

# Voting Systems for the UK Parliament



## Change is urgently needed



In 2019, the Conservatives won an MP for every 38,000 votes it received. The Liberal Democrats got 336,000 votes for every MP; and for the Greens, their 866,000 votes won them just a single MP.

Disillusion with politics in the UK is widespread, as is distrust in our politicians. In the run up to the 2019 General Election, more than 60 per cent of people surveyed said they were dissatisfied with the way our politics works\*. And

public opinion suggests that trust has been further eroded since.

Our voting system, known as First Past The Post (FPTP), drives this widespread distrust and alienation.

When surveyed, only a quarter of people said they thought their vote would influence the election result\*. This reflects the fact that, under FPTP, votes are not **fair and equal**. While every eligible voter has one vote to

cast, one person's vote does not have the same impact on the result as another person's vote. Most constituencies are "safe" seats – certain to return the same party in election after election. Only "swing" voters in marginal constituencies are targeted by the parties; and so millions of voters are almost entirely ignored.

In a fair voting system, everyone's vote counts equally and a party's share of total seats at Westminster is

proportional to its share of the votes. But this is not the case under FPTP. In 2019, the Conservatives won 43.6% of votes cast – a clear minority – but was able to win 56% of the seats and so form a "majority" government.

When surveyed, a third of respondents also said they would vote tactically\* rather than for their actual preferred party or candidate. This highlights the fact that FPTP severely impacts..

\*<http://electoral-reform.org.uk/voters-left-voiceless-the-2019-general-election/> and BBC website, quoting University of Cambridge research

... **voter choice**. Voters are not able to express their preferences freely.

Under FPTP, we have 650 separate constituency elections. Voters cast their vote for one candidate, who is chosen by their party - people can only vote for one option within each political party. The party candidate with the highest number of votes wins, even if that is well below half the total votes cast. Voters are incentivised to cast their vote for a party they do not prefer (the least worst who can plausibly win), to avoid wasting their vote: they are often told "It's a two-horse race!" or "Only Party X can beat Party Y here!".

Indeed, in 2019, 70.8% of votes did not count towards the election result – they were cast either for losing candidates; or went to piling up large but meaningless majorities in individual constituencies.

A system that offered true voter choice would give a high

proportion of voters a representative for whom they had voted, waste as few votes as possible - and allow voters to express their true preferences. This simply doesn't happen under FPTP.

Supporters of FPTP argue that this system is the best way to maintain **geographic links** between voters and the MPs who represent them. It is true that there is a clear link between a single member and their geographical area. But this has its own drawbacks. People have no choice of MP to approach with an issue; and while MPs assure the public that they represent all constituents, including those who did not vote for them, people may not feel that way and FPTP does not give an MP a reason to actually do this.

It is perfectly possible to deliver geographic links through other voting systems, all while maintaining recognisable, meaningful and stable boundaries.

# But change to what?

There are three other voting systems already in use for elections in the UK.



**Single Transferable Vote (STV)** is used for Scottish local government; and optionally for Welsh local government (from 2027). It is used for all elections in Northern Ireland except UK General Elections and has been in use in Ireland since the country's independence in 1921. It is the system preferred by the Liberal Democrats and the Scottish National Party. Within political parties, STV is used for elections to the Labour Party National Executive Committee, for all internal Liberal Democrat Party elections, and for countless associations, institutes and unions across the UK. Even the Conservative Party uses a modified version to elect its leaders!



**List Proportional Representation (LPR)** was used for the UK's European Parliament elections from 1999-2019. It will be introduced for Wales' Senedd elections from 2026.



**Mixed Member Proportional (MMP)** or Additional Member System (AMS) is in use for Scotland Parliamentary elections and for elections to the Greater London Assembly. It was also used for the Welsh Senedd but has now been rejected in favour of LPR

## List Proportional Representation (LPR)

How does it work?

1. The voter casts a **vote for one party in a multi-member constituency or region**.
2. A quota is applied and **each party wins as many elected representatives as they win quotas of votes**.
3. A **regional or national top-up** can be added.

Are votes fair and equal?

- Through the use of a top-up, the result can be made highly proportional in party (rather than candidate) terms, so that seats match votes.
- It can lead to safe seats, especially for candidates near

the top of the lists of large political parties, although this can be mitigated with an "Open (or Flexible) List" system in which voters select candidates as well as parties (though UK elections to date have only allowed "Closed Lists").

## Single Transferable Vote (STV)

How does it work?

1. Representatives are elected in **multi-member constituencies** (usually between 3 and 7 representative members per constituency).
2. Instead of a single 'X' **the voter ranks candidates in order of preference** – a '1' against their first choice, '2' against their second; and so on. They do not have to rank all the candidates - just those they have an opinion on.
3. **Candidates are elected if they achieve a sufficient share, or "quota", of the votes.** If a candidate has more votes than needed for election, surplus votes are transferred to the voters' next preference. When a candidate with insufficient votes is excluded, their votes are passed on to the voters' next preference. These transfers mean that votes are not wasted. People are empowered to vote according to their real preferences.

Are votes fair and equal?

- There are very few wasted votes: virtually everyone's vote counts equally towards the final election result.
- There are few "safe seats".
- It is proportional, both in terms of parties, and of issues where parties might be split.

Does it offer voter choice?

- Voters can rank as many or as few candidates as they wish and can therefore also opt for the candidates they prefer as well as their choice of party.
- There is no need to vote "tactically" because surplus

and unsuccessful first preferences are transferred to the voter's next preference candidate

- In practice, most voters get their first preference candidate.

Does it offer a strong geographic link?

- It offers the same ratio of MPs to constituents as FPTP; with the crucial benefit that voters can choose between candidates as well as parties.
- Constituencies will have between three and seven members. They can use geographically identifiable areas such as a local authority.

How easy is it to implement?

- Constituencies can follow natural boundaries, such as local government areas.
- Boundaries would need to be changed only very rarely. Population changes can be accommodated by changing the number of representatives for a constituency.
- Counting can today be conducted quickly and accurately by computer.

Does it offer voter choice?

- Parties below a minimum vote share threshold win no seats (votes for them are not transferred), which incentivises people to vote tactically. This means an apparently proportional result may not reflect voter preference.

Does it offer a strong geographic link?

- LPR can only provide local representation if its electoral regions are fairly small. In such a case, a national top-up may be needed to make the overall result more proportional.

How easy is it to implement?

- Constituencies can be aligned with natural boundaries, such as local government areas.

# Mixed Member Proportional (MMP)

## How does it work?

1. The **country is divided into regions** with individual constituencies within each region.
2. Each **voter has two votes**: one for their constituency MP and one for a party in the region.
3. Within constituencies, **voters elect individual representatives using FPTP**.
4. Within regions, **voters elect additional representatives (known as a "top up") according to a vote using LPR**.

*This system is also known as Additional Member System (AMS).*

## Are votes fair and equal?

- The aim is to achieve the same proportionality overall as from LPR. However, it is quite possible for a party to win more constituency seats than strict proportionality would give it; this is called an "overhang".
- The extent to which there is likely to be an "overhang" depends on the proportion of seats that are determined by the regional LPR or "top up" vote, and on the number of parties with significant support.
- There is little point in voting for a party on the regional list if it is likely to gain an "overhang"

and so this promotes tactical voting.

- A candidate rejected in a constituency can be elected from a list.

## Does it offer voter choice?

- MMP uses a mix of FPTP and LPR and is therefore subject to the same limitations. Notably, "safe seats" are reinforced rather than minimised.
- Voters can choose to vote for different parties in their constituency and on the list. However, this is open to the use of parallel parties, e.g alliances where one party only stands candidates on the list.

- There can be both safe constituency seats and safe positions at the top of lists.

## Does it offer a local constituency link?

- Single member constituencies are retained, although there will be fewer of them.
- To accommodate the list component, every existing constituency boundary will have to be redrawn and enlarged (reducing the current 650 constituencies to approx 368), to allow for 282 top-up seats - a complex, lengthy and controversial task.
- MMP single constituencies will need the same kind of frequent revision as under the current system, and will also often have to cut across natural boundaries.
- The regions can follow natural boundaries and will only rarely need changing.

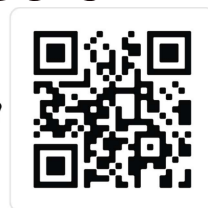
## How easy is it to implement?

- Switching to MMP requires finding space for the additional "top-up" regional MPs:
  - In Scotland this was not a problem as a new Parliament was being created.
  - For Westminster, this could be achieved by adding to the total number of MPs, or by reducing (redrawing) individual constituencies (from 650 to approx. 368).
  - An quick alternative is to "twin" existing seats (325 FPTP and 325 regional list seats), avoiding the complex and time-consuming process of redrawing constituency boundaries.

## Further reading

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