The **Constitution** Unit

New Electoral Systems: What Voters Need to Know

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March 1999

£5.00

Contents

Executive Summary

The UK public is facing a spate of elections to be held under new voting systems: to the Scottish Parliament (May 1999), the Welsh Assembly (May 1999), the European Parliament (June 1999) and the Greater London Authority (May 2000). This study has been undertaken to explore how far voters understand the new electoral systems, to identify what information is needed to help voters to use the systems and to assess when, and in what form, such information is best conveyed.

Need for system information

The new electoral systems are unfamiliar to most people, and various features are not self-evident or intuitively easy to grasp. Even the basic essentials of the way the systems work tend to appear complex, and are quite hard for some people to grasp.

Voters will need more than a mechanical knowledge of how to cast their vote under the new systems. In particular, they will need information that enables them to understand at least the rudiments of the new systems and the way they work. The issues that need to be covered are to some extent system specific, although others are generic across the systems (eg. how votes translate into seats). Voters believe that the provision of high quality information will help them decide which way to vote, as well as encouraging more people to cast their ballot.

Voters' find it easier to understand the new electoral systems once the grounds for change are explained to them. Most voters are familiar with casting their ballot under First Past the Post (FPTP), and will need help in understanding why this is being replaced at some elections.

While this information should include guidance on how FPTP operates - which many people do not fully understand - it should avoid overloading voters with material, nor should it be overly polemical; voters are suspicious of information that 'over sells' any new system. This poses difficult questions of balance for any education programme: between explaining clearly the rationale for electoral system change and the properties of the new system, while avoiding contentious statements that will deter some voters.

There will also need to be other kinds of contextual information:

- details of the new institutions and their roles and powers: while the study found participants generally seemed at least vaguely aware of the new institutions, there was little details knowledge about their activities;
- details of the new electoral units; voters are usually familiar with being located in parliamentary constituencies, and will need information about any new units and their boundaries.

However, voters should not be overloaded with information about the new electoral systems; while there is a general desire to know how the systems will work, there is a limited appetite for grappling with the details.

Delivering system information

Informing the public about the new systems will not be easy. The subject of electoral systems is too dry to arouse much spontaneous interest and the study found that voters generally have little existing knowledge to build on.

Information about the new systems needs to be delivered well in advance of the election. People do not want to have to struggle with learning about systems at the point of voting; they expect their vote to be a rapid execution of decisions largely already taken. If information about the new systems is not available well before election day, then some may be put off from going to vote at all.

It will be easier to take in this kind of information if it is drip-fed through a variety of media over some weeks, rather than being presented in one indigestible lump. People expect, and want, a serious multi-media information campaign, including TV, press and other media. Voters will also need official education material that they can trust as being objective and neutral. At the very least, this should take the form of a series of leaflets explaining the operation of the new systems, and rationale for adopting them.

Responses to the new electoral systems

Of the three systems tested, the research found that the Supplementary Vote was the most easily understood. The Regional List system was less obvious to voters, although it was soon understood once its main features had been explained. The hardest system for voters to understand (both in relation to the other two systems, and in absolute terms) was the Additional Member System, in particular the basis and reason for having two votes and the relationship between each part of the ballot.

Research background and aims

Introduction

This briefing summarises the main findings from a programme of qualitative research conducted by Social and Community Planning Research and the Constitution Unit, and funded by the Gatsby Charitable Foundation with financial contributions from the Home Office, Scottish Office, Welsh Office and Government Office for London. The study was undertaken:

- to explore the design of ballot papers for the forthcoming elections
- to assess how far voters understand the new electoral systems; and
- to identify what information is needed to help voters to use the systems.

The findings are reported in full in the main research report *New Electoral Systems: What Voters Need to Know*, which is published simultaneously with this briefing.[1] The main report includes the results from the principal focus of the research, which was to explore the design of new ballot papers (which are only touched on in this Briefing on page 8).

Electoral turnout

The UK is facing a major change in one of the pillars of its democracy, the electoral system. In the next two years, three[2] new voting systems (Annex 1) will be introduced:

- an Additional Member System for elections to the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and the Greater London Assembly
- a Regional List System for elections to the European Parliament
- the Supplementary Vote system for elections to the post of London Mayor.

The intention behind the new voting systems is to strengthen the representative link between voters and government, and thus create a more sophisticated and participatory political culture. But there is a risk of the reverse happening: faced with additional tiers of government, along with new systems used to elect them, voters may find the arrangements confusing and offputting, and stay away from the polls. This concern should be placed in the context of electoral participation rates in the UK which, in some cases, are low by international standards.[3]

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[1] Available from the Constitution Unit, price £15.

[2] Not including the Northern Ireland Assembly, which was elected in June 1998, using the Single Transferable Vote system.

[3] Turnout for the 1994 European Parliament elections was 36.4% in the UK, as against 52.7% in France, 59.6% in Spain and 60.0% in Germany. Although turnout for local government elections (metropolitan boroughs, non-metropolitan boroughs and London boroughs) has increased since 1973 (Bochel et al, 1994), it remains well below that for comparable EU countries (Commission for Local Democracy, 1995).

Voter education

The first elections to the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly, on 6 May 1999, will be preceded by programmes to educate the public about the new institutions and the electoral systems being used to elect their members. Both the Scottish and Welsh offices are committing £2m to these campaigns. There will not, however, be a broad voter education campaign in advance of the European Parliament elections in June 1999, in spite of historically low turnout in this contest.

Existing research on voter understanding

Politicians, civil servants and other interest groups can currently draw on only limited data showing in detail how far UK voters understand the new electoral systems, and what information they will require in order to participate confidently in elections.

The two main sources of information on voters' reaction to new electoral systems are:

- *Making Votes Count*, a study conducted by Patrick Dunleavy and colleagues, based on large scale voter surveys conducted in 1997 (Dunleavy et al, 1997). This quantitative research showed the Additional Member and Supplementary Vote systems to be the preferred alternatives to First Past the Post, as well as being the easiest to understand for voters;
- a qualitative study carried out on behalf of the McDougall Trust by David Farrell and Michael Gallagher in 1998 (Farrell and Gallagher, 1998). This research addressed more directly voters' attitudes to, and understanding of, different electoral systems. It found several specific areas where voters experience confusion in relation to electoral systems, including: the relationship between votes and seats under First Past the Post, and the use of multi-member constituencies.

Both pieces of research provide useful information in helping us appreciate how voters are likely to react to new electoral systems. The Farrell and Gallagher qualitative study is particularly useful in its exploration of voter understanding of the new systems. Yet, because the research was also concerned to address a number of attitudinal issues to electoral reform,[4] it was prevented from exploring levels of voter comprehension in the detail the issue arguably deserves.

Current research project

This study does not explore in detail voters' attitudes towards First Past the Post or alternative electoral systems (although some analysis of these issues is included in this briefing, on pages 6-7). Rather, it concentrates on how far they understand how to use the new voting systems, and what additional information they require to participate more confidently in the forthcoming elections. The research was based on a programme of

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[4] Such as: knowledge of, and levels of support for, First Past the Post; attitudes towards the practices and structures that derive in large part from the current electoral system; and levels of support for the criteria used to assess the desirability of electoral reform, such as proportionality and the retention of single member constituencies.

focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with individual members of the public, conducted in various locations in England, Scotland and Wales in late summer 1997 (further details of the methodology used can be found in the main report). The qualitative approach, unlike mass level surveys, allowed the research to examine in some detail voters' level of understanding. However, the limitation of using small, though purposively selected, samples is that the results cannot show how widely the various views are held amongst the wider voting population.

Attitudes towards electoral systems

Views about First Past the Post

Interest in electoral systems among the public is generally low. The mechanics of different electoral systems are seen as being an abstract and boring subject with little relevance to the majority of the voting public. Knowledge of the various systems is usually very limited.

The current electoral system is generally familiar to voters, although the name 'First Past the Post' is not always recognised. On one level it seemed well understood, commonly described as a system where 'the person with the most votes in the constituency wins'. However there is typically much less understanding of the way in which votes translate into seats at the aggregate level; the distinction between the 'share of vote won' and 'share of seats gained' (ie. the proportionality of the system). Similarly, when it comes to the formation of a government under FPTP, voters do not seem to appreciate the distinction between 'plurality' and 'majority' in terms of the share of vote needed to win under FPTP.

Knowledge about the way in which the electoral arithmetic is calculated is important, since it can influence people's attitudes to FPTP as an electoral system. We found that voters who did not appreciate the plurality nature of FPTP were much less likely to view the system as unfair. Indeed, it seemed that until this point is made clear, these people may be unlikely to embrace an alternative voting system. Among our sample, desire for change was often, but not exclusively, voiced by participants with more awareness and understanding of the way in which FPTP produces overall outcomes. These people were also more aware of the existence of alternative voting systems to FPTP.

Among our sample, the following reasons were usually given in support of FPTP's use in parliamentary elections:

- its familiarity, and perceived longevity of use;
- its provision of a direct link in each constituency between voters and their representatives.

The main reasons given against FPTP as the voting system for parliamentary elections were:

- its perceived unfairness in allowing parties to win elections with less than 50% of the vote;
- the under-representation of minor parties that it is perceived to cause (the 'vote share': 'seat share' disparity highlighted above);
- the high number of perceived 'wasted' votes that it encourages, particularly in safe seats ('electoral insulation', where a constituency is dominated by one party or candidate, was also felt to discourage voting).

Views about alternative electoral systems

There is some awareness among voters that alternative voting systems exist, but not generally a great deal of understanding of what the alternatives are, or how they work. The term 'proportional representation' seems fairly familiar, but what it actually means is often not well appreciated.

The main appeal of the alternative electoral systems is their perceived fairness; for some, these systems are seen to be fairer even in the absence of real understanding of how they work, although some voters put forward more specific arguments in their favour, based on the plurality-majority distinction. The perceived limitations of proportional electoral systems usually relate to their complexity and their supposed propensity to over-represent minority parties and produce coalition governments.

Information on new electoral systems

Casting a vote

To be able to take part at all in the ballot, people need basic information about the mechanics of voting: how many votes do I have? where do I put them on the ballot paper? if there is more than one vote, which vote relates to which element of the election? what kind of mark do I make?

Voting instructions like these are essential, but our study suggests they are usually fairly easily supplied. People were generally able to pick up information of this kind from most of the test ballot paper designs without prior explanation. They did not usually feel that they were being set a very difficult task, and when asked to 'vote' they seldom marked their papers in invalid ways.

This is because, at a mechanical level, voting in these new systems is not very different from what people are used to doing under FPTP. The Additional Member and Supplementary Vote (SV) systems have two votes instead of one, and SV involves making a second choice; but otherwise the actual ballot papers function much as before. ' However, this does not mean that ballot paper design is unimportant; the main report reviews various different designs, and concludes with pointers to good practice.

Nevertheless participants' principle difficulties and concerns were not with voting instructions, but with the workings of the new systems themselves.

The operation of the new voting systems

It might have been the case that, as long as voters felt confident about the mechanics of casting their vote, they would not have cared much about the way the system works. But the study generally found quite the opposite attitude. There was a clear and fairly consistently expressed desire to understand the operation and implications of the new voting systems before deciding how to vote. This, it was argued, might inform the way a person voted, or possibly encourage more people to vote.

Moreover, participants required explanations of various features of the new systems, such as having two votes, expressing a second preference, or voting for a party rather than an individual candidate. Participants in the study sessions, asked to 'vote' without prior information about these and other features of the systems, often felt unsure about what they were doing, even though they were quite clear about the mechanics of casting their vote. (The particular features of the new electoral systems on which voters require specific information are discussed on pages 13-16.)

Voters will need information about the new electoral systems because:

- These are the first major changes to the electoral system experienced by most British voters, and the mere fact of change in a hitherto stable situation tends to raise questions in people's minds. Add to this the fact that the new systems (particularly AMS; page 15) are generally neither familiar nor intuitive, which often makes people feel they do not know what they are doing when they vote;

- Some basic understanding of the system might affect the way they want to vote (especially given voters' perceptions of 'wasted' votes under FPTP, and the opportunities for different voter behaviour that the new two vote systems will present).

People's desire to learn about the systems themselves does not arise from intrinsic interest in the subject; on the contrary, electoral systems usually strike people as an arid and abstract topic, certainly once they get beyond simple general concepts like 'fairness' and 'wasted votes'. Indeed, some tensions became apparent during the study sessions, with people wanting to know the answers to questions on system properties, but often finding the job of trying to master the information both tricky and tedious. 'Wanting to know' is not necessarily the same as being 'motivated to find out' (this reinforces the point about the need for a well designed and imaginative education campaign).

Information about the rationale for, and properties of, new electoral systems is harder to convey than instructions on the mechanics of casting a vote. Well designed ballot papers are usually fairly easy to master, but the systems they represent are more intricate and harder to explain. For example, it is comparatively easy to state the fact that electors have two votes, and to show *where* these are to be expressed on the ballot; but it is often much more tricky to explain *why* there are two votes, *how* they fit together and *how* they determine the outcome of the election.

Our study participants seemed to find it easier to pick up, and focus on, the key features of the new systems once they understood what the reforms are trying to achieve. Where the reforms seemed an arbitrary procedural change, they seemed less motivated to persevere in trying to understand them. For example, participants found it easier to understand the two different layers of AMS if they grasped that this aims to balance FPTP's element of direct local representation with a fairer distribution of seats in relation to votes.

Since the new systems usually seemed more complex than FPTP, participants sometimes expressed the desire for an explanation which *justifies* the need for change; otherwise the shift from a simpler to a more convoluted procedure is simply puzzling to those using it. People are less likely to engage with a new system if they are unclear about why it has replaced FPTP.

However, our study found some participants who reacted against accounts justifying electoral system change which seemed to be trying to 'sell' the new system. This poses difficult questions of balance, since people will require neutral information about a reform that is the subject of intense political controversy. What is required is information that explains clearly to voters hotly contested notions such as 'making everyone's vote count'

and 'a fair allocation of seats', while avoiding polemical statements that might compromise its objectivity and deter some voters.

The new institutions and electoral boundaries

Electoral change has followed the establishment of new institutions, in Scotland, Wales and London. The European Parliament is not new, but many people are ignorant of its role and operations, and as a result feel remote from it (NOP, 1998). Our study sessions seemed to reinforce the bleak picture that appears from the low turnout figures for EP elections quoted above (footnote 3); people are less inclined to go to the polling station if they are not sure what they are voting about, what the issues are, or who the candidates are.

Although the study participants generally seemed vaguely aware of the new devolved institutions, with some being quite well informed, there was little detailed knowledge of their roles, powers and activities. Participants were clear that they both need, and want, such information before voting.

Voters will also require information on any new electoral boundaries being used in the forthcoming contests. Some of the new electoral divisions will be very different in scale to those currently used in parliamentary and European elections, and the new units need to be identified.[5] Terms such as 'constituency' are strongly associated with Westminster elections, and need to be explained if used in the context of different elections. Even descriptions such as 'region' are problematic, since many people do not know the boundaries to their region or are even confused about which region they fall into. At a specific level, we found participants in Scotland making associations with the former regional councils; and many participants in London found it difficult to think of their city as a 'region' at all.

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[5] AMS in Scotland and Wales will use parliamentary constituencies for the first section of the ballot, and regions (Scotland: 7 regions, each electing 8 members/Wales: 5 regions, each electing 4 members) for the 'top up' section. The members of the Greater London Assembly will be elected from 14 electoral areas (amalgamations of 2-4 London boroughs), or from a London-wide top up list. The electoral units for the European Parliament contest will be the standard regions of the UK, with Merseyside incorporated into the North West.

Delivering system information

This section considers when, and how, people want information on the new electoral systems to be delivered.

The timing of information

Explanation of the way new voting systems work is wanted much earlier than instructions on how to vote. Voters will not expect to be learning about system operation in the polling station. They largely expect to decide how to cast their ballot before going to vote, although some may fine-tune or review their options in the polling booth. Some people are less likely to vote if they feel uncertain about what they are doing; our study found that voters need to have information on the electoral systems in order to achieve their objectives, and that the absence of such material is an important source of voter de-motivation. People also want the act of voting to be quick and simple, essentially an in-out process, and did not want or expect to have to spend time at the polling station absorbing information.
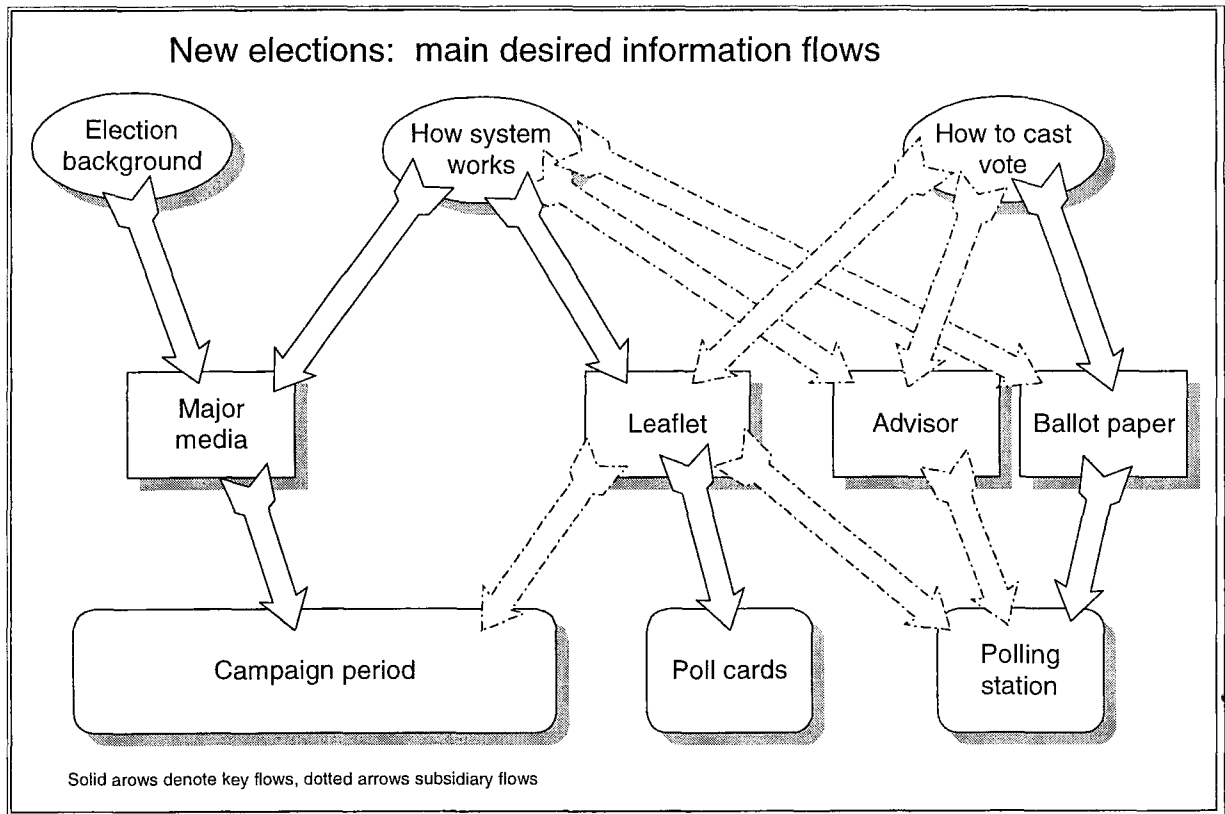
People will also need information early because there is a lot to take in. Our study showed that many voters will find it hard to absorb quickly all the information on the new systems; particularly for AMS (page 15). Voters will thus need to have access to system information:

- well in advance of the poll: periods of a month or more in advance were suggested
- on a 'drip feed' basis, so they can absorb it over time.

Conveying information

Our study participants looked to the media as a prime point of information on the new institutions and electoral systems. The main source was seen as being television, with radio and the press also highlighted. However, many participants 'switched off' when politics was covered in the media, and it is clear that a range of alternative sources of information will also be required.

Participants were also clear that the information they expected, and needed, should be neutral, and not favour one political side or the other. There was some suspicion of the role of political parties in providing explanatory material; participants indicated that they would place greater trust in an official information programme that would present the issues in an objective manner. Such a programme should involve not only leaflets, but also some form of interactive learning (eg. a telephone helpline, and organised public meetings). The diagram below indicates the main information flows that will be required, along with the form that these should take.

New elections: main desired information flows

Solid arows denote key flows, dotted arrows subsidiary flows

Avoiding overload

It would be easy to draw up a lengthy wish-list of things voters would like to know, but our study clearly demonstrates the vital importance of avoiding information overload. This was apparent both from what people said (frequent requests to "Keep it simple"), and from the way they reacted to the information provided (often giving up their attempt to absorb the information before they had really extracted what they wanted to know).

The study participants consistently found the subject matter quite difficult, and although they felt it important to know how the electoral systems work they didn't find the mechanics intrinsically interesting. There seem to be two solutions to this:

- "Drip-feeding" information over a period of time, so that the key ideas can be absorbed gradually
- Making information available at different levels, so that people can engage with the systems according to their own interests and abilities. Some want to know more than others, and information which is sufficiently detailed to satisfy more enquiring minds may be inaccessible to those who find the basic details difficult to internalise.

However, there needs to be a basic bedrock of very simple and effective information, with the essential story pared down to its core essentials.

Understanding of the new electoral systems

It was not the purpose of our study to explore in detail voters' attitudes to the new electoral systems. Rather, our interest was in how well they understood the systems, and what information needs they had. Other quantitative (eg. Dunleavy et al, 1997) and qualitative (eg. Farrell and Gallagher, 1998) studies have covered voter attitudes in detail. This section, then, focuses on issues of comprehension, although, as our study inevitably touched on voters' attitudes to the new systems, these are also discussed briefly.

Supplementary vote

Supplementary Vote (SV) was discussed only in London, where the examples were based on the election for the Mayor.

Comprehension: Voters found SV the easiest to understand of the three systems, and few significant problems were encountered in explaining it.

Key points to understand: The key points necessary for understanding SV are:

- The existence of, and rationale for, two votes
- What happens to the second vote, particularly when and how it is used. This was not obvious without explanation, and some of the study participants found SV more convincing once they understood that second votes were only counted when no candidate got an immediate majority of first preferences
- What happens if no candidate gains 50% of first and second preferences (the rationale for the system being that it produces a winner commanding an overall majority of votes).

Difficult points to explain: The only difficult point to get across was how and when the second votes are used.

Additional explanatory points: It should be made clear to voters whether they <u>have</u> to use their second vote. Some of the study participants queried whether their ballot paper would be invalid if they only made a first choice, which some were inclined to do.

Attitudes towards the Supplementary Vote: Participants seemed to like SV fairly well, particularly when the use of second votes is understood. Voters respond positively to the fact that the winners are likely to have majority support. However, some saw no advantage in having a second choice, the rationale for which will need clear explanation. The less appealing features of SV were the unfamiliarity of the system, and the confusion for some over how it works. SV was generally seen as slightly more complicated than FPTP. There was also some concern that second preferences might outweigh first preferences; in other words, that a candidate with a good first choice performance might be beaten by another candidate after second choice votes had been taken into account.

13

Regional list system

Exploration of the Regional List System (RLS) was based on European Parliament elections in all areas, using the closed list variant in which voters choose parties, not individual candidates.

Comprehension: This system was generally thought to be a bit harder to understand than SV, with participants finding it less straightforward and intuitive. Voting for a party slate, rather than an individual candidate, was a new concept that people found hard to absorb.

Key points to understand: The central points to understand about closed-list RLS are:

- The basic concept of a closed list system:
  - that you vote for a party (or independent) not an individual candidate on a party list
  - that the parties, rather than the voters, decide who will fill the seats won by each party.

- How the seats are allocated to parties: that this operates on a broadly proportional basis, with the share of seats roughly matching the share of votes each party wins.

- How it is decided which candidates fill each party's seats: that they are taken from the top of the party list, and that the order of listing is therefore important.

Difficult points to explain: The points about RLS that caused difficulty were:

- How seats are actually allocated. This seemed generally to be readily grasped once it was explained, but respondents needed more information than simply using terms like 'proportional'. And, when it comes to entitlements to fractions of a seat, the simple image of sharing seats out in proportion to votes does not work. The explanations given did not address the d'Hondt electoral arithmetic,[6] as it was felt this was far too complex for a basic first-time communication of the system. However, this kind of information should be readily available to those who want and can make use of it, since at this level the system may not function quite as the 'top-line' picture implies.

- The existence, and operation, of thresholds. Some study participants wanted to know whether there is a minimum level of vote below which minority parties would get no seats. With the exception of the elections to the Greater London Authority (where the government is expected to introduce a threshold of 5%), none of the forthcoming PR elections will apply a formal threshold. However, de facto thresholds - the minimum

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[6] D'Hondt is the name given to the method by which parties' entitlement to seats is calculated. It involves dividing the total number of votes received by each party by a series of divisors (1, 2, 3, 4, ...) to reach, at each stage, an average number of votes for each party. The number of stages is determined by the number of seats up for grabs; whichever party has the highest average vote at each stage wins that seat. The important point for voters to understand is that parties' entitlement to fractions of seats is determined by the 'highest average' concept, so that whichever party has the highest average vote at the last stage is allocated the final seat.

level of support that parties need to get to gain one seat – do exist. It would be worthwhile conveying this information to voters.

- The rationale for the closed list, and why it is not possible to vote for individual candidates.

Additional explanatory points: Proportionality is approximate rather than exact; parties cannot win fractions of a seat, and constituencies with small numbers of members may not see a very good fit. This point was not stressed in the explanations given to respondents, but it is important not to give people unrealistic expectations of exact proportionality.

Attitudes towards the Regional List system: Responses to RLS were mixed, although generally fairly positive. As with SV (and AMS), people responded favourably to its perceived superior fairness than FPTP. The less appealing features of RLS related mainly to the 'closed' nature of the lists, with many participants finding it unsettling to have to cast a 'party' vote without being able to choose individual candidates (particularly if the top candidate was not liked, or a low placed candidate well liked). Closed lists were widely unpopular among participants, because they were seen to shift power from voters to parties and cause confusion over which candidates would be elected. The 'closed' nature of the lists tended to weaken the appeal of RLS for the study participants.

Additional Member System

The Additional Member System (AMS) was explored in all areas, using the devolved assemblies as examples.

Comprehension: Study participants found AMS the hardest of the three systems to understand. This was a consistent response across different sessions in all areas, and changing the explanatory text given to participants before or after they 'voted' seemed to make little difference. [7] The basic concept behind AMS was not obvious or intuitive, and participants found some of the mechanisms hard to grasp in detail. Some were surprised at how complex it is, and found it over-complicated.

Key points to understand: The central points for voters about AMS are:

- That the two votes correspond to two distinct elements of the system
- The nature of each element: a local candidate-based element and a regional party-based element
- The similarities and differences between them: that local members are intended to provide a direct constituency link and are elected as individuals by a FPTP ballot, and that regional members are meant to ensure a fair overall distribution of seats between

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[7] AMS was also the system for which it was hardest to write a simple explanation, and some of the versions tried during the study did not perform well. But participants' difficulties were not merely due to inadequacies in the texts.

the parties, and hence are elected by a party-based vote through a PR regional list system (as for RLS)

- How the elements fit together in determining the outcome of the election: the share of votes is based only on the regional poll, whereas the share of seats takes the local, as well as regional, seats into account
- The status, role and powers of the two different 'types' of member.

Difficult points to explain: The most difficult feature of AMS was the intrinsic complexity of the system, and in particular the way seats are allocated.

The local FPTP element was usually straightforward and familiar to participants. Difficulties related more to the regional element, and particularly to the combination of the two. In principle, regional AMS should not be much harder to understand than RLS, but in practice it seemed to cause more trouble because AMS brings together what seem to be two disparate elements. There was widespread difficulty understanding the basis and rationale of the regional and local votes, and how they relate to each other. Participants readily understood that they had two votes, but usually found it harder to grasp the way they fit together to produce a particular outcome.

Use of the concept of 'topping up' the vote did not seem to be helpful unless people had grasped what it was being topped up to; in other words had understand the basic concept of proportionality. It was sometimes assumed that members elected under the two different parts of the ballot would have different powers, responsibilities or status; or even that they might sit on different bodies.

The fact that some individual candidates may stand at both local and regional level was difficult for many participants to rationalise. It sometimes appeared vaguely illicit, and some commented that it would enable parties to procure a regional seat for an individual who might have been rejected by the electorate at local level.[8]

Additional explanatory points: As for RLS, it should be made clear that proportionality is approximate. Participants usually assumed that they did not have to choose the same party at both levels, but this may be worth stating explicitly on the ballot paper.

Attitudes to the Additional Member System: Once they had understood the way it works, some people thought AMS offered the best of both worlds: a direct link to a local representative, combined with a fair overall distribution of seats. However this aspect was not usually apparent unless and until the basic structure and rationale had been clearly grasped. The less appealing features of the AMS system were its complexity and the closed nature of the list.

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[8] Candidates will, indeed, be able to stand on both parts of the ballot in each of the AMS elections.

Conclusions

The main findings that emerge from this study are set out below. In the main they relate to the nature and complexity of the systems, rather than to any particular design elements. The main exception arose in relation to the list systems, where the 'closed' nature of the lists was widely unpopular among participants. The main general points that emerged are:

- the low level of knowledge about electoral systems; in particular, the operation of First Past the Post and alternative systems, plus the meaning of terms such as 'proportional' and 'proportional representation';
- the negative impact this limited understanding has on voters' awareness of the merits of alternative electoral systems. People who do not appreciate the plurality nature of First Past the Post are less likely to view the system as unfair, and may be unlikely to embrace an alternative voting system;
- the need to explain to voters the rationale for changing the electoral system. Such explanation makes it easier for voters to understand the key features of the new systems. Where electoral reform is seen as being an arbitrary procedural change, voters appear less motivated in trying to understand it;
- that voters should have few problems in casting their ballot under the new systems, as the actual method of voting under these systems is quite similar to that under First Past the Post;
- that to use the new systems, voters require information that goes beyond the mechanics of casting a ballot. People need to know about the basic operation of the new systems, in particular how votes get translated into seats. Adopting new voting procedures raises questions in people's minds, and they are uncomfortable about being asked to use a system whose operation they do not understand;
- information about the working of the electoral system is needed in relation to each of the systems being introduced shortly: the Supplementary Vote, Regional List and Additional Member systems. The last is particularly difficult for voters to understand, both in relation to the other two, and in absolute terms;
- the need to provide information well in advance of polling day. People do not want to learn about the electoral system in the polling station; they want information at least one month prior to the election. This information should be 'drip fed', so that voters have several chances to engage with it; also, it should be delivered through a variety of sources, and at several different levels to fit in with people's varying learning abilities and desire for information.

Electoral systems are seen by voters as being an arid subject. Thus, even during the study sessions, we found participants' recognition of their information needs being outstripped by their lack of motivation to learn the answers. As a result, we do not underestimate the difficulties in explaining to the public the operation of new electoral systems. This study suggests that any education programme retains a simple and clear approach to the presentation of information. Most of all, though, the programme needs to be imaginatively conceived, and delivered via a variety of sources, if it is to engage voters' attention on the forthcoming elections.

17

Annex 1 - Explanation of electoral systems

First Past the Post (FPTP)
House of Commons

Each constituency has one member, and each elector casts one vote. Whichever candidate gains the most votes wins. There is no requirement for the winner to gain a majority (50%+) of votes, merely the largest number (or plurality).

Additional Member System (AMS)
Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly and Greater London Assembly

Voters cast two votes: one for a constituency member, the second for a party. Constituency members are elected as under First Past the Post; parties then win 'top up' seats according to whether they have won their fair share of constituency seats. It is the share of votes won in the party section of the ballot that determines what percentage of total seats parties should win. So, if a party wins 25% of the party vote, but only 15% of constituency seats, it will gain sufficient top up seats to bring its total share to around 25%.

The *Scottish Parliament* will contain 129 members: 73 will be constituency members, with 56 elected from party lists. The *Welsh Assembly* will contain 60 members: 40 will be constituency members, with 20 elected from party lists. The *Greater London Assembly* will contain 25 members: 14 will be constituency members, with 11 elected from party lists.

Regional List System (RLS)
European Parliament

This system involves large multi-member constituencies, in which the parties put forward lists of candidates. Under the 'closed' list variation, electors can vote only for a party list of candidates, not for individual candidates. Seats are allocated according to the proportion of the vote won by each party. The method of allocating seats uses an averaging system, so that each parties' votes are divided by a series of divisors, with the party holding the largest average number of votes at each stage of the process winning the seat. The particular divisor method to be used is known as the d'Hondt system.

Supplementary Vote (SV)
London Mayor

This system is used to elect one person, with the aim that he/she should have over 50% of the vote. Each elector has two votes: a first and second preference. Once all the votes have been cast, the first choice preferences are examined; if one candidate has gained more than 50% of these votes then he/she is automatically elected. If, however, no candidate reaches 50% on first preference votes, the two candidates with the highest percentages of first preference votes go through to a second round. Here, second preference votes of all the other candidates are examined, and where they are for one of the top two candidates, they are added to the pool of first preference votes. The process of allocating second preferences continues until one of the top two candidates has more than 50% of the votes.

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