



Briefing Paper – The Electoral System

Members have raised various questions about electoral systems in the UK

What is the electoral system in the UK?

General elections to the UK Parliament are conducted under the first-past-the-post electoral system. Under first-past-the-post, the country is divided into areas, or 'constituencies', each of which elects one representative. Each voter may vote for one candidate in their constituency. The candidate in each constituency who receives the most votes wins (hence 'first-past-the-post'), and is elected as an MP. There are 650 constituencies in the UK.

What are the arguments for and against first-past-the-post?

Supporters of first-past-the-post argue that it often gives one party a majority of seats in the House of Commons. This means that the UK is able to have strong single-party majority governments, which can implement the manifesto on which they were elected. As these governments have a majority in the Commons, they tend to be stable and see out their time in office.

Supporters of first-past-the-post also emphasise its accountability. If voters in a constituency don't like the job their MP is doing, they can vote that MP out. First-past-the-post is also said to foster a strong link between the MP and their constituents.

In contrast, opponents of first-past-the-post argue that the results it produces do not reflect how the country as a whole voted. They point out that because a winning candidate only requires more votes than any other candidate, it is possible to be elected with less than 50% of the vote. Opponents of first-past-the-post also argue that this system tends to disadvantage smaller parties, which might have support across the country, but win few seats because they cannot come first in many constituencies.

Opponents of first-past-the-post, who generally tend to favour more proportional systems, also emphasise that their preferred systems tend to produce coalition governments rather than single-party majorities. They argue that this forces parties to work together and compromise in order to get things done.

Are there other electoral systems in the UK?

Yes. Elections to the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Parliament and the Northern Irish Assembly all use forms of proportional representation. These are designed so that a party

wins seats roughly in proportion to its share of the votes cast. Rather than using first-past-the-post, elections for mayors in England and Wales, as well as for Police and Crime Commissioners, see voters rank their two preferred candidates. You can read more about how each of these systems work [here](#).

What do the public think about the electoral system?

Opinions polls in the past few years indicate that the public is divided over electoral reform. Some pollsters have found that more people want to switch to a proportional system than want to retain first-past-the-post, while others have found the opposite. However, there is a relatively recent example of how the public responded when given the opportunity to change the electoral system.

In 2011, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government held a national referendum on whether to replace the first-past-the-post electoral system with the 'alternative vote' method. The alternative vote method sees voters rank their preferred candidates, rather than voting for a single one. The change was rejected by 68% to 32%.