

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

Submissions from academics

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Mixed electoral systems and national lists

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In *Making Votes Counts 2: Mixed Electoral Systems* (March 1998) we expanded on our previous work in specific relation to mixed electoral systems, that is either AMS, or alternatively SV Plus or AV Plus. (Since we have shown that SV and AV produce almost exactly the same results, and can for all practical purposes be treated as identical, we drop mention of AV Plus below: everything that applies to SV Plus applies also to AV Plus).

Mixed systems could hold out the prospect of combining a large majority of single member constituency MPs with only a minority of top-up MPs, elected at a regional level. We demonstrated that ratios of 75:25 were feasible close to the top of the proportionality range for both AMS and SV Plus. (We defined proportionality as being 4 to 8 per cent DV scores, and we might construe 'broad proportionality' as being no more than a 10 per cent DV score - that is, less than half the actual DV score of 21 per cent in the 1997 general election). Under a broad proportionality heading it would be feasible to envisage an 83:17 AMS system, that is one where five sixths of all MPs are elected in single-member local constituencies. The great attractions of such a scheme would be:

- the Jenkins Commission is enjoined to maintain constituency links
- the practical consequences of increasing constituency sizes would be minimized
- in voting on reform MPs would know that relatively familiar local constituencies remained in being
- in terms of distributing political power in the Commons fairly, a system where coalition governments could alternate with single-party majority governments might have some advantages.

We also showed that either the 11 government standard regions used for the European Parliament elections, or the much smaller 18 regions schema used in *Making Votes Count* would produce virtually identical results. So top-up MPs could be considerably more 'local' than we might otherwise have thought.

In this Note we expand on one further possibility, responding to a query from David Lipsey, who asked whether a mixed electoral system could be constructed in which top-up MPs are distributed at a national level. We take that to mean at the level of the three component countries of Great Britain - England, Scotland and Wales - for anything else will discriminate against the nationalist

parties. One approach which the Jenkins Commission might consider taking to the question of securing 'broad proportionality' would be to define limits of DV scores which are deemed permissible on this criterion (such as 5 per cent or 10 per cent). Then one could ask what ratios of local to top-up MPs would be feasible within these constraints if national lists are used instead of regional lists. The immediate impact is concentrated in England, where currently 529 out of 641 MPs are elected, 83 per cent of the total.

The appropriate mixes meeting 10 and 5 per cent levels are given below, for AMS and SV Plus systems, and for the 1997 and 1992 general election situations. The first figure shows the proportion of locally elected MPs, and the figure after the colon the proportion of top-up MPs.

	AMS			SV Plus		
	England	Scotland	Wales	England	Scotland	Wales
1997: 10%	90:10	67:33	75:25	75:25	67:33	75:25
1992: 10 %	90:10	75:25	75:25	90:10	67:33	75:25
1997: 5%	75:25	57:43	67:33	67:33	57:43	67:33
1992: 5 %	75:25	57:43	67:33	83:17	57:43	67:33

The general implication is that in order to achieve a 10% level of DV reliably in AMS, nine out of ten MPs could be elected in local constituencies in England, three quarters in Wales and two thirds in Scotland. In order to achieve a 5 per cent DV score reliably in AMS these ratios would have to swing further towards top-up seats. And if SV was used to elect local MPs, then the ratios would need to include more top-up MPs under 1997 conditions, to compensate for the shift in local seats and worsened showing of the Tories when both first and second preferences are counted.

Could there be a rationale for varying levels of top-up MPs nationally? Obviously in both Scotland and Wales an extensive range of services are devolved to their own Parliament and Assembly respectively, so that one might argue that local constituency representation will be less needed at

Westminster than it is in England. In addition, top-up MPs elected in Scotland and Wales will be inherently more regional and closer to voters than those in England, so that their greater numbers in these countries might be seen as more acceptable. To counter their potential remoteness, English top-up MPs might be elected on a national list basis, but assigned to particular regions after election for the purpose of constituency work, holding surgeries and the like. The task of making such an allocation could be entrusted to the parties which these MPs represent, rather than being formally laid down in detail in legislation.

Treating the component countries of Great Britain in somewhat different ways for the purpose of electoral system design has a further basic rationale. The three countries' party systems are now quite different in their arrangements, as we showed in a recent paper at the 1998 PSA Conference. We all accept that an electoral system for Northern Ireland must fit with the special conditions of that region, and its unique party system. So we might be well advised to recognize that the 4+ party systems in Scotland and Wales need separate treatment from the still solidly 3 party system in England.