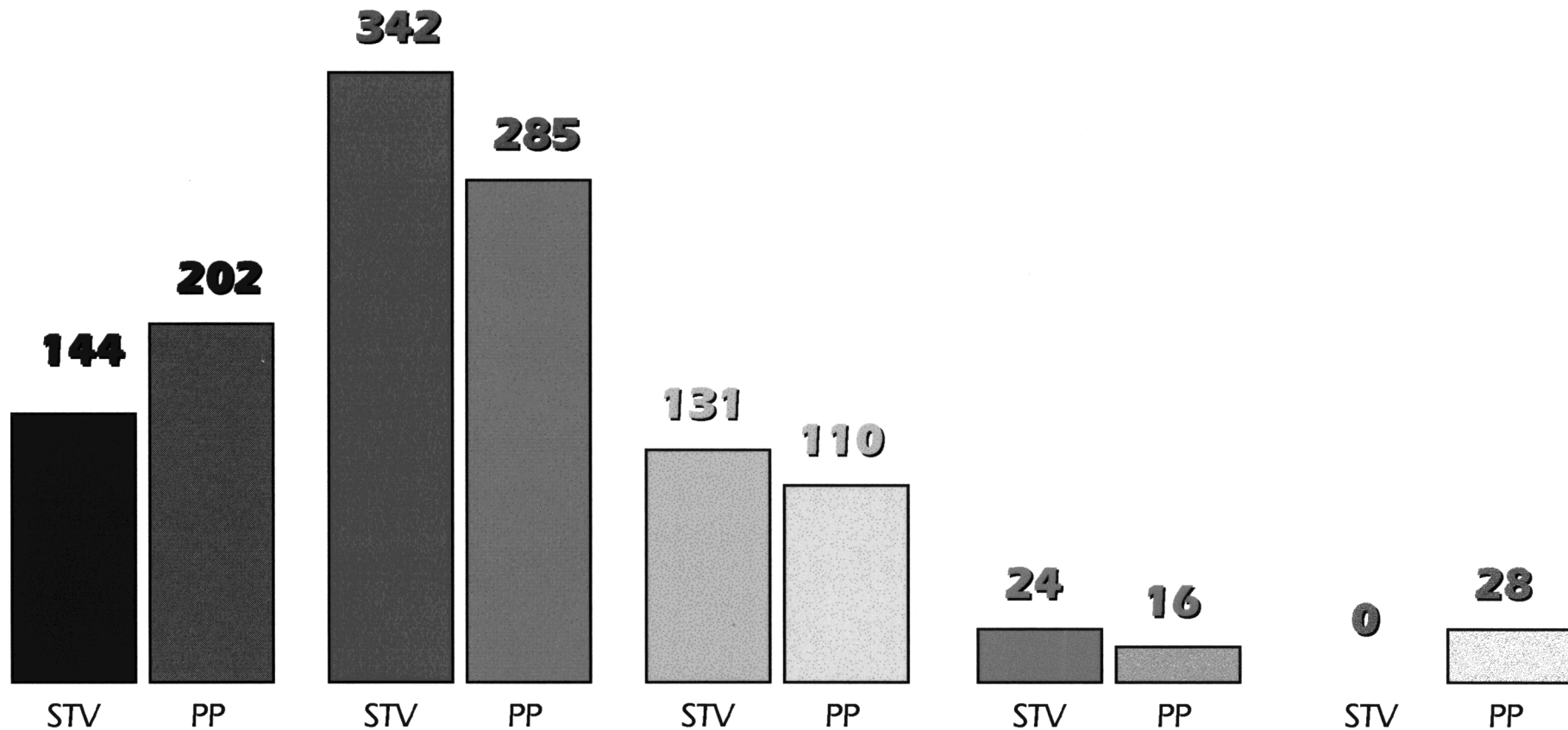
How a 1997 AV result might compare to pure proportionality



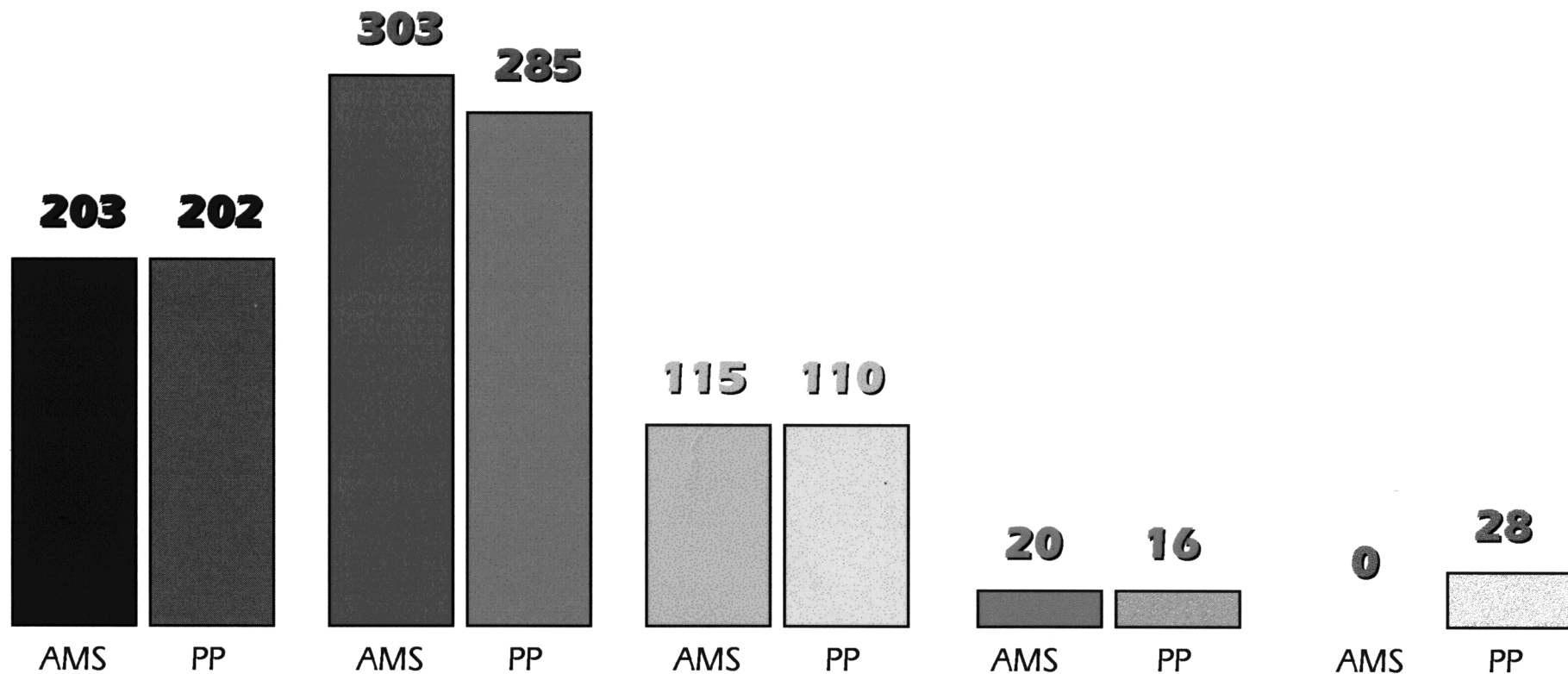
How a 1997 SV result might compare to pure proportionality



How a 1997 STV result might compare to pure proportionality



How a 1997 AMS result might compare to pure proportionality



7. RECRUITMENT QUESTIONNAIRE

TIME OF GROUP:.....

DATE OF GROUP:.....

GROUP NO:.....

Q1. We are carrying out a Market Research Survey about elections and are looking for people representing various occupations.

Do you or do any members of your family, or do any of your close friends, work in any of the following occupations, either now or in the past?

<u>READ OUT AND CODE BELOW</u>	YES	NO
ADVERTISING	1	1
MARKET RESEARCH	2	2
PUBLIC RELATIONS	3	3
JOURNALISM	4	4
MARKETING	5	5
MEMBER OF A POLITICAL PARTY/ CHARTER 88/ELECTORAL REFORM SOCIETY	6	6
LOCAL COUNCILOR/UNION REPRESENTATIVE/CHAIRMAN OF A PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATION*	7	7

IF YES TO ANY OF THE ABOVE - CLOSE INTERVIEW

*See Instructions

Q2 Have you ever attended a Market Research Group discussion?

YES 1 ASK Q2a) & Q2b)

NO 2 GO TO Q3

Q2a) How long ago did you attend a Market Research Group discussion?

In last 6 months

1 CLOSE INTERVIEW

6-12 months ago

2 Ask Q2b) (no more than 2 Respondents)

12 months-2 years ago

3 Ask Q2b)

2 years-3 years ago

4 Ask Q2b)

Over 3 years ago

5 Ask Q2b)

Q2b) What was the discussion about?.....

IF ON A SIMILAR SUBJECT AS THIS SURVEY - CLOSE INTERVIEW

Q2c) How many groups have you attended?

(i) in last 2 years?

(ii) in total?

(i) in last 2 years (write in)..... (if more than 3 CLOSE)

(ii) in total (write in).....(if more than 5 CLOSE)

Q3 Which of the following statements describes you?

I know nothing about electoral reform or proportional representation

1

I know a little about electoral reform or proportional representation

2

I know a lot about electoral reform or proportional representation

3 CLOSE

All to code 1 or 2 @ Q3 – Please refer to instructions.

Q4 And can I just check, did you vote at the last General Election?

YES	1
NO	2

Within each group: 6 to code 'Yes' @ Q4 and 2 to code 'No' @ Q4

Q5 Which of the following political parties did you vote for, either at the last General Election or in case of those who did not vote – at the one before.

Conservative	1
Labour	2
LibDem	3
SNP	4
Other (write in).....	5

Within each Group: At least one but no more than 3 to have voted for any one party @ Q5

PHOENIX FIELDWORK LIMITED

Q1	Are you at present	Married	1	Single	2
		Divorced	3	Widowed	4
		Separated	5	Cohabiting	6

Q2 Occupation of Chief Wage Earner:.....

Probe fully, obtain as many details as possible:.....

.....

Qualifications:.....

Number. in charge of.....Note Social Grade:.....

Q3a) Age of Respondent:..... Q3b) D.O.B.....

Q4 Occupation of Respondent if not Chief Wage Earner.....

.....

Working full-time	(30+ hours per week)	1
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Working part-time	(6-29 hours per week)	2
-------------------	-----------------------	---

Working less than 6 hours per week	3
------------------------------------	---

Non working	4
-------------	---

Q5 Number of children living at home:.....

Ages:

NAME OF RESPONDENT (incl. first name).....

ADDRESS:.....

.....Post Code:.....

TEL: No: (work).....ext:..... (home).....

INVITE TO GROUP/DEPTH IF RESPONDENT FITS ALL REQUIREMENTS

INTERVIEWERS DECLARATION:

This interview was conducted in accordance with the Market Research Code of Conduct and the respondent is not a relative or friend of mine.

FACE TO FACE 1 TELEPHONE 2 STREET 3 DOOR TO DOOR 4

INTERVIEWERS SIGNATURE:.....DATE:.....

