

## DEMOCRATIC FINDINGS 2

**Making Votes Count** sets out the results of a unique test of voting systems for general elections in Britain. A research team, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, “re-played” the 1997 election under the main alternative voting systems which may be chosen for the referendum on electoral reform. The referendum, to be held by 2002, will give voters a choice between the existing first-past-the-post system and a proportional system.

In 1997, Labour won many more seats in Parliament than its share of the national vote warranted. The *Making Votes Count* report shows that Labour would have had an even larger majority under two systems – the alternative vote and supplementary vote – which were previously believed to be more moderate than first-past-the-post. Under the Liberal Democrats’ favourite system, STV, Labour would still have been over-represented, but not so badly. The Conservatives would have suffered more severe losses under all three systems, losing up to a third of their 165 seats. The Liberal Democrats would have two or three times more seats than they have now.

Only one system – the German additional member system – would have produced a proportional result, matching the parties’ share of seats in Parliament to their share of the votes. Labour would still be the largest party, though Tony Blair would probably have lost his overall majority and may have had to try and run a minority government or form a coalition with the Liberal Democrats.

- Full details of the results for 1997 and 1992 are set out in the rest of this leaflet.

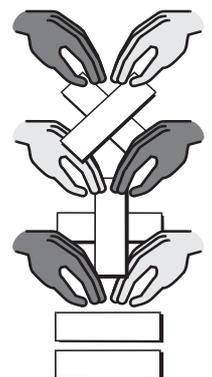
*‘Our tests show surprisingly that only one voting system – the additional member system (AMS) used in Germany – is consistently proportional in its results. Thus it alone meets the criteria set for the “reform” option to stand against the existing system in the referendum on voting systems. The AMS system combines voting for MPs in local constituencies with “top-up” MPs elected regionally. In a mock referendum between the two systems, AMS was the narrow winner.’*

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The academic team which produced  
the *Making Votes Count* study



# MAKING VOTES COUNT

**DEMOCRATIC FINDINGS NO. 2**  
DEMOCRATIC AUDIT  
OF THE UNITED  
KINGDOM  
*in association with*  
BIRKBECK COLLEGE,  
LONDON,  
*and the*  
LONDON SCHOOL OF  
ECONOMICS



# ALTERNATIVE VOTING SYSTEMS *in action*

For the mock elections in 1992 and 1997, ICM Research interviewed 9,614 adult people in 11 regions in April 1992 and 8,447 people in 18 regions in May 1997. The 1997 sample was split into two independent surveys - one large enough to provide robust data for analysis by region, the other to include questions on people's attitudes to electoral reform and other matters.

The 1997 opinion polling and computer analysis were funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC Award Number N000222253. Award Title: *Modelling Alternative Electoral Systems in British Conditions in the 1990s*) and by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust. The 1992 research and a pilot study in 1991 were funded by the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust.

The government is committed to holding a referendum by 2002, giving the British public a choice between the existing first-past-the-post electoral system for elections to the House of Commons and a single "proportional" electoral system. The choice of the rival system to be put to the referendum vote lies with the Electoral Commission established in autumn 1997.

The public are being offered this choice because of mounting criticism of the existing electoral system which is not proportional – that is, it does not allocate seats in the House of Commons in proportion to the votes that the parties receive. Instead, it tends to over-represent the leading party, and to protect the two main parties – the Conservatives and Labour – against the challenge of third parties. Since the 1970s, first-past-the-post elections have produced more disproportionate and unpredictable results as other parties – the Liberal Democrats nationally, and the Scottish and Welsh Nationalists – have become more popular with voters. The Liberal Democrats – and before them the Liberals and SDP – have consistently received far fewer seats than their votes deserve.

The case for first-past-the-post is that, generally, it provides a workable majority for a single-party government, thus avoiding the uncertainties of coalition government and clearing the way for "strong" government.

## The alternative voting systems

There are three main contenders for the rival place in the referendum:

- the *additional member system* (AMS), under which people vote for half the MPs in local constituencies and the other half of "top-up" MPs" regionally. This 50:50 split produces a Parliament in which the parties' share of seats closely matches their share of the vote. The classic AMS system is used in Germany and modified versions will be used for elections to the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly.
- the *single transferable vote* (STV), under which people vote in large multi-member constituencies – say, for five MPs in constituencies five times

larger than current constituencies. Voters are able to express as many preferences as there are candidates. STV is the traditional first choice of the Liberal Democrats and is disliked by Labour. The system is used in the Republic of Ireland.

- the *alternative vote* (AV), a modified version of first-past-the-post voting. People would vote, as now, for MPs in local constituencies, but would be able to indicate second and other preferences which would come into the reckoning in constituencies where no candidate won more than half the votes.

There are two other possible alternatives:

- the *supplementary vote* (SV), a newly-created system popular in some Labour party circles. It is a close cousin of the alternative vote.
- *List PR systems*, as used largely in most of Europe's liberal democracies. People cast a single vote for a party in very large constituencies, sometimes consisting of the whole country. As they do not vote for individual candidates, the parties in effect determine who their MPs will be. List PR has been chosen as the system to be used in Britain's Euro-elections from 1999 onwards, but has never been a serious contender for parliamentary elections.

## The alternative systems in action

For the tests, mock elections were carried out by ICM Research in Great Britain (excluding Northern Ireland) immediately after the 1997 and 1992 general elections. Respondents in large-scale opinion surveys were asked to "vote" again on the kind of ballot papers used for the main alternative electoral systems described above: the *additional member system*; the *alternative vote*; the *single transferable vote*; and the *supplementary vote*. The results of *List PR elections*, using three different counting rules, were calculated from the actual election results. These results are simulations and could not take account of the political dynamics which would come into play with a new voting system.

The table below shows how many seats the parties would have won in the House of Commons under the various systems in 1997:

Voting system	Con	Labour	Lib Dem	SNP/PC	Other
First-past-the-post	165	419	46	10	1
Supplementary vote	110	436	84	10	1
Alternative vote	110	436	84	10	1
Single transferable vote	144	342	131	24	0
Additional member system	203	303	115	20	0
Pure proportionality	202	285	110	16	28

In 1997, as stated (page 1), Labour would have won a majority in elections under the alternative vote (AV), the single transferable vote (STV) and the supplementary vote (SV) systems. Both AV and SV gave Labour an even greater majority than under the existing first-past-the-post system. STV would have given Labour a smaller overall majority of 44 seats in Great Britain. Labour would have remained the largest party in the Commons under the additional member system (AMS), but Tony Blair would probably have lost his overall majority.

The Conservatives got fewer Commons seats in the actual 1997 election than their share of the votes warranted. They would have been much more severely under-represented under AV or SV, falling to just 110 seats. Under STV, they would have gained only 144 seats as against the 165 they actually took in 1997. The Liberal Democrats would take 84 seats under AV or SV – nearly twice as many as they now hold (46) – and 130 seats under STV – nearly three times as now, and somewhat more than their share of the vote warranted.

## Why these startling results?

These startling results upset most assumptions about the effects of the systems involved. The alternative and supplementary vote have both been seen as more moderate versions of first-past-the-post, producing less disproportional results. In 1992, both would have produced marginally more proportional results; in 1997, they would have given even *less* proportional results than first-past-the-post.

STV is generally regarded as a proportional system. These studies tested an STV system of 134 mostly five-member constituencies twice – in 1992 and 1997. The results of the 1992 STV ballot were mildly disproportional. The 1997 results are strongly disproportional – producing a high deviation from proportionality score of 13 per cent (see page 4 over).

The explanation for the 1997 results is clear. AV, SV and STV are all “preferential” systems – that is, they allow voters to express more than one preference when they vote. In 1997, people were disillusioned with the Conservatives and reassured by New Labour’s moderate image. Voters’ second and later preferences reflected the disillusion with the Tories and magnified its electoral effects. In 1997, Labour would have benefited under any of the three systems had they been in operation. Any future government, however, could plumb the depths of political unpopularity (as Labour did in the late 1970s) and suffer equally punishing results.

The idea that the alternative vote and supplementary vote systems are moderate versions of first-past-the-post is now in serious doubt. The single transferable vote is evidently more proportional than first-past-the-post, but the system ought now to be regarded as *contingently* proportional – that is, as a system which will usually produce fairly proportional results on people’s first preferences, but not invariably. None of these systems incorporates a mechanism to ensure that they produce a proportional outcome.

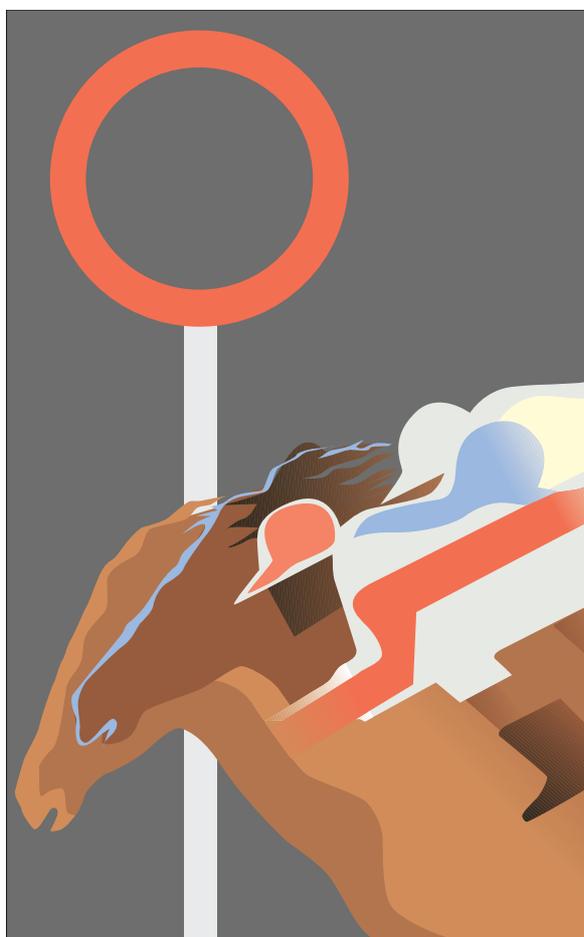
## The additional member system

Both in 1992 and 1997, the additional member system was consistently proportional. The AMS system tested is the classic version, in which half the MPs are elected locally and half are regional ‘top-up’ members. This is the AMS system which is in use in Germany and New Zealand. It produces, as we have shown, nearly pure proportional results.

Other versions of AMS use different mixes of locally-elected and “top-up” MPs. In the version approved by the government for use in Scotland, local MPs will take 57 per cent of the seats in the Scottish Parliament and “top-up” MPs 43 per cent. This variant produces a less exact, but broadly proportional result. Had it been used nationwide in 1997 for elections to Westminster, it would have produced a deviation score of 6 per cent. For the Welsh Assembly, the ratio is 66:33 per cent, which would have produced a quite high deviation score of 9 per cent throughout Britain in 1997.

## The results of the continental List system

The analysis shows that List PR elections are not necessarily proportional under British conditions. Their results are heavily influenced by the counting formulas used in allocating seats. In 1997, for example, Labour’s lead over the Conservatives would have varied between 90 seats (under one formula) to 140 (under another).



## DEVIATION *from* PROPORTIONALITY

It is possible to calculate how disproportional voting systems are by a measure developed by political scientists, known as “deviation from proportionality”. Such “deviation scores” are quoted overleaf. The lower the figure, the more proportional a system is.

The British DV score has been among the largest recorded among all liberal democracies for the last 25 years. Western European democracies using PR systems commonly achieve DV scores of 4-8 per cent – a level only briefly recorded in Britain during the two-party era of the 1950s. In the USA, the solid two-party system in Congressional elections produces stable DV scores of about 7 per cent. So the British system is broadly three times worse at translating seats into votes accurately than the main countries with whom we usually compare ourselves.

The table below gives the deviation (DV) scores for the systems under study in 1997 in order of their disproportionality:

The DV score for the existing electoral system in 1997 was thus 21 per cent (see table). This figure can be simply understood as the proportion of MPs who are not entitled to their seats in the legislature in terms of their party’s national share of the vote – after 1997, 21 per cent, or one in five, of all MPs. Under the classic 50:50 AMS system, only 2 per cent of MPs would have been similarly placed.

The DV score for the 1997 Labour landslide is

slightly below the 23 per cent score notched up by Margaret Thatcher’s 1983 triumph over Michael Foot’s divided Labour party – when the Liberal-SDP Alliance was grossly under-represented with only 3 per cent of the seats in the Commons in return for 26 per cent of the popular vote.

These national DV scores for the UK, however, only tell half the story. Higher deviation scores in the regions are hidden from sight by the national DV figure because areas of pro-Conservative and pro-Labour deviation offset each other. In 1997, for example, the national DV score was 21 per cent – which means that the votes of nearly one in four electors in the Britain were ignored by the existing voting system. But in 11 out of the 18 regions, DV scores varied from 26 to 42 per cent.

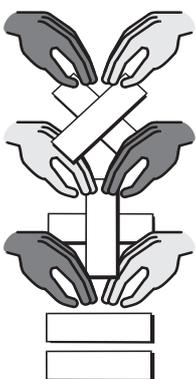
Electoral system	Deviation from proportionality in 1997 (%)
Alternative vote	23.5
Supplementary vote	23.5
First-past-the-post (actual)	21
Single transferable vote	13.5
List PR formula 3	10
Additional member system (66:33) (for Welsh Assembly)	9
List PR formula 1	7.5
Additional member system (57:43) (for Scottish Parliament)	6
List PR: formula 2	4
Additional member system (50:50) (as used in Germany)	2

### Public attitudes towards the alternative systems

The study’s “voters” were asked whether they liked or disliked the systems under which they “voted”. There were two-to-one majorities in favour both of the additional member system and the supplementary vote, both of which retain voting with an X. But people were almost evenly divided for and against the alternative vote, and strongly disliked the more complex STV ballot paper. Interviewers also asked people whether they would prefer one MP to represent the area they lived in or several MPs, possibly from different parties, to represent a larger area. Those who chose the single-constituency MP outnumbered those who wanted several MPs by more than two to one.

### The mock referendum on electoral system

The pre-election agreement between Labour and the Liberal Democrats on constitutional reform indicated that the public would be given a choice between first-past-the-post and a single proportional representation system in the referendum on electoral reform. A question was developed to serve as a “mock referendum”, explaining the advantages and disadvantages of first-past-the-post and its most likely rival – the additional member system – to respondents in neutral terms on a show card. They were then asked to choose between them. The outcome of the mock referendum was evenly balanced: 41 per cent chose first-past-the-post and 44 per cent AMS, with 14 per cent don’t know.



### About the Making Votes Count study

This leaflet summarises *Making Votes Count: How Britain would have voted under alternative electoral systems in the 1990s* (Democratic Audit Paper No. 11). Copies are available for £12.50, inc p&p, from the Scarman Trust, 3-11 Pine Street, London EC1R 0JH. Copies of a brief report, *Devolution Votes: modelling the elections to the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly*, are available from the same address for £2.75.

*Making Votes Count* is a joint exercise of the Democratic Audit, Birkbeck College, London, and the London School of Economics. The four authors are Patrick Dunleavy, Professor of Government at the LSE; Helen Margetts, Lecturer in Politics at Birkbeck College, London; Brendan O’Duffy, Lecturer in Politics, Queen Mary and Westfield College, London; and Stuart Weir, Human Rights Centre, University of Essex.

A full report on the 1992 study, *Replaying the 1992 General Election: how Britain would have voted under alternative electoral systems* (by Patrick Dunleavy, Helen Margetts and Stuart Weir) is still available at £5 from Mrs Sharon Thompson, Public Policy Group, Department of Government, LSE, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE.

The Democratic Audit of the United Kingdom is based at the Human Rights Centre, University of Essex, and undertakes research into the quality of democracy and human rights in this country. The Audit has published a major volume, *The Three Pillars of Liberty* (Routledge 1995), on the protection of political and civil rights in the UK and 11 other reports, including seminal studies of quangos in Britain.