

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

Submissions from political parties / fora

Green Party



Green Party

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Lord Jenkins
Independent Commission on the Voting System
6th Floor Clive House
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24th February 1998

Dear Lord Jenkins

The Green Party wishes to give its views to your Independent Commission on the Voting System. We have for a long time advocated the Additional Member System for elections to the House of Commons and believe that it best satisfies the requirements for broad proportionality, the need for stable government, an extension of voter choice and the maintenance of a link between MPs and geographical constituencies set out in your terms of reference.

Proportionality and representation

We believe that the representation of views in the House of Commons should be as close as possible to the representation of those views amongst the voters, ie that there should be proportional representation. In 'Making Votes Count' Democratic Audit rated AMS as the system closest to exact proportionality, with a 'deviation from proportionality' of only 2% (for 50:50 AMS). Other systems had larger 'deviations from proportionality'.

AMS maintains a link to geographical constituencies for the constituency MPs. The top-up MPs from the party lists would not have a geographical constituency but could be linked to a region. We would suggest that the additional members are elected from party lists on a regional basis, using the same regional boundaries as the Government Regional Offices and those proposed for future European Parliament elections. The areas for topping up from the party lists should not be smaller than these regions.

We would prefer a 50:50 ratio between constituency and additional members, because this provides a balance between proportionality and constituency links. However a lower proportion of additional members would be acceptable as long as it is not less than 40%. Below that figure we believe that the result would significantly deviate from proportionality. There should not be a requirement for a party to have to win a constituency seat before it is entitled to top-up seats. That would exclude smaller parties and so deviate from proportionality.

We would find the use of AV, instead of FPTP, for the election of the constituency MPs quite acceptable. This would provide voters with a mechanism to express preferences amongst the candidates in the constituency ballot. Any deviation from proportionality produced by the use of AV for the constituency ballots would be corrected by the topping up process.

The top-up MPs, the additional members, should be taken from ordered lists submitted by the parties in each region. They should not be the 'best losers' for the parties in the constituency ballots. There are too many other factors at play in the constituency elections for them to be a reliable guide as to the relative support for each of the party's candidates. The constituency ballots rely upon the vagaries of FPTP. Also, if the order of party lists were not known at the time of voting the voters not know in what order candidates would be elected from the party lists.

Some people argue that there should be a threshold for the party list vote below which a party would not receive any top up seats. If this threshold is high then parties with significant levels of support would be excluded and so the 'deviation from proportionality' would become too large. We would regard a threshold of 2% or 3% as acceptable. 3% was the figure proposed for European Parliament elections in the de Gucht report and accepted by the European Parliament.

We prefer the Hare or Sainte-Laguë counting methods for deciding how many seats each party is entitled to in each region. They would give a more proportional result than the d'Hondt method.

FPTP leads to a poor geographical distribution in terms of political representation of MPs. For example, in the 1992 general election the Conservatives gained all but a handful of seats in South East England (outside London). Yet millions of people voted for other parties and were largely unrepresented. In that election 2.2 million people south of a line from the River Severn to the Wash voted Labour but only 10 Labour MPs were elected in that area. In Scotland 1.1 million people voted Labour and 49 Labour MPs were elected. In Scotland there were about 22,000 votes per Labour MP but in the south there were about 220,000 votes per Labour MP, a ten-fold difference. This huge discrepancy would not occur with AMS. AMS would ensure that the dominance by one party in a geographical area, to the exclusion of MPs from other parties, was ended.

The SNP has been the only smaller party whose proportion of seats has been even close to its proportion of the vote, although it has been consistently under-represented. In the 1994 European Parliament election the SNP and the Greens both got 3.2% of the vote in Britain. The SNP got two seats and the Greens got none. This highlights the fact that with FPTP a smaller party can gain representation if its support is localised but not if it is evenly spread across the country. We believe that a party should get its proportion of seats in the Parliament whether its support is localised or is spread out. AMS would come closest to achieving this.

AMS would also broaden the number of parties, and thus views, represented in Parliament. Smaller parties who cannot win a constituency under FPTP can still be represented in Parliament by candidates elected as additional members. This would extend voter choice and end the 'wasted vote' syndrome. More people would have their views represented in Parliament and so would feel connected with the political process.

AMS should also avoid the geographical misrepresentation often caused by FPTP. For example, in the 1997 general election no Conservative MPs were returned for either Scotland or Wales. With AMS some Conservatives would have been elected as additional members in both. Labour's support has traditionally been in industrial and inner city areas while the Conservatives' has traditionally been in rural and suburban areas. Supporters of other parties in those heartland areas have been largely unrepresented. With AMS each of the two major parties would be virtually certain to have some representation in Parliament from each region and other parties would also be likely to be represented.

With FPTP in many constituencies the voters know what the result will be before they cast their votes. Those who support any other party know that they are 'wasting' their votes because their votes will not contribute towards the election of anyone. Consequently parties put little effort into campaigning in those constituencies and the turn out is often low. With AMS, even if the result of the constituency ballot is predictable, the second vote for the party will contribute towards the election of additional members. This should encourage more people to vote. A higher turn out is healthier for democracy and should lead to less disaffection with politics.

Stability

Germany has used AMS for its Federal government elections for about 50 years, a system imposed after WWII by the Allies including the UK. During that time it has had stable and effective government. During the same period the UK under FPTP has had less stable governments, with swings from left to right often leading to frequent reversals of policy, eg nationalisation and privatisation.

Recent experience in the UK has shown that FPTP does not necessarily produce stable government. During the last couple of years of the Major government, with a dwindling majority, government decisions were often influenced by other small parties upon whom the government depended for support, the Ulster Unionists, and by a faction within the Conservative party, the Eurosceptics. Supporters of FPTP often claim that it results in strong and stable governments. The events of 1995-7 prove that this is not the case.

Voter Choice

The criteria for accepting a candidate should be based on local support rather than the wealth of the party or the individual. The criteria for candidacy with deposits which are forfeited if a candidate gets less than a certain proportion of the vote should be replaced by a requirement for a larger number of assessor signatures. This is widely used elsewhere in Europe. We would suggest, say, 100 signatures for a constituency candidate. Requiring signatures rather than cash shifts the emphasis from the pocket to the people.

Each candidate in British FPTP elections has had to put up a deposit of £500 which was forfeited if the candidate got less than 5% of the vote. The deposit is meant to deter frivolous candidates. In practice it often fails to deter frivolous candidates but it can prevent serious candidates from standing. It is no deterrent whatsoever for a wealthy person but is a deterrent for people of ordinary means. Dropping the deposit extends voter choice.

The provision of a number of signatures from electors in order to be a candidate both shows that the candidate has some support locally and is a useful deterrent for unpopular or racist candidates, particularly if the names of the assessors (those who sign the nomination paper) are made publicly available.

With FPTP in safe seats the choice before voters is not very meaningful. However they vote the result is unlikely to be affected. With AMS almost every party list vote will contribute towards the election of an additional member. Voter choice is both extended and becomes more meaningful. People need to feel that they have a stake in Parliamentary representation.

With FPTP voters often resort to tactical or negative voting. They vote not for who they want to be elected but for the candidate most likely to defeat the candidate that they do not want to be elected. This is both unsatisfying for the voter and can produce unpredictable and odd results. With AMS the voter can vote for an individual candidate in the usual way but can also vote for a party list in a straight forward way without having to consider negative or tactical voting.

Gender and ethnic balance

Both women and the ethnic minorities are under represented in Parliament. With FPTP each party has to select just one candidate for each constituency. There is a tendency for each constituency party to select a middle aged white male as its candidate, particularly in safe seats. This leads to an over representation of such people in the Parliament and an under representation of women and ethnic minorities. While this would still apply with regard to the constituency MPs the additional members from the party lists could have a much better gender and ethnic balance.

Implementation

AMS could be implemented without a major boundary review by pairing adjacent existing constituencies to create the new constituencies for constituency MPs. If the proportion of top-up MPs were less than 50% this would also result in a reduction in the total number of MPs.

Other Systems

We do not believe that the other systems under consideration give sufficiently proportional results. AV and SV are even worse than FPTP, see the Democratic Audit report.

STV, while more proportional than FPTP, is not by design a proportional system. It is a preferential system. Its 'deviation from proportionality', 13.5% according to Democratic Audit, is considerably more than that for AMS. STV has a number of other drawbacks. It is likely to cause competition between candidates of the same party for the first preference votes. This may be damaging to party unity.

For STV to be even vaguely proportional the constituencies need to have at least 5 MPs. Consequently the constituencies have to be several times larger than with AMS and so the link with the constituency is weaker. It is often claimed by supporters of STV that it offers voters a choice amongst candidates from different factions of a party. However, depending upon how a party selects its candidates for the constituency there is no guarantee that different viewpoints within the party will be represented on the ballot.

Recommendations

We recommend the Additional Member System for elections to the House of Commons.

We would suggest that the additional members are elected from party lists on a regional basis, using the same regional boundaries as the Government Regional Offices and those proposed for future European Parliament elections.

We would prefer a 50:50 ratio between constituency and additional members. However a lower proportion of additional members would be acceptable as long as it is not less than 40%.

We would find the use of AV, instead of FPTP, for the election of the constituency MPs acceptable.

The top-up MPs, the additional members, should be taken from ordered lists submitted by the parties in each region.

The criteria for accepting a candidate should be based on local support rather than the wealth of the party or the individual. We would suggest, say, 100 signatures from assentors for a constituency candidate.

Finally, we would like to participate in the hearings that the Commission is organising.
Could you please send us a list of venues with dates and times.

Yours in peace

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Alan Francis', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Alan Francis
Co-convenor Green Party PR Working Group