

Wise After the Event?
Attitudes to Voting Reform Following
the 1999 Scottish and Welsh Elections

CREST

CENTRE FOR RESEARCH INTO
ELECTIONS AND SOCIAL TRENDS

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The Constitution Unit

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Executive Summary

This analysis of the attitudes of voters in Scotland and Wales in the wake of the first devolved elections examines three key questions:

1. Did voters understand the new system?
2. Did they approve of the new system?
3. Did their understanding or approval affect their willingness to vote?

Voters' understanding

- The official voter education campaign reached most voters, though it was more effective in doing so in Scotland than in Wales;
- The vast majority of voters said they had little or no difficulty in completing the ballot paper. But a significant proportion said they found it difficult to understand how votes translated into seats;
- Voters' actual understanding of the new electoral system – as measured by a knowledge test – was rather patchy. While the principles of the system and the mechanics of the ballot paper were apparently widely understood, beyond that many remained in the dark;
- Levels of understanding of the electoral system were unevenly distributed. In particular, those with fewer educational qualifications were less knowledgeable about the new system than were those with post-16 qualifications.

Voters' approval

- A clear majority of voters in both Scotland and Wales consistently support the use of proportional representation for the devolved institutions;
- Support for the extension of PR to elections for the House of Commons is lower and less consistent than it is for elections to the devolved institutions;
- There appears to be support for the use of PR in local government elections;
- In Scotland, there has been a shift in favour of electoral reform, both for the Scottish Parliament and the House of Commons, compared with opinion at the time of the 1997 general election;
- This shift in favour of reform appears, however, to have occurred in the wake of the devolution referendum campaign. In neither Scotland nor Wales is there evidence to back the claim that the experience of PR in the devolved elections increased support for reform;
- People's answers to questions about electoral reform remain sensitive to the institution being asked about or the way in which the question is phrased. There is no evidence that exposure of PR has resulted in voters becoming more consistent in their attitudes towards PR;

- In both Scotland and Wales, voters felt the new voting system was fairer than the single member plurality system, and made it more worthwhile casting a vote;
- Voters are not necessarily frightened by the prospect of coalition government. In Scotland at least, where a coalition is now in place, a majority believe a coalition is better for Scotland than single party government, and there has even been a growth in support for coalition government at Westminster;
- Voters are not concerned about many of the alleged defects of proportional electoral systems: they do not believe that they transfer undue power to smaller parties and, as a result, produce unstable government;
- However, a majority of voters still prefer the idea of a single local MP while many would still like to see their elections produce a clear winner;
- The 'closed' list element of the electoral system used in Scotland and Wales is disliked by voters. They would prefer to be able to choose between individual candidates.

Voter Turnout

- Voters did not stay at home from the polls because they disapproved of the new system or because they felt it difficult to understand.

Introduction

The 6th May 1999 was a historic day in British politics. For the first time ever, voters in Scotland and Wales had the opportunity to vote for their own devolved institutions. And in doing so, they used not the familiar 'first-past-the-post' electoral system, but rather a variant of proportional representation (for an explanation, see Annex 1). Using a survey conducted in Scotland and Wales soon after the May 1999 elections, this Briefing looks at how Scottish and Welsh voters reacted to this new way of voting. It addresses three key questions:

1. Did voters understand the new voting system, or did they find it confusing?
2. Did voters approve of the new system, or would they have preferred 'first-past-the-post'? And what features of the new arrangements met with approval or criticism?
3. Were voters encouraged to vote or discouraged from doing so by the use of the new system?

Our motivations are twofold. First, one of the challenges facing the new institutions in Scotland and Wales is to become as much an accepted part of the political landscape as, traditionally at least, the Westminster parliament has been. In Wales at least, the narrowness of the referendum in September 1997 on whether the new National Assembly for Wales should be created has raised doubts about how far it does enjoy public support. If people in Scotland or Wales do not approve of the way in which their new institutions are elected, those institutions are likely to find it difficult to secure public acceptance. Moreover in that event, it is also likely that the recent recommendation of the McIntosh Committee, that Scottish local elections should be conducted using some form of proportional representation, would not find public favour.¹

But before long, the merits or otherwise of proportional representation may also become a key issue for the whole of the United Kingdom. The current Labour government at Westminster has promised to hold a referendum on whether or not the electoral system for the House of Commons should be changed, albeit without as yet setting a timetable for that referendum. An Independent Commission on the Voting System has recommended an alternative electoral system for the Commons which, though far from perfectly proportional, would secure a closer relationship between seats won and votes cast than has commonly been provided by the existing system.² In short, the whole British public may, in the not too distant future, be asked to express their judgement on proportional representation. They may look to the practical experience of Scotland and Wales for a lead.

¹ Neil McIntosh (chairman), *Report of the Commission on Local Government and the Scottish Parliament*, Edinburgh: The Stationery Office (1999)

² Lord Jenkins (chairman), *Report of the Independent Commission on the Voting System*, Cm 4090-I, London: The Stationery Office (1998)

Moreover, previous research suggests that many voters in Britain do not hold firm opinions about a subject which appears to attract little interest outside the confines of the 'chattering classes'.³ Indeed, qualitative research has suggested that opinions on the subject change as voters learn.⁴ The outcome of any referendum on the subject is therefore highly uncertain. But the elections in Scotland and Wales in May 1999 exposed voters in those parts of the UK to some of the information and arguments about proportional representation that are likely to be at the centre of the debate about changing the Commons electoral system when a referendum is eventually held. Thus, the reactions of voters in Scotland and Wales to their experience may well give us vital clues about which arguments for and against proportional representation might eventually prove to be the most persuasive in a referendum campaign.

Our key questions

Did voters understand the new system?

One of the commonest arguments made against the introduction of proportional representation is that it is 'complicated'. And certainly it is important that if voters are asked to use a new electoral system, they understand it sufficiently to be able to cast their vote effectively. Thus, our first key question is to examine whether voters understood the new system.

They were certainly given some help. In what was a unique experience in Britain, though by no means uncommon elsewhere, in Scotland and Wales the government undertook a voter education campaign designed both to encourage voters to vote and to ensure that they understood how the new system would work. Of course, how much voters needed to understand in order to vote effectively is a matter of some debate. Clearly they needed to understand how to fill in the ballot papers. But whether they needed to understand how seats were allocated once the votes had been cast is perhaps more open to question. If voters simply wanted to vote 'sincerely' for whichever party/candidate they thought was best, such information about the relationship between seats and votes might be considered extraneous. On the other hand if they wanted to ensure that their vote was not wasted in support of a hopeless cause by voting 'tactically', then understanding how seats were allocated would matter.

In any event we look at all three of these issues. How effective was the voter education campaign in reaching the electorate? Did voters find the ballot papers clear or confusing? And did they understand how votes were

³ John Curtice and Roger Jowell, 'Is there Really a Demand for Constitutional Change?', *Scottish Affairs*, Special Edition on 'Understanding Constitutional Change', 61-93 (1998)

⁴ David Farrell and Michael Gallagher, 'British Voters and their Criteria for Evaluating Electoral Systems', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 1: 293-317 (Oct 1999)

translated into seats? In so doing, we look not only at whether they felt subjectively that they understood but also at some objective indicators of their levels of knowledge.

Did voters approve of the new system?

If proportional representation is to be considered an asset rather than a liability for the devolution project, then not only do voters need to have a reasonable level of understanding of its operation, they also need to approve of it. It is whether or not they did so that is our second crucial question.

However, our interest goes beyond simply asking whether voters approved or not. Not least of the reasons for this is that previous research has suggested that the views that people express about proportional representation are highly sensitive to the precise question that they are asked.⁵ This suggests that, while they may well approve of some features of proportional representation, they are less happy about others. After all, a wide variety of arguments are actually deployed in the debate about electoral reform. One of our aims, therefore, is to examine which of these appear to have resonated with voters in Scotland and Wales, and which less so.

We look in particular at two kinds of arguments. The first set are about the merits or otherwise of the electoral system itself. For example, advocates of proportional representation often argue that the system gives people an incentive to vote because 'every vote counts', whereas under first past the post many votes are wasted, that is cast for candidates who fail to secure election. They also argue that proportional representation is fairer because there is a clear predictable relationship between seats and votes. In contrast, opponents of proportional representation argue that having multi-member constituencies means that it is no longer the case that all MPs have sought, and secured, the support of a clearly defined body of voters.

But the debate about electoral reform is not just about the inherent properties of different electoral systems, but also about their consequences. Advocates of proportional representation suggest that coalition government is desirable because it is likely to represent a wider cross-section of the community. Its critics rejoinder that it produces instability and makes it difficult for voters to know who to blame when things go wrong. Indeed, behind these arguments are very different assumptions about what elections are about. Are they, as advocates of proportional representation imply, primarily about ensuring that a parliament or assembly faithfully reflects the division of opinion in society? Or are elections primarily about choosing governments, and in particular being able to hold them accountable for their actions?⁶

⁵ John Curtice and Roger Jowell, 'Is there Really a Demand for Constitutional Change?', *Scottish Affairs*, Special Edition on 'Understanding Constitutional Change', 61-93 (1998)

⁶ Raymond Plant, *The Plant Report: Democracy, Representation and Elections*, London: The Guardian (1991); Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, 5th edition, London: Allen and Unwin (1976)

In this Briefing, we report on the relative attractiveness of these arguments to voters in Scotland and Wales. As a result, we are able to provide an unusually detailed picture of what the merits and demerits of electoral reform appear to be in the eyes of those with experience of both first past the post and a proportional system. In so doing we hope to provide some pointers as to which arguments might prove to be the most persuasive in a referendum campaign.

That campaign will, of course, be about the electoral system for the Commons, not the devolved institutions. And we should not assume that voters who favour proportional representation for one institution necessarily take the same view about another. After all, the function and structure of the devolved institutions are not the same as those at Westminster. We thus look separately at voters' views about the merits of changing the electoral system for Westminster, as well as how far they approved its use for the new devolved institutions.

Voters did not come to the first devolution elections without any opinions. Some of them, at least, had very clear views about the merits of different systems. If we want, therefore, to assess whether or not their experience of a new electoral system made people in Scotland and Wales more or less inclined to favour proportional representation we need to be able to compare their views after the event with those they held beforehand. Fortunately, a few of our key indicators were carried on previous surveys. In particular, in Scotland, they were asked after the last Westminster election as well as after the September 1997 devolution referendum. Unfortunately, we are not quite so well placed in Wales, but we are able to undertake some comparison with the position immediately after the referendum.

Were voters put off?

In the end, there is perhaps one crucial test of the acceptability or otherwise of an electoral system, and that is whether or not it encouraged or discouraged voters from voting. Were they so confused by the new system, or did they disapprove of it so much, that they felt unable, or were unwilling, to participate? After all, at 58% in Scotland and 46% in Wales, the turnout did not fulfil the highest hopes of those who had argued for devolution, apparently leaving both institutions with the task of demonstrating their importance and relevance to the lives of their populations. Perhaps, however, the new electoral system shares some of the responsibility for the low turnout. This is the third question that we examine.

Finding out people's views

Our research was conducted as part of the 1999 Scottish Parliament, and Welsh Assembly, election studies. In the weeks immediately after the election, these studies interviewed a random sample of people designed to be

representative of the adult population in the two countries. As many as 1,482 people were interviewed in Scotland and 1,256 in Wales, the former interviews all being conducted face to face in people's homes, while the later comprised (as part of a methodological experiment) a mixture of face to face and telephone interviews.

Nearly all of the questions about electoral reform were, however, asked as a distinctive part of the interview in which respondents were asked to complete a booklet of questions after they had completed the main interview. Inevitably some respondents did not complete this task, while in Wales we were only able to ask those who had undertaken a face to face interview, rather than a telephone one, to complete the booklet. Thus, most of the figures reported here are based on the answers of 1,169 people in Scotland and 440 in Wales. This latter figure means we have to be particularly careful about drawing conclusions about any small differences we might find within Wales, and as a result sometimes we confine our analysis to Scotland. Technical details about the surveys can be found in Annex 2.

As we indicated earlier, some of the questions carried on these surveys had been asked previously in Scotland and Wales. In Scotland they were asked on the 1997 Scottish Election Study and the 1997 Scottish Referendum Study, while in Wales they were asked as part of the 1997 Welsh Referendum Study. The election study interviewed 882 people, while the two referendum studies interviewed 659 in Scotland and 632 in Wales.

Clear or confusing? Voter understanding of the new electoral system

The new electoral system in both Scotland and Wales was a variant of the Additional Member System. Indeed, so far as the task that faced voters was concerned, the system used was exactly the same in both countries. Voters were given two ballot papers. The first was for a single representative for their constituency, in other words a familiar first past the post ballot. The second, however, was very different. Voters were asked to vote not for an individual candidate but for a list of candidates put up by the various parties. The lists were 'closed', that is the order of the names on the list (and thus the candidates' chances of being elected) were decided by the parties themselves and could not be changed by the voters.

In contrast, the details of how seats were allocated was a little different in the two countries. Scotland was divided into eight separate regions, most of which contained nine single member constituencies. In each of these regions a further seven MSPs were elected from the party lists. These seven were selected so that the combined total of single member and party list MSPs allocated to each party was as proportional as possible to their share of the share of the second, party list, vote across the whole region. Wales, however, was divided into just five regions, each containing between seven and nine single member constituencies, and all of them having just five AMs elected

from the party lists. But the principle of how the five list seats were allocated was, however, exactly the same as in Scotland.

The voter education campaign

The official public education campaign followed broadly similar lines in Scotland and Wales. In both, the government departments (the Scottish Office and the Welsh Office respectively) used television, radio and newspaper adverts together with official leaflets, booklets, posters and billboards. Information was also available via official websites, and through a telephone hotline. However, the principal mechanisms were adverts on television and a leaflet distributed to every household. The campaigns focused on raising awareness of the election, how to fill out the ballot paper and explaining briefly the mechanics of the electoral system.

Both the television adverts and the leaflet reached a wide audience. In Scotland, no less than 83% of voters reported having seen the adverts, while 77% indicated they had seen or read the leaflets.⁷ In Wales, both figures were rather lower, with 62% seeing the adverts and 67% the leaflets.⁸ The relatively low figures for adverts in Wales reflects that fact that many people in Wales have their televisions tuned to English, rather than Welsh, transmitters. For example, amongst those who said they watched BBC1 Wales or HTV Wales regularly, around two in three said they had seen the television adverts. In contrast amongst those who said they regularly watched an English version of BBC1 or ITV, nearly a half did not see the adverts. The relatively high penetration of English broadcasting media in Wales is, of course, a problem for any political campaign directed at Wales. Still, all in all, no less than 75% of people in Wales and 89% in Scotland saw either a leaflet or a television advert.

Reaching an audience is one thing. Successfully communicating with it potentially quite another. In this respect the leaflets, which of course could carry rather more information, appear to have been a little more successful than the adverts, in Scotland at least. As many as 69% of those who read the leaflet in Scotland felt that it provided a 'very' or a 'fairly' clear explanation of the voting system, compared with 62% of those who said the same of the TV adverts. In Wales, in contrast, there was little difference in the perceived effectiveness of the two mediums with 67% rating the leaflets clear and 65% the TV adverts.

⁷ Figures collected for the Scotland Office found, however, that only 64% had seen the TV adverts though as many as 81% said they had seen the leaflet. See the Scotland Office, *Assessment of the Voter Education Campaign for the Scottish Parliament Elections*, Edinburgh: The Stationery Office (2000)

⁸ Again our figures are a little higher than those collected for the Welsh Office which found that 54% had seen the adverts and 53% the leaflet. See the National Assembly for Wales, *Welsh Election Tracking Surveys*, Cardiff: National Assembly for Wales (1999).

So in many respects, it would appear that the voter education campaigns were successful. Even so, we should recognise the limitations of their reach even as measured by the relatively simple indicators that we are using here. Only half of people in Wales felt that they received a clear explanation of the new voting system from either the adverts or the leaflet, while in Scotland this figure was, at 58%, only somewhat higher. Of course, some of those who felt they did not receive a clear explanation from the voter education campaign may have felt they received a perfectly adequate explanation from other sources such as the media or party propaganda.⁹ But it certainly appears as though the campaigns did not err on the side of excess in the clarity or intensity of their work.

Voter understanding: The mechanics and operation of the electoral system

This conclusion is confirmed when we look at how much voters actually understood about the new system. True, claims from opponents of electoral reform that voters would have difficulties in completing the ballot paper proved wide of the mark. Only around one in ten voters in Scotland or Wales found the ballot 'very' or 'fairly' difficult to fill in, while over 70% found it 'not very' or 'not at all' difficult.

But even voters themselves acknowledged that when it came to how votes were translated into seats, they were none too sure how the system worked. In both Scotland and Wales, around two in five said that they thought it was 'very' or 'fairly' difficult to understand that process. Indeed, as Table 1 shows, rather more people in Wales said that they found it difficult than said they did not.

	Scotland	Wales
Very difficult	7%	9%
Fairly difficult	33%	33%
Not very difficult	33%	29%
Not at all difficult	12%	7%
Can't choose	14%	19%

Note: The percentage totals in the tables may not sum to 100%, due to some respondents answering 'Don't know', or not indicating any response at all, to the questions.

Moreover, there were some clear differences in what kind of person felt confident in using, and in understanding, the new system. Amongst those in

⁹ Even so, according to the Scottish Office's own research, one in five voters claimed to know 'nothing at all' about the electoral system. See the Scotland Office, *Assessment of the Voter Education Campaign for the Scottish Parliament Elections*, Edinburgh: The Stationery Office, 2000.

Scotland with at least one Higher or its equivalent,¹⁰ no less than half felt that it was 'not at all difficult' to fill out the ballot papers. In contrast, just 37% of those with no formal qualifications took that view. Equally, 52% of those with a Higher or more felt that it was either 'not very difficult' or 'not at all difficult' to understand how the seats were worked out from the votes, whereas only 37% of those with no qualifications felt the same way. However there is little, if any, consistent pattern with age, and certainly no evidence to support the contention that older people found it more difficult to come to terms with the new system.

But believing that you understand something is one thing; actually doing so might be quite another. So we also included in our survey a simple quiz designed to provide an objective measure of people's knowledge of the new system. This quiz consisted of half a dozen statements which the respondents were asked to identify as either definitely or probably 'True' or 'False'. In practice, three of the statements were true and three false. The statements were as follows:

1. You are allowed to vote for the same party on the first and second vote (True)
2. People are given two votes so that they can show their first and second preferences (False)
3. No candidate who stands in a constituency contest can be elected as a regional party list member (False)
4. Regional party list seats are allocated to try to make sure each party has as fair a share of seats as is possible (True)
5. The number of seats won by each party is decided by the number of first votes they get (False)
6. Unless a party wins at least 5% of the second vote, it is unlikely to win any regional party list seats (True).

Table 2 shows the proportion of respondents in Scotland and Wales who identified the correct answer for each statement. If a statement was true, the table shows the proportion who said the statement was definitely or probably true, while if it was false, it shows the proportion who said it was definitely or probably false. In many respects, the results confirm the impression we have formed from the self-reports of knowledge. People were generally more likely to give the correct answer in Scotland than they were in Wales. And while matters are confused somewhat by a clear tendency for respondents to find it more difficult to identify correctly false statements rather than true ones, for the most part it appears that respondents had more difficulty with statements about the allocation of seats than they did about casting a vote. Thus, for example, in Scotland, 78% were aware that they could vote for the same party on both ballots, but only 63% were clear that the list seats were allocated to make the results as proportional as possible. However, one of

¹⁰ The nearest equivalent to the Scottish Higher in the rest of the United Kingdom is the 'A' level examination.

our false statements about voting, that the aim of having two votes was to allow people to show their first and second preference, caused particular difficulty, producing the lowest number of correct answers in Scotland. It may well be that, although voters know how to *behave* under the new system, asking them about the *operation* of the system in more abstract terms produces confusion.

	Scotland (% correct)	Wales (% correct)
Allowed to vote for same party (T)	78%	63%
List seats allocated to make fair share (T)	63%	63%
Need 5% to win list seats (T)	43%	35%
No constituency candidate elected on list (F)	31%	23%
Number of seats decided by 1 st votes (F)	30%	21%
Show 1 st and 2 nd preferences (F)	26%	22%

Our knowledge quiz also confirms that those with more advanced educational qualifications were generally more knowledgeable about the new system. Thus, for example, amongst those in Scotland with at least a Higher, no less than 46% were aware that the number of seats a party won was not determined by its share of first votes, compared with just 16% of those with no qualifications. Equally, older voters were generally better informed than were young ones. Still, even amongst those with no qualifications, as many as 70% were aware, at least, that they could vote for the same party on the first and the second vote.

So the voter education campaigns appear, for the most part, to have achieved the minimum that might be considered necessary for the successful introduction of a new electoral system. Most voters appeared to be reasonably confident and knowledgeable about filling in the ballot papers. But the campaigns do not appear to have been successful in ensuring that voters were fully aware of the possible consequences of their vote. A large number of voters did not apparently understand the decisive role the second vote played in determining the overall allocation of seats.¹¹ Equally, a majority were apparently unaware or unsure of the level of support a party needed to start winning seats. Of course, given that advocates of proportional representation often argue that voters should be permitted to vote sincerely rather than be concerned with the tactical consequences of their vote, it may be argued that this limitation to voters' knowledge is not unduly serious.¹²

¹¹ This, of course, might be expected to change as voters become more familiar with the system. The New Zealand Electoral Study found that, whereas only 57% of people were aware in 1996 that the second vote was decisive in determining the allocation of seats, by 1999 this had risen to 68%. See New Zealand Electoral Study at: <http://www.nzes.org>

¹² Martin Linton and Mary Southcott, *Making Votes Count: The Case for Electoral Reform*, London: Profile Books (1998)

Attitudes to electoral reform

But whatever voters in Scotland and Wales did or did not understand about 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? And what do they think about the possibility of proportional representation for local elections?

First of all, we examine the distribution of attitudes to these issues in the immediate wake of the devolved elections. But if we wish to establish whether the experience of reform changed attitudes, then we need to compare attitudes after the election with what they were beforehand. That will be our second task. But that exercise in itself will give us few, if any, clues as to why voters in Scotland and Wales are in favour or opposed to electoral reform. So our third and final task in examining attitudes towards reform is to look at what voters appeared to identify as the good and the bad points of the new electoral system. It is in this analysis that we might hope to secure some understanding of what arguments for or against reform might resonate with voters across the UK in the course of a referendum on proportional representation for the House of Commons.

Attitudes to electoral reform in 1999

Scottish Parliament/Welsh Assembly

The new electoral system appears to have secured the support of a clear majority of the electorate in both Scotland and Wales. We asked two questions to try and tap voters' overall evaluation of the new system. The first of these simply asked voters whether they agreed or disagreed that the Scottish Parliament/Welsh Assembly should be elected using proportional representation. As Table 3 shows, no less than two in three people in Scotland, and nearly three in five in Wales, agreed that it should.

	Scotland	Wales
Strongly Agree / Agree	66%	58%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	23%	26%
Strongly Disagree / Disagree	9%	14%

However, this might be thought to be a way of asking about proportional representation that encouraged a pro-PR response. After all, the question does not suggest that there might be some possible disadvantages to such a step. Indeed this question was asked immediately after one about introducing PR into elections for the House of Commons that mentioned that PR might ensure a closer relationship between votes and seats but did not suggest any possible disadvantage (see Table 6). And research on the art of asking survey questions has long recognised that some people are reluctant to say they disagree with a proposition.¹⁵ So a better test of the level of support for the use of proportional representation in elections to the devolved institutions might be to see which option voters back when they are presented with both sides of the case.

Indeed, as Table 4 shows, when we do this the overall level of support for proportional representation is somewhat lower. But even so, in both Scotland and Wales over a half of voters say that they prefer the new way of voting because it means that all parties are fairly represented, while only a third back using the current Commons system on the grounds that it produces effective government. There appears, then, to be unambiguous support for the new electoral system.

Table 4		
<i>"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?"</i>		
	Scotland	Wales
Keep to the new way of voting	58%	56%
Use the old way of voting	32%	33%

Moreover, in Scotland at least, support for proportional representation seems to have crossed the partisan divide. Officially, the Conservative party still opposes the introduction of proportional representation at any level of government. But as Table 5 shows, amongst those in Scotland who think of themselves as Conservative, as many are in favour of the new system as are in favour of using the current Commons system. But in Wales, a majority of Conservatives remain opposed to proportional representation for the Welsh Assembly. It looks as though, in Scotland at least, the realisation that the party is now a clear beneficiary of PR is beginning to influence the views of its supporters.

Otherwise what is most striking about the results in Table 5 is the similarity of the results for Scotland and Wales. In particular, despite the fact that the use of PR in Welsh Assembly elections had to be foisted on the Welsh Labour

¹⁵ H Schuman and S Presser, *Questions and Attitudes in Attitudes Surveys: Experiments on Question Form, Wording and Context*, New York: Academic Press (1981)

party by the party's British leadership, those in Wales who identify with the Labour party were no less likely to be in favour of PR than their counterparts in Scotland, where the party had long accepted the use of PR as part of the negotiations in the Scottish Constitutional Convention.¹⁴

Table 5				
<i>"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?"</i>				
Party identification*	Con	Lab	Lib Dem	SNP
<i>Scotland</i>				
Keep to the new way of voting	47%	55%	75%	76%
Use the old way of voting	45%	37%	18%	21%
	Con	Lab	Lib Dem	PC
<i>Wales</i>				
Keep to the new way of voting	39%	56%	68%	76%
Use the old way of voting	53%	34%	20%	19%

*Party identification is measured by responses to the question, "Generally speaking do you consider yourself to be Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat, Nationalist or what?"

The electoral system for Westminster

But does this mean that, in the light of their experience, voters in Scotland and Wales now also favour the use of proportional representation in elections to the House of Commons? At first glance, the answer to that question appears to be 'Yes'. But on further investigation, the answer proves to be a little more complex.

First of all, we can look at the answers to the question about introducing PR to the House of Commons that immediately preceded the question about PR for the devolved institutions we have already looked at in Table 3. Here (Table 6) we find a clear majority of people in both Scotland and Wales saying that they favour the introduction of proportional representation for Commons elections.

But even here we can see that the idea of using PR in Commons elections has somewhat less appeal than it does in devolved elections. Thus, whereas two-thirds of people in Scotland said that they favoured the use of PR for Scottish parliament elections (Table 3), fewer, 59%, back it for the Commons. In Wales the equivalent gap is, at three points, somewhat lower but is still evident.

¹⁴ Scottish Constitutional Convention, *Scotland's Parliament, Scotland's Right*, Edinburgh: Scottish Constitutional Convention (1995)

<u>Table 6</u> <i>"How much do you agree/disagree that the UK should introduce PR so that the number of MPs each party gets in the House of Commons matches more closely the number of votes each party gets?"</i>		
	Scotland	Wales
Strongly Agree / Agree	59%	55%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	28%	27%
Strongly Disagree / Disagree	11%	18%

Clearer evidence that the experience of PR in the devolved elections has not automatically transmitted into support for its use in Commons elections comes from a second question in which we simply asked whether the new way of voting should be used in elections to the House of Commons. As Table 7 shows, in Wales less than two in five agree with that proposition, and while support proves rather more robust in Scotland, it still only reaches one half.

<u>Table 7</u> <i>"The new way of voting [ie. that used in elections for the Scottish Parliament/Welsh Assembly] should be used in future to elect MPs to the House of Commons"</i>		
	Scotland	Wales
Strongly Agree / Agree	50%	39%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	21%	23%
Strongly Disagree / Disagree	15%	22%
Can't choose	11%	14%

Of course, one possible explanation for this result is that, while a majority of voters in Scotland and Wales support the principle of introducing PR into Commons elections, some of them (and especially in Wales) have doubts about the merits of the particular Additional Member System used in the devolved elections. But the pattern of answers to our third question suggests that in fact even support for the principle of proportional representation is far from robust. For when we put to respondents a question that puts both the case for and against change, we find (Table 8) that over half of voters are opposed to changing the existing electoral system for the House of Commons.

<u>Table 8</u> <i>"Some people think we should change the voting system for general elections to the House of Commons to allow smaller parties to get a fairer share of MPs. Others say that we should keep the voting system as it is to produce effective government. Which comes closer to your own view?"</i>		
	Scotland	Wales
Change the voting system	39%	37%
Keep it as it is	53%	57%

This result should not surprise us. Previous surveys in the British Election Study and British Social Attitudes surveys that have asked the two questions

detailed in tables 6 and 8 have consistently found that whereas the former regularly finds a majority saying that they favour the introduction of PR, the latter equally regularly identifies a majority against.¹⁵ Such sensitivity to question wording suggests that many people do not as yet have very clear, or strongly formulated, views about proportional representation. Despite having now experienced proportional representation for themselves, evidently that remains the position for many voters in Scotland and Wales.

However, these divergent findings on attitudes towards the Commons electoral system do cast fresh light on attitudes towards PR for the devolved institutions. The questions on PR for the devolved institutions we detailed in Tables 3 and 4 are parallel to those for the Commons outlined in Tables 6 and 8. Yet there is far less difference between the responses in Tables 3 and 4 than there is between those in Tables 6 and 8. It appears that support for PR for the devolved institutions is not only higher than it is for the Commons but is also, just as significantly, more robust.

Electoral reform at the local level

In both Scotland and Wales, the first devolved elections took place on the same day as local government elections, held under the traditional first past the post system. This juxtaposition has been used by campaigners for electoral reform to argue that it would make more sense for both sets of elections to be held using similar systems. But given that some voters in Scotland and Wales appear to draw a distinction between what kind of electoral system is suitable for the devolved institutions and which is appropriate for the House of Commons, we evidently cannot assume that voters necessarily believe that local and devolved elections should be held under the same system.

To examine this, we asked respondents whether they agreed or disagreed that the voting system used in the devolved elections should also be used in local elections. Table 9 suggests that, in fact, this proposition receives somewhat more support than the equivalent proposition for the House of Commons (see Table 7). As many as 53% of voters in Scotland say that the new system should be used in local elections, compared with 50% who took the same view about the House of Commons. Meanwhile, although support in Wales for local PR is, at 45%, lower than it is in Scotland, it is clearly higher than the 39% who backed the equivalent proposition for the Commons.

In Scotland at least, where the local government electoral system is a devolved matter, changing the electoral system for local elections is already high on the policy agenda. The McIntosh Commission on Local Government and the Scottish Parliament backed the introduction of proportional

¹⁵ John Curtice and Roger Jowell, 'Is there Really a Demand for Constitutional Change?', *Scottish Affairs*, Special Edition on 'Understanding Constitutional Change', 61-93 (1998)

Table 9 "The new way of voting [ie. that used in elections for the Scottish Parliament/Welsh Assembly] should be used in future local council elections in Scotland [Wales]"		
	Scotland	Wales
Strongly Agree / Agree	53%	45%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	20%	21%
Strongly Disagree / Disagree	14%	17%
Can't Choose	10%	15%

representation in principle.¹⁶ The Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition agreement in Scotland commits the Scottish Executive to making progress on electoral reform. Meanwhile, a working group under the chairmanship of Richard Kerley has been charged with the task of recommending a specific alternative. Our results suggest that there is probably broad public support for these developments. It should be noted, however, that we did not make any attempt to examine whether voters in Scotland specifically want an Additional Member System introduced into local elections or whether they simply back the principle of introducing some form of proportional representation. In the absence of such work, we would suggest that, although our results in Table 8 could be taken as measuring support for the introduction of AMS in particular, they are probably better regarded as an indication of the level of support for the principle of local PR rather than for any specific variant thereof.

Changing attitudes to electoral reform since 1997

So far, then, it appears that the experience of PR in the devolved elections was viewed favourably by voters in Scotland and Wales, but that this experience did not necessarily translate into support for electoral reform for the House of Commons. But if we are to evaluate fully the impact of the devolved elections on attitudes towards electoral reform, we need not only to look at attitudes after the devolved elections, but also whether or not they differed after those elections from beforehand.

Fortunately, some of our key questions on attitudes towards electoral reform were carried in previous surveys of the Scottish and Welsh electorate. These were as follows:

- The Scottish Election Survey (SES), conducted in the weeks after the May 1997 general election, and the Scottish Referendum Survey (SRS), conducted in the weeks after the September 1997 referendum;
- The Welsh Referendum Survey (WRS), conducted in the weeks after the September 1997 referendum.

¹⁶ Neil McIntosh (Chairman), *Report of the Commission on Local Government and the Scottish Parliament*, Edinburgh: The Stationery Office (1999)

By comparing the answers obtained in 1999 with those in these earlier surveys, we can examine whether support for proportional representation, both for the devolved institutions and for the House of Commons, rose or fell in the wake of the first devolved elections. But we can also go beyond this. We have already noted that attitudes towards PR for the devolved institutions are not necessarily the same as those towards PR for the Commons, while attitudes towards the latter in particular appear to be particularly sensitive to the way in which the issue is presented. Even so, we might still ask whether or not voters' attitudes were more consistent after experiencing PR than they were beforehand. This is certainly what we might anticipate would happen if holding a relatively high profile election under PR had made voters more aware of the issues at stake in the debate about electoral reform.

Trends in attitudes towards PR for the devolved institutions

In Table 10, we show the trend in attitudes towards PR for the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly. So far as the Scottish Parliament is concerned, we can see that the idea of PR was indeed more popular after the first Scottish election than it had been after the previous Westminster election. As many as two in three Scots were in favour of the use of PR for the Scottish Parliament compared with only just over half two years previously. However, at the same time, support for the idea was somewhat lower than it was immediately after the 1997 referendum when no less than three in four backed the idea.

Table 10			
<i>"How much do you agree/disagree that the Scottish Parliament should be elected using proportional representation?"</i>			
	SES 1997	SRS 1997	SPES 1999
Strongly Agree	14%	26%	21%
Agree	39%	49%	45%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	25%	20%	23%
Disagree	11%	4%	8%
Strongly Disagree	2%	1%	1%
<i>"How much do you agree/disagree that the Welsh Assembly should be elected using proportional representation?"</i>			
		WRS 1997	WAES 1999
Strongly Agree	-	16%	14%
Agree	-	36%	43%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	-	36%	28%
Disagree	-	7%	10%
Strongly Disagree	-	2%	4%

In Scotland, then, it looks likely that the referendum campaign, in which the proposals put forward to the people of Scotland included the idea that the

Scottish Parliament should be elected using proportional representation, served to increase support for the use of PR in Scottish elections. By the time the first elections had been concluded, that impact had worn off somewhat, though opinion was still left more favourable than before the referendum campaign. If so, that would suggest that the first devolution election itself did relatively little to make Scots feel more favourable towards PR.

Of course, one reason why this might be the case is because of dashed expectations. Perhaps Labour supporters had not anticipated that the introduction of PR would force them into a coalition with the Liberal Democrats. Perhaps nationalists became disillusioned because, although the new system delivered them considerably more seats than they would have had under first past the post, they were still a long way from being able to secure victory. However, as can be seen from Table 11, support for PR fell by more or less the same amount between the referendum and the first election amongst all groups of party identifiers. Moreover, by 1999, the one group whose hopes and expectations from PR might have been thought to have been most clearly fulfilled, that is Liberal Democrat supporters, were by 1999 in fact less distinctive in their level of support for PR than they had been two years earlier.

Party identification	SES 1997	SRS 1997	SPES 1999
Conservative	49%	67%	54%
Labour	50%	75%	65%
Liberal Democrat	76%	91%	79%
SNP	61%	81%	74%
None	36%	53%	53%

In Wales, in contrast, where as we can see from Table 10, we can only compare attitudes after the devolved elections with those after the referendum, the experience of the first election does appear to have had an impact. After the referendum, well over a third of people neither agreed nor disagreed with the use of PR in Welsh Assembly elections, but by the time of the first elections, this figure had fallen to only a little over a quarter. As a result, both support for, and opposition to, PR increased by five points, leaving the balance between them unchanged. In short, the impact of the first election in Wales appears to have been to polarise attitudes.

Trends in attitudes towards PR for the House of Commons

The trajectory of attitudes towards PR for the House of Commons appears to have followed a similar course to that for PR for the devolved institutions. As can be seen from Table 12, in Scotland, support for the introduction of PR for Westminster was far higher after the 1997 referendum than it was after the general election six months earlier. After the referendum, no less than two in

three Scots agreed with this proposition compared with less than half after the general election. But by the time of the first devolution election, support had fallen back somewhat, though at 59% it was still as much as eleven points higher than it was after the general election.¹⁷

So it appears that the introduction of PR into Scottish elections has been accompanied by a rise in support for electoral reform for Westminster, albeit that this change seems to have been a product of the referendum campaign rather than the first devolution election itself. Moreover, other evidence in our survey is consistent with this conclusion. Asked to choose between keeping the existing electoral system because it produces more effective government or switching to PR because it gives smaller parties a fairer share of the seats (Table 8, above), the 33% who backed change after the general election had risen to 39% after the first Scottish election.

Meanwhile in Wales, just as was the case for PR for the Assembly, attitudes towards PR for the Commons appeared to polarise between the referendum and the first devolution election, with a drop from 35% to 28% in the proportion neither agreeing nor disagreeing with PR. However, whereas there was a rise in both support and opposition to PR for the Assembly, in the case of PR for the Commons, it was opposition alone that rose.

Table 12 <i>"How much do you agree/disagree that the UK should introduce PR so that the number of MPs each party gets in the House of Commons matches more closely the number of votes each party gets?"</i>			
(a) Scotland	SES 1997	SRS 1997	SPES 1999
Strongly Agree	13%	21%	16%
Agree	35%	45%	43%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	30%	25%	28%
Disagree	11%	5%	9%
Strongly Disagree	3%	2%	2%
(b) Wales		WRS 1997	WAES 1999
Strongly Agree	-	15%	17%
Agree	-	40%	37%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	-	35%	28%
Disagree	-	7%	13%
Strongly Disagree	-	2%	5%

So in itself, the experience of PR did not prove to be a recruiting sergeant for the cause of electoral reform. At the same time, in Scotland at least, it is clear that support for PR, both in Scottish Parliament elections and in Westminster elections, was higher in 1999 than it was after the last general election, thanks

¹⁷ Note that this rise in support for PR since the general election is as evident amongst Labour identifiers as it is amongst the electorate in general, despite the reported cooling off in enthusiasm for PR amongst Labour MPs in the wake of their party's continuing large opinion poll leads.

it seems to the impact of the referendum campaign. In the long term, then, it appears that the creation of an institution elected by PR has served to bring about some increase in support for PR.

Have attitudes become more consistent?

We suggested earlier, however, that one of the more striking characteristics of public opinion towards electoral reform has hitherto not been the level of support for or against electoral reform, but the extent to which the distribution of answers varies according to the institution being asked about or the way in which the question is phrased. If the experience of PR in action resulted in people having clearer views about PR, we might anticipate that the differences in answers given to different questions would be less after the first devolved election than they were before.

However, there is no evidence in support of this expectation. We have already seen that, in 1999, as many as 59% of people in Scotland agreed that PR should be introduced for the House of Commons so that seats more closely match votes (Table 6) whereas only 39% want to change the electoral system to ensure that smaller parties find it easier to win seats (Table 8), a difference of 20 points. In contrast, the equivalent difference at the time of the 1997 general election was just 15 points. Equally, we have also already seen that while 59% agree with the introduction of PR for Westminster, as many as 66% do for the Scottish Parliament (Table 3), a difference of seven points. In 1997 the equivalent gap was just five points.

The positives and negatives of electoral reform

As we indicated at the beginning, however, our aim is not simply to look at overall levels of support for or against proportional representation, but also to examine what arguments about proportional representation resonated with voters in Scotland and Wales in the light of their experience. In so doing, we aim to provide a more in depth understanding of attitudes towards PR amongst a relatively well informed population than has hitherto been possible in Britain. The arguments we explore are of two kinds. The first are claims about the inherent properties of proportional representation systems. The second are debates about the consequences of PR. We will look at public opinion towards each of these in turn.

Inherent properties of electoral systems

There are perhaps two arguments that are most commonly used by the advocates of electoral reform. The first is that PR is 'fairer' than single member plurality because seats are allocated more or less in proportion to votes. The second is that 'every vote counts' because relatively few votes are cast in a way that fails to contribute to someone's election.

For the most part, these arguments do seem to appeal to voters in Scotland and Wales. As Tables 13 and 14 show, in Scotland over a half agreed that the new system is fairer, while nearly two thirds agreed that there was more point voting under the new system because every vote counts. Even amongst Conservative identifiers, around half agreed with the two propositions. In Wales, too, over a half agreed there was more point voting under PR. And while only two in five of people in Wales agreed that the new system was fairer, they easily outnumbered the one in eight who actually disagreed.

Table 13 <i>"The new voting system is much fairer than the one usually used at elections"</i>		
	Scotland	Wales
Agree strongly / Agree	54%	39%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	23%	31%
Disagree strongly/Disagree	9%	12%
Can't choose	11%	16%

Table 14 <i>"There is more point voting under the new system because every vote counts"</i>		
	Scotland	Wales
Agree strongly/Agree	62%	54%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	20%	21%
Disagree strongly/Disagree	6%	9%
Can't choose	10%	15%

Equally, there are two arguments commonly deployed by the opponents of electoral reform. One is that multi-member constituencies, some of which at least are necessary to implement any form of proportional representation, undermine the link between elected representative and those whom they represent. The second is that PR gives too much power to small parties, because although such parties may simply receive their proportionate share of seats they often have a disproportionate share of power since their votes become crucial to the formation of a government or the passage of important legislation.

Tables 15 and 16 suggest that only one of these arguments holds sway with the voters. The idea of having their own constituency MP still has wide appeal for many people in Scotland and Wales. In each case, over three in five said they preferred to have one representative for their area rather than be part of a larger area with several representatives. Even amongst Liberal Democrat identifiers, a majority said they preferred the single member MP. Of course, Additional Member Systems, such as that used in Scotland and Wales and as proposed for the House of Commons by the Jenkins Commission, attempt to marry the idea of the single member constituency with multi-member constituencies. It looks as though this may be an

important feature in helping make any switch to proportional representation publicly acceptable.

Table 15 "People have different views about how their area should best be represented in a parliament. Which of these statements comes closest to your views?"		
	Scotland	Wales
I would rather have one member of parliament for the area I live in	63%	61%
I would rather have several members of parliament, possibly from different parties, but covering a larger area	23%	24%
Can't choose	13%	14%

On the other hand, claims that PR gives small parties too much power evidently fail to convince many voters. In both Scotland and Wales, just one in six voters agree with this view. Perhaps, as this claim is most often heard from members of larger parties, the public have come to disregard it as rather self-serving.

Table 16 "The new voting system gives too much power to small parties"		
	Scotland	Wales
Agree strongly / Agree	16%	16%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	28%	33%
Disagree strongly / Disagree	44%	35%
Can't choose	10%	15%

Open and Closed Lists

However, it is not just the qualities of proportional systems *in general* that are the subject of the debate about electoral reform. The debate also turns on the *specific* features of list based systems. One feature of the system used in Scotland and Wales that has been the subject of criticism is the fact that voters had to give their second vote to a party list over whose order they had no control, a feature known as 'closed' lists (see Annex 1).

Tables 17-19 clearly suggest that closed lists were unpopular with the voters of Scotland and Wales. In both countries, over two in five said that they would have preferred to have been able to vote for an individual candidate on the second vote, while well under half that figure disagreed. Around a half disagreed that parties, rather than voters, should decide which of the candidates on their list should be elected, while again less than half that number took the opposite view. And around twice as many people were concerned that regional list MSPs and AMs would be too beholden to their parties than took the opposite view. Moreover, despite their party's dismissal

of open lists, Labour supporters were as likely to reject closed lists as were the rest of the public.

Table 17 <i>"I would have preferred to have been able to vote for individual candidates on the regional vote rather than for a party list"</i>		
	Scotland	Wales
Agree strongly / Agree	43%	44%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	28%	27%
Disagree strongly/Disagree	17%	14%
Can't choose	11%	14%

Table 18 <i>"Parties, not voters, should decide which of the candidates on their regional list get the seats their party has won"</i>		
	Scotland	Wales
Agree strongly/Agree	23%	19%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	19%	18%
Disagree strongly/Disagree	47%	51%
Can't choose	9%	12%

Table 19 <i>"MSPs/AMs elected through the regional party list will be too much under the control of their party"</i>		
	Scotland	Wales
Agree strongly/Agree	30%	26%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	36%	38%
Disagree strongly/Disagree	15%	7%
Can't choose	16%	28%

The outcome of electoral systems

The debate about PR is, however, at least as much about the desirability of its presumed consequences as it is about the merits or otherwise of the properties of any particular voting system itself. At the heart of this debate is an important philosophical difference.¹⁸ On the one hand, advocates of proportional representation emphasise the importance of *representation*. They suggest it is better for elected institutions – the legislature and executive from which it is drawn - to mirror the views of the electorate as much as possible. On the other hand, advocates of the single member plurality system argue that what matters most is *accountability*. They suggest that, above all, voters

¹⁸ Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, 5th edition, London: Allen and Unwin (1976)

need to know who to blame when things go wrong. And voters will be clearest about whom to blame if just one party forms the government.

<u>Table 20</u> <i>"Which of these statements comes closest to your views?"</i>		
	Scotland	Wales
It is better to have just one party in government so that it is very clear who should be blamed if things go wrong	33%	41%
It is better to have two or more parties in government so that more people's views are represented	55%	47%
Can't choose	10%	10%

Table 20 suggests that so far as this debate is concerned, voters in Scotland and Wales are more impressed with the arguments in favour of a more representative multi-party government than they are with those in favour of single party government, although in Wales the majority is a relatively small one. However, as Tables 21 and 22 show, the pattern of responses changes somewhat when we ask about the merits of single party versus coalition government in more concrete terms. For example, in Scotland, whereas only one in three say that they prefer single party government in response to our abstract question, the proportion rises to over two in five when asked about single party versus coalition government for Holyrood. Meanwhile in Wales, the narrow majority in favour of two party government on our abstract question disappears when asked what would be best for Wales. Moreover, when it comes to what voters prefer for the UK rather than their devolved government, then opinion is even somewhat more unfavourable to the idea of coalition.

<u>Table 21</u> <i>"Which do you think would be generally be better for Scotland [Wales] nowadays?"</i>		
	Scotland	Wales
To have a government in Edinburgh [Cardiff] formed by one political party on its own?	41%	48%
To have a government in Edinburgh [Cardiff] formed by two political parties together - in coalition?	51%	47%

<u>Table 22</u> <i>"Which do you think would be generally be better for Britain nowadays?"</i>		
	Scotland	Wales
To have a government at Westminster formed by one political party on its own?	42%	55%
To have a government at Westminster formed by two political parties together - in coalition?	48%	41%

In short, even after the experience of a PR election, the merits or otherwise of coalition divides Scottish and Welsh public opinion. It seems likely to continue to be a crucial part of the debate about electoral reform for the House of Commons. At the same time, we can note that in Scotland, where the devolved election did result in the creation of a coalition government, the idea of two parties sharing power is more popular than it is in Wales where a minority Labour administration was formed. Moreover, opinion in Scotland has become markedly more favourable towards coalition government than it was after the 1997 general election. In the immediate wake of Labour's landslide, no less than 56% of Scots said they thought that single party government was best for Britain, while only 35% backed coalition. As we can see from Table 22, after the 1999 Scottish election those backing coalition outnumber those favouring single party government by 48% to 42%. Despite the largely unfavourable publicity surrounding the formation of the coalition in Scotland, it appears that seeing a coalition government being formed has helped to increase public acceptance of the idea. Whether, in the longer run, the actual performance of the coalition also acts as an advertisement for the alleged virtues of having more than one party in government remains, of course, to be seen.

One reason why the idea of coalition is widely thought to be unpopular is that it is associated by some with weak, unstable government. But, so far at least, the new electoral system is not associated in the minds of people in Scotland and Wales with instability. As Table 23 shows, in both countries only around one in six or one in seven agree with that view. On the other hand, one of the other criticisms of PR and coalition government, that voters are not always sufficiently aware of who might be prepared to enter a coalition with whom thereby making it difficult for them to influence the composition of the government, does potentially receive an echo in public opinion.¹⁹ Table 24 shows that, in Scotland at least, where no party was expected to win an overall majority, over half the electorate said that all parties should have indicated who they were prepared to work with in government. Whether they felt this actually happened in 1999 is perhaps a moot point. Although most of the parties gave some indication of their possible negotiating positions in coalition talks, none of them clearly declared in advance of the election a preferred coalition partner. In Wales, in contrast, there had been little expectation that Labour would fail to win an overall majority, and as a result there seems on this occasion at least somewhat less public feeling than in Scotland that coalition options should have been discussed in advance.

¹⁹ Indeed after the first New Zealand election held under PR, New Zealand First entered into a coalition with the National Party after having indicated before the election that it wanted the National Party ousted from government. See Raymond Miller, 'Coalition Government: The People's Choice?', in Jack Vowles et al (eds) *Voters Victory? New Zealand's First Election under Proportional Representation*, Auckland: Auckland University Press (1998)

Table 23 <i>"The new voting system will lead to unstable government"</i>		
	Scotland	Wales
Agree strongly / Agree	14%	16%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	28%	29%
Disagree strongly/Disagree	43%	36%
Can't choose	12%	18%

Table 24 <i>"All parties should have told us before polling day who they would prefer to work with in a coalition government"</i>		
	Scotland	Wales
Agree strongly / Agree	53%	41%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	20%	27%
Disagree strongly/Disagree	14%	16%
Can't choose	11%	15%

And back to the abstract

Having reviewed which arguments for and against PR appear to resonate with voters in Scotland and Wales, it appears, then, that the arguments of the pro-PR camp are the better regarded. People in Scotland and Wales appear to accept that their new electoral system is fairer and makes it more worthwhile to vote. They do not accept on the other hand that it will lead to instability or gives too much power to small parties. They may have doubts about multi-member constituencies and still have some doubts about coalitions, but on the whole our evidence appears to be more encouraging for the proponents of reform who, potentially at least, have the stronger arguments than do its opponents.

Table 25 <i>Which of these statements comes closest to your views?</i>		
	Scotland	Wales
It is more important that elections should produce a clear winner so that it is voters who decide who forms the government	41%	51%
It is more important that elections should produce a fair result even if this means it is not clear who should form the government	43%	36%
Can't choose	14%	12%

Yet on one central issue on this debate, it is clear that opinion in Scotland and Wales remains unconvinced by the arguments in favour of PR. As we noted earlier, the debate about electoral reform is ultimately a debate about what elections are about. Are they primarily about electing a government and

holding it accountable? Or are they primarily about securing a legislature that faithfully reflects the views of the electorate? As Table 25 (above) shows, when we put that issue directly to the electorate, people in Scotland were evenly divided, while in Wales the attraction of being able to make and unmake governments remains a strong one. Opponents of reform still have, it seems, some important ammunition in their armoury.

Were voters put off from voting?

We now turn to the last of the three questions addressed in this Briefing. We have examined how far people appeared to understand the new system and we have seen how far they approved of its workings. But did any of these make any difference to whether they voted or not? In particular, is there any evidence that either misunderstanding or disapproval of the new system was in any way responsible for the relatively low turnout in the first devolved elections? Given the smaller size of our sample in Wales we will address these questions simply by looking at our results for Scotland.

In Table 26, we look at the possible role of understanding. Voters approach an election with a variety of motivations. Irrespective of the electoral system being used, some are interested, some less so. To take at least some account of this we confine our analysis to those people who said they voted in the 1997 general election, that is those who have at least demonstrated a willingness to vote in a first past the post election. If the alleged difficulty of the new electoral system discouraged some people from voting in the devolved election then we would expect to find that the level of abstention was higher amongst those 1997 voters who found the system difficult than it was amongst those who did not. Table 26 therefore shows the level of abstention amongst 1997 voters according to how difficult they felt it would be filling in the ballot paper and how difficult it was working out how the seats were allocated.

<u>Table 26</u> <i>Understanding and abstention (Scotland only)</i>		
% of 1997 voters who abstained in 1999 amongst those who found it difficult or not difficult:	Difficult	Not difficult
Completing the ballot paper	22%	11%
Working out how votes translated into seats	15%	14%

Perhaps unsurprisingly, amongst the small minority of voters who said that the ballot paper would be difficult, the level of abstention amongst 1997 voters was twice as high as it was amongst those who did not. But even if all this difference really is accounted for by the perceived difficulty of the ballot paper, it can account for no more than a one percentage point fall in the turnout. More importantly, when it comes to the perceived difficulty of working out how the seats are allocated, a matter far more voters said they found difficult, there is no difference in the abstention rate at all. It thus

seems difficult to argue that much of the drop in turnout compared with the Westminster election can be accounted for by the perceived difficulty of the new electoral system.

But perhaps some voters did not participate because they did not approve? However, Table 27 fails to give any consistent support to this contention. True, those who think it more important that elections should produce a clear winner rather than a fair result were a little more likely to abstain. But equally those who favour having more than one MP for their area were actually a little more likely to abstain than were those who prefer having just one MP. Equally, there is no consistent evidence that the use of closed rather than open lists discouraged people from voting. True, those who said they would have preferred to have been able to vote for an individual candidate on the second vote were more likely to abstain than were those who did not. But then we find that abstention was also a little higher amongst those who agreed that parties, and not voters, should decide which of the candidates on their lists should be elected.

Table 27 <i>Approval and abstention (Scotland only)</i>		
% of 1997 voters who abstained in 1999 amongst those who agreed or disagreed with the statements:	Agreed	Disagreed
Should keep to the new way of voting for Scotland	19%	20%
Elections should produce a fair result	14%	20%
Prefer several MPs for my area	21%	17%
Coalition better for Scotland	20%	20%
Prefer being able to cast regional vote for a candidate rather than for a list	18%	7%
Parties, not voters, should decide who gets elected from the list	20%	16%

So whatever other demerits the new electoral system may have had, there is little evidence that it had much, if any, impact on the level of turnout in the devolved elections. This should perhaps come as little surprise. We can anticipate that voters had many more important reasons, ranging from their views on the constitutional future of their country, to the tax raising powers of the new legislature, in deciding whether to turn out and vote in the devolved elections. By comparison, the electoral system itself doubtless seemed relatively unimportant.

Conclusion

The first devolved elections in May 1999 gave parts of mainland Britain their first taste of proportional representation in a relatively high profile election. It appears that, for the most part, voters in Scotland and Wales managed to cope with the new experience. They seem, in general, to be clear about what they had to do when they went to the polling station. But at the same time, only a minority appears to have a clear understanding how the new system

converted their votes into seats. However, this difficulty does not appear to have deterred them from going to the polls. In short, the voters of Scotland and Wales may not have been an ideally informed electorate on the occasion of the first devolved elections, but they do seem to have been an adequately informed body.

The voters of Scotland and Wales not only for the most part managed to cope with the new system. They also received it with at least mild approval. Some of its key principles such as fairness and ensuring that every vote counts receive public endorsement. Some of its alleged defects, such as giving too much power to small parties and causing government instability do not. And while the experience of the election itself may not have led more people to the view that proportional representation is preferable to first past the post, the evidence suggests that, in Scotland at least, the referendum campaign, in which the advocates of devolution argued for a proportional parliament, does appear to have shifted opinion in favour of reform. At minimum it seems safe to conclude that, in the event, the voters of Scotland and Wales were no less happy being asked to vote under the new system than they were under the old.

Yet advocates of proportional representation would be wrong to believe that our evidence necessarily suggests that they are likely to win any future referendum on proportional representation for the House of Commons. Even after experiencing proportional representation, voters' views on the subject in Scotland and Wales remain sensitive to the terms in which they asked to think about the subject. Some also appear to draw a distinction between the devolved institutions and the House of Commons. And it is clear that some of the arguments in favour of single member plurality, such as the local MP and ensuring that elections produce a clear winner, still have a strong appeal. In short, the experience of Scotland and Wales in the first devolved elections has undoubtedly provided important evidence for the debate about electoral reform across the UK. But it still looks as though the outcome of any referendum on proportional representation for the House of Commons will depend on the quality of the arguments marshalled by both sides. On that we will have to wait and see.

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Organisations

Details of the Constitution Unit can be found on the back cover of this Briefing.

The Centre for Research into Elections and Social Trends (CREST) is an ESRC Research Centre jointly based at the National Centre for Social Research (formerly SCPR) in London and the Department of Sociology, University of Oxford. Having evolved from a successful programme of collaboration between the National Centre and researchers at the University of Oxford since 1983, CREST was founded in 1994. Following a review by the ESRC in 1998, CREST has secured renewed funding until 2002. CREST partially supports five researchers, as well as support staff, at its two locations.

CREST's work relies on the conduct and interpretation of high quality social surveys of the general public, designed to document and explain changing patterns of voting behaviour, trends in social attitudes, and similarities and differences between Britain and other countries. CREST also develops and encourages improved methods of measuring attitudes and behaviour.

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Annex 1 – Explanation of electoral systems

First Past The Post

House of Commons; local government (Scotland and Wales)

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

Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly and Greater London Assembly

Voters cast two votes: one for a constituency member, the second for a party list (or an independent). Constituency members are elected as under first past the post; parties are then allocated 'top up' seats so that the combined total of first past the post and 'top up' seats is as proportional as possible to the distribution of second votes.

Closed list voting

The Additional Member System in Scotland and Wales uses a list arrangement for the second vote. This means that parties put forward lists of candidates, with the number of candidates being elected depending on the proportion of the second vote each party gains, and the number of constituency seats each party had already won. In Scotland and Wales, each party's list of candidates was displayed to voters on the ballot paper, but voters could not vote for any particular candidate. Rather, they had to vote for a party (or independent candidate), with the candidates elected being drawn in order from the top of the list. Under list systems operating in some countries, voters can choose particular candidates from within each list; in some cases, this means that a candidate appearing well down the list might be elected before, or instead of, a candidate further up the list if he/she is particularly popular among voters. Critics of the system used in Scotland and Wales argued that voters had no control over who was elected from the party lists, that power instead rested with the parties themselves.

Annex 2 – Technical details of the surveys

Scottish Parliamentary Election study, 1999

The Scottish Parliamentary Election Study formed the first round of the new Scottish Social Attitudes survey, intended to be conducted annually by the National Centre for Social Research, Scotland. The funding was provided by the ESRC (grant numbers R000 238 065 and L327 253 017). The survey was conducted by the National Centre for Social Research in co-operation with the Unit for the Study of Government in Scotland (University of Edinburgh) and the Constitution Unit (University College London).

Sampling details

The Scottish Parliamentary Election Study was designed to give a representative sample of the adult population living in private households in Scotland (including north of the Caledonian Canal). The sample was drawn from the Postcode Address File (PAF) by a clustered multi-stage method:

1. Any postcode sectors with less than 500 delivery points (DPs) were grouped and the resulting list was stratified on the basis of grouped council areas, population density and socio-economic group profile.
2. 90 sectors were selected with probability proportionate to DP count.
3. 31 DPs were sampled systematically throughout each sector.

Throughout the process, DP count was expanded to incorporate the Multiple Output Indicator (MOI) which gives an indication of the number of households at the address (although it is well known that MOI is occasionally inaccurate in Scotland).

Interviewers called at each selected address and established the number of resident households. If there were several households, they selected one or two for interview on the following basis:

- MOI = 1 and there were 2-5 households: one selected
- MOI =1 and 6+ households: two selected
- MOI > 1: one selected

The households were selected using a Kish grid and computer-generated random numbers.

Interviewers then sought to establish contact with each (selected) household and establish the number of residents aged 18 or over. If there were several, one was selected for interview using a Kish grid and computer-generated random numbers.

The data are weighted to take account of the unequal selection probabilities arising from these procedures.

Fieldwork

All interviews were carried out by members of the National Centre for Social Research's regular panel of interviewers. They were briefed in person by the researchers.

The survey consisted of a main questionnaire administered using computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI) and a self-completion questionnaire, which was completed by 79% of the respondents. The questions reported in this Briefing were largely on the self-completion questionnaire.

Interviewing began immediately after the elections to the Scottish Parliament on 6 May 1999. The bulk of the fieldwork was completed in May and June, with a few interviews taking place in July and August.

The final response rate was as shown:

	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Total issued households (including additional households)	2,810	
Out of scope	317	
Total in scope	2,493	100%
Interview achieved	1,482	59%
Of which: with self-completion	1,165	47%
Weighted equivalent	1,169	

Out of scope = address not traceable, derelict, empty, no private dwellings, weekend/holiday home

Welsh Assembly Election study, 1999

The Welsh Assembly Election Study was funded by the ESRC (grant numbers R000 238 070 and L327 253 017). The survey was conducted by the Centre for Research into Elections and Social Trends (CREST) (an ESRC-funded research centre based jointly at the National Centre for Social Research and the Department of Sociology, University of Oxford), in co-operation with the Institute for Welsh Politics at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth and the Constitution Unit, University of London.

Sampling details

The Welsh Assembly Election Study was designed to give a representative sample of the adult population living in private households in Wales. As an

experiment into telephone interviewing, the survey was carried out on three separate random samples:

1. Face-to-face interviewing of a sample drawn from the Postcode Address File (PAF)
2. Telephone interviewing of a sample drawn from PAF
3. Telephone interviewing of a sample generated via random digit dialling

The study also incorporated an cross-cutting experiment into the effect of offering an incentive to respondents (£5 gift vouchers).

The total sample of the survey was 1,256, but most of the questions reported in this paper were implemented on a self-completion which was given only to face-to-face respondents. The details in this annexe therefore cover the 522 face-to-face respondents only. (Respondents were offered the option of being interviewed in Welsh, but since the Welsh language interviews were all conducted on the telephone, they are not included here).

The sample was drawn from PAF by a clustered multi-stage method:

1. Any postcode sectors with less than 500 delivery points (DPs) were grouped and the resulting list was stratified on the basis of county, percent Welsh-speaking and population density.
2. 60 sectors were selected with probability proportionate to DP count.
3. 15 DPs were sampled systematically throughout each sector.

Interviewers called at each selected address and established the number of resident households. If there were several households, they selected one for interview using a Kish grid and computer-generated random numbers.

Interviewers then sought to establish contact with each (selected) household and establish the number of residents aged 18 or over. If there were several, one was selected for interview using a Kish grid and computer-generated random numbers.

The data are weighted to take account of the unequal selection probabilities arising from these procedures. A set of weights incorporating non-response weighting are to be made available in the final version of the data set but are not deployed here.

Fieldwork

All interviews were carried out by members of the National Centre for Social Research's regular panel of interviewers. They were briefed in person by the researchers.

The survey consisted of a main questionnaire administered using computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI) and a self-completion questionnaire,

which was completed by 85% of the respondents. The questions reported in this paper were largely on the self-completion questionnaire.

Interviewing began immediately after the elections to the Welsh Assembly election on 6 May 1999. The fieldwork was conducted during May and June.

The final response rate was as shown:

	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Total issued households (including additional households)	900	
Out of scope*	119	
Total in scope	781	100%
Interview achieved	522	67%
Of which: with self-completion	446	57%
weighted equivalent**	440	

* Out of scope = address not traceable, derelict, empty, no private dwellings, weekend/holiday home.

** The data were weighted for unequal selection probabilities only and a set of weights incorporating non-response weighting will be made available later.

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