

Electoral reform : PR v. STV

There is much talk nowadays about the desirability of introducing proportional representation (PR) for elections to the House of Commons. I do hope we do not do this.

We currently have proportional representation for elections to the European Parliament. My constituency (South West) has 6 seats. In the 2009 election there were 17 names on the list, 16 parties and one independent. We were asked to put an "X" against only one of these. So votes for at least 11 of the 17 were guaranteed to be wasted. How could I have guessed which, and should I have had to? Why are we not given the option to state our preferences in sequence? Why should those whose vote is otherwise wasted not be allowed to have their votes transferred to a more successful party? Is the current system fair? Is it democratic? Can it even reasonably be claimed to be "proportional"?

In this system seats are distributed to the parties in accordance with the number of votes they receive. Each party has up to 6 candidates, and chooses the order in which they would be selected. But what if I greatly disliked the number one candidate of my chosen party, but wished to vote for all the others? Why is that choice taken away from me? Why are the parties given so much control over my vote? Why do I have to vote for a party rather than for people? Indeed, why do we have parties built into the electoral system?

One of the candidates was an independent. What would have happened if she had received 95% of the vote? Would she have been entitled to occupy all 6 seats? Or would the other 5 seats have been shared between parties who between them got only 5% of the vote?

If there had been 6 independents I would still have been allowed to vote for only one of them. As a result the 6 could receive 42% of the vote between them and still get no seats, whereas a party which got only 8% of the vote might get one seat. Is that reasonable? Why is the system biased so greatly against independents? There are 6 seats so surely I should have 6 votes.

I cannot imagine a worse system. This is insanity, and I object very strongly.

This nonsensical system is inflicted on us in the name of "proportional representation". But all it offers is a highly defective representation in proportion to the votes cast for some of the parties. Why do parties have to be paramount? Clearly we need a voting system which is fairer than the old "first past the post", and one which comes as close as can be to representing the wishes of the electorate. But why do we have to devise an absurd system like this? There is already a well-established system which does the job, and is used by just about every major democratic organisation in the country for the election of its managing council. It is called STV. It works, and it produces fair results. Why on earth are we not using it?

The answer is that even some of those who campaign for STV, including many members of the Liberal Democratic Party (LibDems) and of the Electoral Reform Society (ERS), slip into calling STV proportional representation. Which STV is not. And when you tell politicians that you want proportional representation they assume, totally reasonably but incorrectly, that you mean you want representation in proportion to the votes cast for political parties. Hence the absurd system for electing Euro-MPs.

This persistent use of the word "proportional" constantly undermines the aims of the ERS and LibDems to seek the early introduction of STV. Proportionality, in my estimation, is neither

attainable nor desirable. At its best STV can only offer a limited approximation to proportionality, and then only proportionality to the votes cast for different political parties. Why is that kind of proportionality so important? Why not have representation proportional to race, creed or gender? And what would proportionality to party votes mean if there were nine independent candidates in a four-member constituency? Anything which enshrines political parties into our electoral system is, in my opinion, to be strenuously avoided.

Moreover, emphasising proportionality as the objective induces people with weak minds or vested interests to seek “better” ways of achieving it. For example, in addition to the ludicrous Euro-MP system, there is the different “proportional” system used for the Greater London Assembly (GLA). Half the GLA seats are elected from single-member first-past-the-post constituencies, and the remainder are selected from party lists to make the total representation proportional to party votes. This too enshrines parties into the electoral system, giving them additional power and removing choice from the electorate. And even now those politicians who are reported to be willing to accept the single-seat version of STV (known as “alternative vote” or AV) favour having it with “proportional top-up”, presumably in the GLA manner, in order to ensure proportionality. Worse still, the Electoral Reform Society (ERS), one of the principal proponents of STV, encourages that approach by advocating a policy of taking “every opportunity to point out that AV is not a proportional system”.

The ERS, and the LibDems too, would do well to accept that AV would be an acceptable, not to say excellent, first step in the reform of our voting system, offering a quick, significant, and highly desirable, improvement in our electoral processes. It would immediately end the need for “tactical voting” and contentious accusations of “splitting the vote”. Indeed, it would allow a party to offer more than one candidate, leaving the choice to the electorate, without serious fear of losing votes because of that (thus removing any need for introducing “primaries”, which some pro-democracy campaigners currently advocate). And it could be implemented without delay, without the need to have a comprehensive review of constituency boundaries or the need to give parties time to adjust their local organisation.

My opinion is that too negative a response to what ought to be welcomed as a useful step forward risks discouraging those we should be seeking to encourage, and making progress less likely rather than more.

I believe that the justification for going beyond AV to full STV is that it provides a simple and fair way of handling ballots in multi-member constituencies (MMCs). One benefit of MMCs is that they give a much “fairer” result. For example, if in four-constituency Bloggsville the votes are cast 50-25-25 for three parties, then combining the four constituencies into a single MMC can convert four safe seats into a 2-1-1 representation, clearly “fairer”, and a much closer approximation to what the voters want.

Another benefit of MMCs is that they allow and encourage a greater variety of representation: a smaller proportion of dim, white, middle-aged, middle class males, and higher proportions of people from all sorts of under-represented sections of the population. Surely one can argue for such benefits without mentioning proportionality? Could we not make STV the objective and drop all reference to proportional representation?

I consider that the best way to introduce STV, which should remain our aim, would be to have legislation to switch immediately to preferential voting (i.e. AV) within existing constituencies and at the same time to make provision for the later introduction of multi-member constituencies,

and to task the Boundaries Commission to move towards these as fast as it can, with due regard to careful planning and appropriate consultation.

I would not wish or expect to see multi-member constituencies introduced in a completely uniform manner, all at once, or everywhere. Whereas a five-member constituency might be regarded as the ideal (and possibly the maximum) size, the policy should be that boundaries should be natural, convenient, and locally acceptable. For instance, a town or city which is now arbitrarily divided into 2, 3 or 4 constituencies should be simply reunited, without the need to force it to take in arbitrary sections of nearby countryside to make up numbers. And many rural constituencies will be found to cover such a large and sparsely populated area that any enforced combination with other such areas would cause more aggravation, alienation and administrative difficulty than any theoretical benefit would justify.

So my recommendation would be to give warm support to any move towards AV, while at the same time proposing that any legislation which introduces it should at the least make provision for the possible later introduction of multi-member constituencies. I would strongly oppose any move to supplement AV with a party-based proportional top-up.

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