

**WHAT WE ALREADY KNOW:
LESSONS ON VOTING REFORM
FROM BRITIAN'S
FIRST PR ELECTIONS**

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April 2001

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Published by The Constitution Unit
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First published April 2001

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Introduction

At the end of the Labour Government's term, one of the major question marks hanging over the constitutional change programme concerns reform of the Westminster electoral system. At the 1997 general election, Labour promised a referendum on the voting system. It established an independent commission to examine which option represented the best alternative to first past the post. The commission, chaired by Lord Jenkins, reported in October 1998, recommending the 'Alternative Vote Plus' option.

Since then, there has been a concerted debate on the merits of electoral reform both inside and outside the Labour party. Beyond Westminster, though, new electoral systems have become a reality. In May 1999, voters in Scotland and Wales cast their ballots for the new devolved institutions using the Additional Member system, used also by Londoners a year later to elect their new assembly. London voters also used a new system - the Supplementary Vote - to choose their mayor. Voters across Britain had the opportunity in June 1999 to elect MEPs through a Regional List system.

Labour's current position on electoral reform for Westminster was agreed in summer 2000 at the party's National Policy Forum, and confirmed at the party conference in September. The outcome was to commit the party to holding a referendum prior to any change in the electoral system, but "to allow the changes for elections to the European and Scottish Parliament and for the Welsh and London Assemblies to become familiar and allow time for all their consequences to be felt before deciding on any further proposals for electoral reform". Following recent talks with the Liberal Democrats, the Labour party has now agreed that it will conduct this review following the next Scottish and Welsh elections in 2003.

Delaying the review should lead observers to ignore the lessons already available from the first round of PR elections in 1999 and 2000. While each of the political parties will have drawn its own conclusion from the Scottish, Welsh, London and European Parliament PR elections, attention should also be paid to the views and behaviour of voters and of their elected representatives. Did voters understand the new electoral systems, and did they approve of them? How did voting under these new arrangements change their behaviour? And have the changes made any impact on the role and behaviour of members of the devolved bodies?

These important questions were the subject of a Westminster seminar, organised in January 2001 by Make Votes Count and the Constitution Unit. The seminar was held to present to policy makers the findings of academic research conducted around the first wave of PR elections. The Constitution Unit subsequently agreed to publish fuller versions of the presentations given at the seminar, in order to bring the findings to a wider audience. The seminar was convened to bring impartial research evidence to a keen political debate; it is in the same spirit that this Briefing is published.

Executive Summary

Voters' attitudes to the new electoral systems

1. Relatively few voters in Scotland and Wales (although more in London) reported problems in completing the ballot paper. But four in ten voters in all three areas reported problems in understanding how the new electoral systems operated.
2. There is solid support for using the new electoral system for the devolved elections in Scotland and Wales: over half of voters supported the system, with around one third preferring single member plurality. But these proportions were reversed when voters are asked which system they would prefer for elections to the House of Commons.
3. Support for PR for the Scottish Parliament has increased since spring 1997, although it has fallen slightly from a highpoint around the devolution referendum in autumn 1997. In Wales, attitudes have polarised since autumn 1997. It is therefore not clear what impact the experience of using a new electoral system has had on attitudes to PR.
4. Voters respond favourably to some of the claimed beneficial properties of PR systems: their fairness and the fact that votes are more likely to count. But they also remain attached to a feature of the existing plurality system: single member constituencies.
5. In relation to the consequences of PR, the experience of coalition formation does not appear to have put people off: voters in Scotland (where a coalition was formed immediately after the election) are no more hostile to coalition government than their counterparts in Wales (where the elections resulted in a single party minority government). Voters in neither country are convinced by the argument of those sceptical of PR, that electoral reform would give too much power to smaller parties and would lead to unstable government.

Voters' behaviour under new electoral systems

1. There is no evidence that the supposed 'complexity' of PR significantly reduced turnout at the devolved elections.
2. Evidence from the PR elections is consistent with the claim of electoral reformers, that PR allows people to vote sincerely rather than tactically. Reported tactical voting in Scotland and London was down from the levels recorded after the 1997 general election. At the 1999 European Parliament elections, too, tactical voting appears less prevalent than at the general election. However, tactical voting did not completely vanish under the PR electoral systems.
3. There is also evidence to back up the claim that PR allows for more complex voter preferences to be expressed. Data collected in Scotland and Wales shows that many voters responded to candidates' personal qualities rather than their party label. Voters who 'split their ticket' accounted for over one fifth of the electorate in Scotland, Wales and London. There is little indication that this group voted the way they did out of confusion about how the electoral system operated. Many in Scotland split their ticket to indicate their favoured coalition combination, although plenty of others did so for other reasons, such as tactical or personal voting.

Once elected.... The effect of PR on the Scottish Parliament in Practice

1. The behaviour of the parties in the Scottish Parliament is not markedly different from that of their counterparts at Westminster, elected under single member plurality. Levels of party discipline in the Scottish Parliament are broadly comparable to those at Westminster, while the incidence of cross-party coalitions remains low, casting doubt on the degree to which a 'new', less adversarial, politics has been created.
2. There is evidence that the new electoral system has affected the role and behaviour of elected members. MSPs elected from constituencies place a slightly higher premium than their list counterparts on constituency work as opposed to policy making and scrutiny of the executive. They also spend more time on constituency work and - measured in terms of correspondence received - appear slightly more closely linked to their constituents than lists MSPs do to their larger electoral areas.

Voter attitudes to the new electoral systems

Ben Seyd

This section of the Briefing analyses voters' reactions to the new electoral systems used in Scotland and Wales (May 1999) and London (May 2000), and asks two key questions: Did voters understand the new systems, and did they approve of them? We also go beyond general attitudes to the new systems to examine views on their specific features. How did voters respond to claims made by PR supporters that the new systems would produce greater fairness and ensure that more votes counted? And did they side with critics of electoral reform when it came to the choice between single party or coalition governments and single versus multi-member constituencies?

In the run up to these elections, many commentators doubted whether voters, supposedly attuned to the Single Member Plurality system, would fathom the "complex" (as they were invariably described in the media) new PR systems. In particular, many were sceptical whether people would understand that, under the Additional Member system, they could cast two votes rather than one, and whether they would understand what role was played by these two parts of the ballot. The answers to these concerns are important, not only for the second round of devolution elections in 2003/04, but also for the debate over the merits of the Jenkins Commission's proposals. For the system recommended by Jenkins – the Additional Vote Plus – operates in a similar way to the systems used in Scotland, Wales and London, based as it is on two votes, with the second/list vote serving to compensate in part for disproportionalities produced by the first/constituency vote. If the dual nature of the ballots used in the devolved elections is seen to present major problems to voters, a serious question mark would hang over their use in a similar system for Westminster elections.

The vehicles used in this analysis are three public attitude surveys: the Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly and London Mayoral Election studies, each of which was conducted immediately after the contests. In addition, we can also identify trends over time by comparing data in Scotland and Wales at the time of the devolution elections with data obtained through previous surveys: in the case of Scotland we have two time points from 1997 (the Scottish Election, and Scottish Referendum, studies), with one in Wales (the Welsh Referendum Study).

Did voters understand the new electoral system?

Voters' understanding of electoral systems operates at two levels. The first requires a comprehension of how to complete the ballot paper. This 'mechanical' understanding forms the minimal level that voters require in order to participate in elections. At a more 'systemic' level, voters may also understand how the electoral system operates, principally the way that votes are translated into seats. In the research conducted around the Scottish, Welsh and London elections, these two forms of electoral understanding were distinguished.

We found relatively little difficulty when it came to completing the ballot papers: 9% in Scotland and 15% in Wales reported finding the papers very or fairly difficult, although this figure increased to 21% in London, reflecting in part perhaps the fact that Londoners were given two separate ballot papers, one for the Mayor and the other for the Assembly. However, larger proportions found it difficult to understand how the electoral system operated, specifically the way that the allocation of seats to parties is worked out. As Table 1 shows, around four in ten voters experienced problems with this aspect of the electoral system, with more people in Wales and London reporting difficulties than not.

Table 1

“Some people say it is difficult to understand how the number of seats a party wins is worked out under the new system. Others say it is not at all difficult. How difficult do you think it is understanding how the seats are worked out?”

	Scotland	Wales	London
Very/Fairly difficult	40%	42%	39%
Not very/Not at all difficult*	45%	36%	29%
Don't know/Can't choose	14%	19%	32%

* In the London survey, the categories given to respondents were 'Fairly easy' or 'Very easy'.

Believing that you understand an electoral system is one thing; actually doing so may be quite another. So we also included in our survey (in Scotland and Wales, although not in London) a simple quiz designed to provide an objective measure of people's knowledge of the new system. The quiz consisted of half a dozen statements about the system which the respondents were asked to identify as either definitely or probably 'True' or 'False'. For only two of our statements did more than half the respondents in Scotland and Wales give correct answers. Moreover, for the most part, respondents had more difficulty in answering questions about the allocation of seats under the new systems than they did about casting a vote. Thus, for example, 78% of respondents in Scotland were aware they could vote for the same party on both parts of the ballot, but only 30% understood that the number of seats a party receives is determined by reference to the number of second (or list) votes it gets.

In conclusion, while most voters – in Scotland and Wales at least – appear to have been reasonably confident and knowledgeable about filling in the ballot papers, many appear not to have had the same confidence and understanding about the possible consequences of their vote. This degree of knowledge may develop over time, although policy makers responsible for voter education programmes will probably want to focus rather more on this come the second devolution elections in 2003 and 2004.

Did voters like the new system?

Whether voters in Scotland and Wales did or did not understand the new system, arguably the more important question is, did they approve? Did they emerge from the experience of the devolved elections believing that proportional representation was the right way of electing their new institutions, thereby perhaps helping to enhance those

institutions' legitimacy? And did voters draw any broader conclusions from their experience? Do they hold the same views about proportional representation for the House of Commons as they do for the new institutions, or do they draw a distinction between them?

First, we examine views towards the new electoral system for the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly (for reasons of space, we did not carry the same attitudinal questions in London). Here, as reported in Table 2, we find fairly solid support for the new system, with clear majorities favouring the "new way of voting" (additional questions that asked the same question in slightly different ways, and not reported here, found similar results).

Table 2

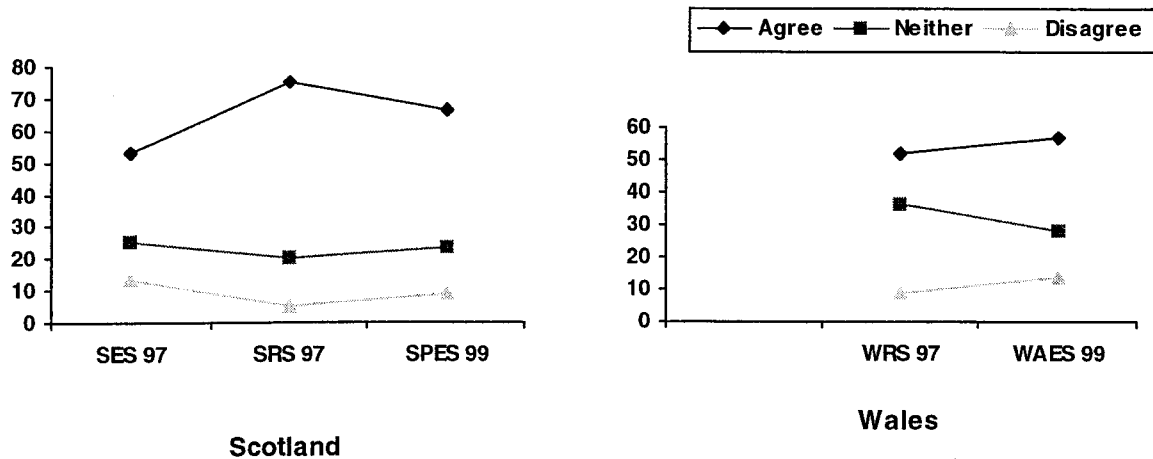
"Some people prefer the new way of voting for the Scottish Parliament/Welsh Assembly as they say it means all parties are fairly represented. Others say that the old way of voting for elections to the House of Commons is better as it produces effective government. Which comes closer to your own view?"

	Scotland	Wales
Keep to the new way of voting	58%	56%
Use the old way of voting	32%	33%

Does the support in Scotland and Wales for PR for the devolved institutions also mean voters are now keener on electoral reform for Westminster? When we asked voters a very similar question about the electoral system for Westminster as we had for the devolved bodies, we found that PR at the centre attracted far lower levels of support. Asked whether they would prefer to change the electoral system for the House of Commons or to keep it as it is, 39% of respondents in Scotland and 37% in Wales wanted change, while 53% in Scotland and 57% in Wales preferred sticking to the status quo.

Has the experience of using a more proportional electoral system had any effect in shifting peoples' attitudes towards the merits of PR? By referring to identical survey questions asked in 1997, we can compare any changes in attitude over time. In Scotland, PR appeared more popular immediately after the devolution election in May 1999 than it did after the Westminster election of May 1997 (Figure 1). However, support for PR was greatest at the time of the devolution referendum, in September 1997. In Wales, the effect of holding an election under a new system was to harden attitudes, with both sides of the PR debate gaining supporters. Thus, we can say that the experience of voting under new electoral arrangements appears not to have turned voters away from PR, although it is not clear that it contributed to growing support for PR, either. It will be important that, at the next devolution elections, further surveys are conducted to assess whether, and how far, attitudes have shifted further as voters' gain greater experience of the PR arrangements.

Figure 1
Attitudes towards PR in Scotland and Wales, 1997-99



“How much do you agree/disagree that the Scottish Parliament/Welsh Assembly should be elected using proportional representation?”

What about the positives and negatives of electoral reform? Which features of the new electoral systems did voters either warm to or reject? We might distinguish here between the *inherent* properties of electoral systems, and their likely *consequences*. Supporters of electoral reform claim that inherent properties of PR systems include greater fairness and the fact that each vote has a greater worth than under the existing plurality arrangements. In both Scotland and Wales, a significantly higher proportion of voters supported these claims than rejected them. But a key argument of those hostile to reform also found favour with voters. A clear majority of respondents in both areas (63% in Scotland, 61% in Wales) indicated a preference for single member constituencies rather than the multi-member constituencies required for proportionality. Finally in relation to the properties of the new electoral systems, our research reinforced earlier qualitative studies that highlighted the unpopularity of ‘closed’ lists, that is party slates of candidates which voters have to choose en bloc rather than being able to select individual candidates. Asked whether they would have preferred to have been able to vote for particular candidates rather than for a party list, over four in ten respondents agreed, with only around 15% in both Scotland and Wales disagreeing.

We should expect voters to evaluate electoral systems not only on their properties, but also on their consequences. The main outcome of the new voting system in Scotland was the formation of a coalition government, although in Wales the resulting executive was a single party minority government (switching to a two party coalition in October 2000). What was the response of voters in Scotland and Wales to the prospect (in Scotland, the reality) of power sharing government? As we can see from Table 3, opinion is fairly evenly divided, although the experience of Scottish voters in a coalition forming situation is more, not less, supportive of power sharing than that of their Welsh counterparts faced with a single party government.

Table 3
Which would be better for better for Scotland/Wales?

	Scotland	Wales
For a single party government in Edinburgh/Cardiff	41%	48%
For a coalition government in Edinburgh/Cardiff	51%	47%

Opponents of electoral reform don't merely argue against coalition per se; they also attack what are perceived to be the defects associated with it. One such feature is the undue bargaining power that coalition building situations are seen to give to small parties. Another is the supposed instability of coalition governments. Our findings suggest that, at the time of the first devolution elections at least, neither of these issues was of concern to voters in Scotland. Just 16% believed that the new voting system "gives too much power to smaller parties", while only 14% agreed that the system "will lead to unstable government".

Conclusion

Our research shows that the introduction of new electoral systems in Scotland and Wales did not cause major problems for voters in casting their ballots. However, voters were far less clear about the operation of the new systems (what importance should be attached to this level of knowledge in terms of voters exercising their democratic role is an open question). Having witnessed the post-election formation of a coalition government, voters in Scotland do not appear to have reacted against the idea of a power sharing executive. However, elements of the new systems - notably the use of multi-member constituencies - appear less popular. The proposed review of new electoral systems in 2003 will need to consider voters' more considered reactions to the electoral system, in particular how they have adjusted to living under coalition administrations and with new forms of political representation.

Voters' behaviour under new electoral systems

John Curtice

Introduction

The argument between advocates and opponents of electoral reform is primarily one about whether seats won at elections should or should not be proportional to votes cast. But they also disagree with each other about what impact alternative electoral systems have on the way that voters behave. The Scottish, Welsh and European elections in 1999, together with the London election in 2000, all conducted using some form of proportional representation, enable us to test those claims against the actual behaviour of British voters.

Four key claims are often made about how alternative electoral systems, and the Additional Member System in particular, affect the way that voters behave. These claims, expressed in the terms that advocates of reform would use, are as follows:

1. Voters have little difficulty in adapting to the demands of an alternative electoral system. The alleged 'complexity' of proportional representation does not put voters off voting.
2. Proportional representation frees voters from having to consider whether to vote tactically for someone other than their first choice party. Instead voters can always vote 'sincerely' for their first choice.
3. By giving voters two votes, one to elect a local representative, the other to vote for a party list, voters are enabled to vote for whoever they think would make the best local representative irrespective of the party under whose colours they are standing.
4. Having two votes enables voters to express a more sophisticated set of preferences than does a single ballot. In particular they can express a preference for which pair of parties should come together in any post-election coalition.

We can examine the validity of these claims by looking at two sources of evidence. The first comprises the results of the various elections themselves. The second consists of surveys undertaken in London, Scotland and Wales immediately after their respective elections under the auspices of the ESRC Centre for Research into Elections and Social Trends (CREST).

Evidence

The first of our claims is about whether proportional representation's complexity reduces turnout. Those voters in Scotland who said that they found the ballot paper difficult to complete were in fact more likely to report not voting in the first Scottish election. Thus, of those who said they did vote in the 1997 Westminster election and who said they found the ballot paper difficult, 22% stayed at home, compared with just 11% amongst those who did not find the ballot difficult. But as Ben Seyd's contribution makes clear, the proportion of Scots who found the ballot paper difficult

was small – just one in ten. In short we have little evidence here that the complexity of the new electoral system constituted a significant reason as to why people did not vote.

True, rather more people in Scotland, two in five, felt it was difficult to understand how the seats were allocated. But this perception had no impact on turnout at all. Amongst 1997 voters, the level of abstention amongst those who found the allocation of seats difficult to understand was, at 15%, almost exactly the same as level amongst those who did not find it difficult (14%).

The picture is only a little different in London where, of course, the overall level of turnout (34% in the Mayoral election and 31% in the Assembly vote) was far lower than it was in Scotland (58%). Again, those who found the ballot paper difficult were rather more likely to abstain than were those who did not. Amongst those who turned out in the 1997 general election, the level of abstention reached 49% amongst those who found the ballot difficult compared with only 34% amongst those who did not. Yet despite the absence of a voter education campaign prior to polling day, the proportion of Londoners who found the ballot paper difficult – one in five – was still a distinct minority. Meanwhile, having difficulty understanding the seat allocation – which proved to be as common amongst Londoners as it was amongst Scots – was only associated with a marginally higher level of abstention (42% compared with 34%).

Our second claim is that tactical voting would be less common under proportional representation. In fact it is far from clear that this was bound to be true in some of Britain's recent PR elections. Under the Additional Member System, voters might actually find it easier to vote tactically in the election for their constituency representative because they could still vote for their first preference on the list vote. Meanwhile, in many parts of Scotland, it was far from clear that it made much sense to vote Labour on the second, party list, vote because it looked likely that the party would do so well in the constituency contests that it would not be entitled to any additional seats from the lists.

In practice, however, the proportion of voters who said that they voted tactically in the Scottish and London elections was lower than the proportion who reported doing so in 1997 under the single member plurality system. As many as one in ten voters voted tactically in 1997. In London this figure fell to 7% (on both ballots), while in Scotland it was 6% on the first ballot and just 4% on the second.

An examination of the results of the European elections also suggests that tactical voting was far less in evidence at that election. For example, in constituencies where Labour were third in 1997, and where the party's vote is likely to have been diminished by tactical squeezing in 1997, the party's vote fell by just 8 points between 1997 and 1999. This was less than half the 19 point drop the party suffered in seats it had won in 1997. The Liberal Democrat pattern was just the same. Their vote fell by just two points in those constituencies where they had been third in 1997, compared with a massive 22 points in places the Liberal Democrats had won two years earlier. There was evidently a considerable unravelling of anti-Conservative tactical voting amongst Labour and Liberal Democrat supporters.

Of course, we cannot discount the possibility that voters would have been less inclined to vote tactically in 1999 than they were in 1997 anyway. There is some evidence from recent local election results to suggest this might have been the case. But our evidence

is consistent with the claim that tactical voting is likely to be lower under a more proportional electoral system, though equally it is also not consistent with exaggerated claims that tactical voting disappears entirely.

What, then, of the third claim, that the Additional Member System facilitates personal voting? For this there is considerable support. In Scotland, those who were currently Westminster MPs for the constituency they were contesting consistently outperformed those who were not. In Wales, Rhodri Morgan's personal popularity was demonstrated by the fact that his share of the vote was 18% higher than the Labour list vote in his Cardiff West constituency, compared with a Wales wide average of just 2%. Overall, no less than one in eight of people in Wales and one in ten in Scotland said that they cast their constituency vote for whom they thought was the best candidate rather than their preferred party.

Our final claim is that voters use the opportunity to split their ballots afforded by the Additional Member System, to express a more sophisticated set of preferences, in particular their coalition preference. As many as 20% of voters in Scotland, 21% in London and no less than 25% of those in Wales voted differently on the first and second ballot. These figures are similar to the level recorded at the last German election, though lower than those seen in New Zealand since it adopted an Additional Member System in 1996.

Critics of electoral reform argue, however, that voters who split their votes often do so out of confusion rather than sophistication. But there is little evidence of this in Britain's first PR elections. In Scotland, the level of vote splitting was just 3% higher amongst those who said it was difficult to understand the relationship between seats and votes than it was amongst those who did not. In London, it was actually 3% lower.

Meanwhile, there is evidence that some of those who split their tickets between Labour and the Liberal Democrats were reflecting a coalition preference. No less than one in ten of those who voted Labour or Liberal Democrat on the first vote and who said they favoured a Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition gave their party list vote to the other potential coalition partner. In contrast such vote switching amounted to no more than 3% amongst Labour and Liberal Democrat supporters who did not favour a coalition. Even so, there clearly are limits to the claim. For no less than 14% of Labour and Liberal Democrat constituency voters who favoured a coalition between those two parties backed the SNP on their second vote, more than the 10% who switched between the two preferred coalition partners. Evidently there were plenty of other reasons than coalition preferences - including both tactical and personal voting - that encouraged people to split their tickets.

Conclusion

Our findings are far from a clear endorsement of the claims made by electoral reformers about the impact of alternative electoral systems on the way that voters behave. For example, tactical voting did not disappear entirely in Britain's first PR elections. And even in Scotland where coalition seemed inevitable, the expression of support for coalition preferences was limited.

But even so, there is nothing in these findings that constitutes an impediment to the implementation of Lord Jenkins' proposal that future Commons elections should use the so-called 'AV Plus' electoral system, a variant of the Additional Member System used in London, Scotland and Wales. There is little evidence that the alleged complexity of proportional representation discourages voters from voting. There is little evidence that they are confused about what to do with their two votes when they do get to the polling station. And it appears that the personal appeal of a candidate matters at least as much and perhaps even more under an Additional Member System than it does under single member plurality.

In truth, suggestions that we need to learn more about the experience of Britain's experience so far with PR before deciding about Jenkins are but a diversion from the real choice that Labour has to make. That choice is whether or not seats won in the House of Commons should be related more closely than they are now to votes cast. Just where the party eventually decides it stands on that issue will be watched with interest.

Once elected...

The effect of PR on the Scottish Parliament in Practice

Philip Cowley and Stephen Lochore

In this section of the Briefing we look at the effect that the adoption of the Additional Member system (AMS) has had on the functioning of the Scottish Parliament in practice, focussing on two issues:

- The extent to which parliamentary parties elected under AMS behave differently to those elected under Single Member Plurality (SMP); and
- The extent to which those MSPs elected from regional lists behave differently to those elected from single-member constituencies.

The parliamentary parties

One of the justifications for using PR to elect the Scottish Parliament was that it would lead to a different style of politics. So do parliamentary parties behave differently under PR than they do under SMP? Here we examine two aspects of this question:

1. The cohesion of the parliamentary parties; and
2. The extent to which cross-party coalitions have emerged in the Parliament (for a more detailed analysis, see Cowley, 2001)

Cohesion

Table 1 shows the frequency with which MSPs vote against their party whips.¹ A total of 37% of votes in the first year of the Scottish Parliament saw some intra-party dissent, with the figures for the three largest parties ranging between 7 and 10%. The behaviour of Labour MSPs - dissenting in 7% of votes - is almost identical to their current behaviour at Westminster. It is the behaviour of the Liberal Democrats - seeing a dissenting vote in around 20% of votes - that stands out. This is very different from the behaviour of Liberal Democrats at Westminster, where rebellions are currently extremely rare. Largely because of the Liberal Democrats, the Executive sees a rebellion from within its own ranks in over a quarter (26%) of all votes.

Table 1: Percentage of votes seeing intra-party dissent

<u>Party</u>	<u>As % of all votes</u>
Lab	7
SNP	10
Con	7
LD	20
Executive	26
Two biggest parties	16
Total	37

¹ The table shows the date once abstentions and free votes have been removed, so as to make the data comparable with that derived from Westminster.

If we focus on just the two largest individual parties, Labour and the SNP, to allow comparison with data derived from the two party system at Westminster, then the figure is 16%. This is higher than the behaviour *currently* seen at Westminster – where there is a dissenting vote from within the two main parties in around 10% of votes – but lower than that seen during the 1970s and 1980s, when the incidence of dissent by MPs from the two main parties varied between 20% and 28%.

Coalitions

As well as the formal coalition between Labour and the Liberal Democrats, we are also interested in any other informal coalitions that might be forming within the parliament. If PR had created a ‘new’, or less adversarial, politics, we might expect cross-party coalitions to develop on votes. In practice, the evidence so far appears to be mixed.

Table 2: Voting coalitions

	Lab	SNP	Con	Lib Dem	DC	Green	SSP
Lab	-	19	32	98	26	30	15
SNP	19	-	38	18	63	45	43
Con	32	38	-	32	38	27	18
Lib Dem	98	18	32	-	25	30	15
DC	26	63	38	25	-	54	49
Green	30	45	27	30	54	-	39
SSP	15	43	18	15	49	39	-

Note: DC is Dennis Canavan (Ind. Lab), SSP is Tommy Sheridan, the Scottish Socialist Party MSP.

Table 2 shows the number of times any pair of parties have voted together, expressed as a percentage of the total number of the votes. The only party to have voted with Labour in more than half the votes is the Liberal Democrats, and vice versa. These two have voted together in 98% of votes. The other two multi-member parties, though, are much more likely to vote against the Executive than with it.

There is therefore not much evidence of any great consensus building between the Executive and the opposition parties. There is a governing bloc, consisting almost solely of the two parties that formally constitute it. But there does not, so far at least, appear to be an effective opposition bloc forming against it. The SNP and the Conservatives have voted together in just 38% of votes. In more than one in every two votes, then, the Executive does not face a united opposition. The divisions within the opposition parties are currently almost as great as the divisions between those parties and the Executive.

MSPs: Equal but different?

The formal position is that the two types of MSPs – those elected from constituencies, and those elected from lists – are *equal* but that is no guarantee that they will do their job *identically*. Given that they have been elected under different electoral rules, and represent different types of constituency (of different sizes, if nothing else), this could well be reflected in different roles and workloads for the MSPs.

Here we report the findings of a survey sent to MSPs in June 2000 to test differences in both attitudes/priorities and parliamentary workload.²

Priorities

MSPs were asked to rate the relative importance of constituency service compared to three other activities on a five point scale from 'much less important' (coded 1) to 'much more important' (coded 5). Table 3 shows the average scores broken down by type of seat.

Table 3: The average relative importance of constituency work, by type of MSP

Importance of constituency service in relation to:	Constituency MSPs	List MSPs	Difference (Constituency-List)
Policy making and influencing	3.7	3.2	+0.5*
Scrutinising the executive and the bureaucracy	3.6	2.9	+0.7**
Influencing your party's policy and stance on issues	3.7	3.1	+0.6*

Note: * p<0.1; ** p<0.05

The constituency face of the MSP is obviously important for all MSPs, just as it has long been for Westminster MPs. On average both types of MSP thought that constituency service was more important than policy-making and influencing their own party's policies. But list MSPs on average thought scrutinising the executive (very slightly) *more* important than constituency work, unlike constituency-based MSPs. And in all three cases the average score of list MSPs was lower than constituency MSPs indicating that constituency MSPs gave a relatively higher profile to constituency work than did list MSPs.

We found something similar when we asked MSPs to rank the importance of work in the chamber. On average list MSPs were more positive about the chamber (with an average of 3.9) than constituency MSPs (an average of 3.5). Again, therefore, the difference is a relative one: both types of MSP thought the chamber important (both scoring an average of more than 3); but constituency members gave it a slightly lower priority.

So, we have evidence of different priorities amongst the different types of parliamentarians: constituency MSPs give a higher priority to constituency work than do list MSPs.

² For a postal survey of parliamentarians – usually a very difficult group to survey – it achieved a high response rate of 55% (with a reasonably equal response from all parties). For a more detailed discussion of the findings than is possible here, see Cowley and Lochore, 2001.

Workloads

We next investigated the way the MSPs did their job in practice, looking first at their parliamentary workloads. We asked MSPs for estimates of the percentage of their time that they spent on different parliamentary tasks.

Table 4: Average time spent on tasks (%), by type of MSP

	Constituency work	Time in chamber	Committee service
Constituency	42	22	22
List	35	22	24

As Table 4 shows, there are little or no differences in the proportion of their time that MSPs spend in the chamber or in committee. But on average constituency MSPs spent noticeably more of their time on constituency work when compared to list MSPs.

We then asked about the number of ‘surgeries’ that they held each month. As Table 5 shows the vast majority of MSPs of both types hold surgeries. However, constituency MSPs were more likely to hold surgeries at all – every constituency MSP who responded to the survey held at least one a month, whereas a fifth of list MSPs did not – and they were also likely to hold more. And a higher proportion of the correspondence received by constituency MSPs came from their constituency (31%), compared to the proportion received by list MSPs that came from their ‘district’ (23%).

Table 5: Number of surgeries held in a month (row %), by type of MSP

	3+	2/3	1	0
Constituency	71	24	5	0
List	34	31	14	21

There does, then, appear to be some tentative evidence that constituency Members spend more time on, give a higher priority to, and are under greater demand from, the constituency than list MSPs. Yet these differences are relative. Both types of MSPs give a high priority to constituency work, spend some considerable amount of time on it, and receive correspondence from within their constituency or area.

Further reading

Voter attitudes to electoral reform and new electoral systems

- John Curtice, Ben Seyd, Alison Park and Katarina Thomson: *Wise after the Event? Attitudes to Voting Reform following the 1999 Scottish and Welsh Elections*, London: Constitution Unit, 2000
- Patrick Dunleavy, Helen Margetts, Brendan O'Duffy and Stuart Weir, *Making Votes Count: Replaying the 1990s General Elections under Alternative Electoral Systems*, Essex University: Democratic Audit, 1997
- David Farrell and Michael Gallagher, 'British Voters and their Criteria for Evaluating Electoral Systems', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 1(3), 1999, 293-317
- Trevor Smith, 'Citizenship and the British Constitution', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 44(4), 1991, 429-42
- Stuart Weir, 'Waiting for Change: Public Opinion and Electoral Reform', *Political Quarterly*, 63, 1992 197-221

Voter behaviour under the new electoral systems

- John Curtice and Michael Steed, 'And now for the Commons? Lessons from Britain's First Experience with Proportional Representation', *British Elections and Parties Review*, 10 2000
- John Curtice, Ben Seyd and Katarina Thomson, 'Devolution to the Centre: Lessons from London's First Mayoral Election', paper presented to the Annual Conference of the *PSA Territorial Politics Work Group*, Cardiff, January 2001

The role and behaviour of elected members

- Philip Cowley, 'Voting in the Scottish Parliament', *British Elections and Parties Review*, 11, forthcoming, 2001
- Philip Cowley and Stephen Lochore, 'AMS in a Cold Climate: The Scottish Parliament in Practice', *Representation*, forthcoming 2001

Acknowledgements

The Constitution Unit would like to acknowledge the role of David Lipsey and Nina Temple of Make Votes Count in initiating and organising the Westminster seminar of which this Briefing is a product.

The following bodies provided invaluable funding for the research reported in this Briefing:

- *Economic and Social Research Council*: the Scottish Parliamentary Election Study/Scottish Social Attitudes survey and the Welsh Assembly Election Study
- *Leverhulme Trust*: the London Mayoral Election Study
- *University of Hull's Research Support Fund*: Survey of MSPs

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• Establishing an Electoral Commission by Katy Donnelly, <i>March 1997</i>	Briefing £5.00
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• Elections Under Regional Lists: A guide to the new system for electing MEPs by Ben Seyd, <i>January 1998</i>	Briefing £5.00
• Electoral Reform in New Zealand: Lessons for the UK by Ben Seyd, <i>August 1998</i>	Briefing £5.00
• Review of the Local Government Commission by Robert Hazell, <i>March 1998</i>	Report £10.00
• New Electoral Systems: What Voters Need to Know by Clarissa White, Alan Hedges, Kandy Woodfield (SCPR) & Ben Seyd, <i>March 1999</i>	Report £15.00 Briefing £5.00
• A Panacea for Local Government? The role of PR by David Sinclair, <i>October 1998</i>	Briefing £5.00
• Democracy Day: Planning for referendums on PR and Lords reform by Ben Seyd, <i>March 1999</i>	Briefing £5.00
• Women's Representation in UK Politics: What can be done within the Law? by Meg Russell, <i>June 2000</i>	Report £10.00

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