

# Reclaiming the Body Politic: Untangling Electoral Reform

Electoral reform has long been a focus for campaigners, who occasionally manage to get a parliamentary debate on it. Parliament debated the question shortly after the 2016 EU referendum, when Caroline Lucas tabled a private member's bill proposing the adoption of Proportional Representation (PR), but that bill was swiftly rejected. After the debacle of last year's general election, there were hopes that the idea would now attract more support and a petition initiated by Make Votes Matter led to a parliamentary debate in October 2017. However, most MPs in the two main parties still oppose it so, as things stand, it seems unlikely that the battle for electoral reform will be won soon. Perhaps another approach is called for.

When our system of government is so obviously flawed, in many different ways, is pursuing proportional representation really our best option for improving the political landscape? It would certainly be easy to integrate PR into our current system but would it in fact have a place in a coherent constitution? Are political parties so intrinsically necessary to effective democracy that their role should be entrenched? And, if efforts to introduce PR do succeed, will they take us closer to a genuinely healthy system – or could they be at best a distraction and at worst a hindrance?

For those of us seeking a system of government fit for a mature society, a major stumbling-block is the fact that, although no single reform is likely to be truly transformative on its own, most people assume that reform can only happen one step at a time. As a result, much of the thinking about reform looks at each problem in isolation and the solutions people come up with tend to be fairly arbitrary.

Proportional representation is a good example of this. The need for electoral reform of some kind is clear to any impartial observer, but advocates of PR generally take it for granted that political parties are essential and therefore fail to recognise that the dominant role parties play in our current system could be the result of deeper constitutional flaws.

Before we can properly understand how other aspects of the constitution might affect the outcome of elections, however, we need to be clear about what dilemmas the electoral framework itself confronts us with. For this, we need to distinguish between electoral systems and the individual elements that constitute them: specifically the voting process (which is the main focus of this article) and the framework of representation (which is the focus of a further article).

## Electoral systems unpicked

The marks voters may put on ballot papers, and the rules governing how votes should be counted (the voting process) are distinct from questions such as how many representatives a constituency elects, what their role is, and who is eligible to be elected (the framework of representation). Specific combinations of voting process and framework of representation (constituting 'electoral systems') are often compared to each other in terms of the outcomes they

produce. But simple comparisons of electoral systems make it difficult to appreciate the underlying issues .

There are two distinct aspects to electoral reform: an essentially technical question of what voting process would best serve the purpose for which elections are held; and a more clearly political question of what framework of representation should be used. These questions are wholly independent of each other – single-option voting (in which voters simply put a cross by a single candidate’s name) or preferential voting (which allows voters to rank candidates) can both be used with either single-member or multi-member constituencies. The merits and flaws of different solutions can only be properly appreciated when the questions are examined separately.

Unfortunately, debate on electoral reform has generally focused on electoral systems, obscuring the fact that these distinct questions really need to be answered in isolation. For example, the debate in the UK is mostly centred on the relative merits of the Alternative Vote *system* (AV) and the Single Transferable Vote *system* (STV) and tends to focus on the outcomes they produce. But this framing of the debate ignores the fact that the only change involved in AV is also present in STV; both depend on a relatively simple reform (replacing single-option voting with preferential voting) but STV involves a couple of additional reforms whose advantages and disadvantages are very much harder to weigh up (switching to multi-member constituencies, and adding a refinement to the vote counting process). From the perspective of what reforms are necessary, therefore, these cannot be regarded as competing options; any decision to adopt STV implies acceptance of the principle underlying AV.

## **Framing the debate**

How we frame the debate has significant ramifications, both in terms of how easily reforms can be understood by the wider public and in terms of what lines of argument might prove most effective.

This was almost certainly a factor in the public’s lack of engagement with the referendum in 2011. That ballot asked the public *‘At present, the UK uses the “first past the post” system to elect MPs to the House of Commons. Should the “alternative vote” system be used instead?’*. Well, in my experience, plenty of people who are deeply engaged with politics don’t really know what the “alternative vote” system entails, so how much meaning would that question have had for people who aren’t politically engaged? Most of the public, as far as I can see, just want the politicians to get on with running the country honestly and fairly – do we really expect them to inform themselves about the intricacies of different voting systems? 58% of the electorate didn’t vote in that referendum – how many of them simply didn’t engage with the issue because they didn’t know what the question meant, and felt it was a technical issue that wasn’t their business?

Suppose the question had been *‘At present, to elect MPs to the House of Commons, UK voters may only mark ballot papers with a single “X” against their preferred candidate. Should they be allowed to use numbers instead to indicate all their preferred candidates in order?’*. With no special knowledge needed, the public would have found it much easier to engage with the issue and some of the spurious objections (like the claim that AV means people who support unpopular candidates get more votes than people who support popular ones) would have been much less likely to take root.

Many people would still have thought that it wasn't their business, though – quite reasonably, to my mind. Why was it that the public were expected to decide on a technical question like that? – because, by framing the debate in terms of competing electoral systems, reformers had made it easy for their opponents to claim it was such a major constitutional change that it must be explicitly sanctioned by the electorate.

If we frame it, instead, as an essentially technical question – what voting process would best serve the purpose for which elections are held? – we can confront opponents with the weakness of their own case. Supporters of single-option voting justify it with the argument that it usually provides strong government, whereas other systems generally lead to coalitions that are weak and indecisive and unable to govern effectively. Reformers, all too often, fall into the trap of disputing that argument on its own terms, pointing to examples where first-past-the-post has led to hung parliaments or preferential voting has produced decisive governments. By doing that, they implicitly accept that providing strong government is a primary purpose of holding an election.

A more productive response would be to challenge opponents to prove their argument's relevance. Imagine putting this question to the public in a referendum: *'Do you believe the essential purpose of holding ballots to elect MPs to the House of Commons is a) to put into power a strong government who will be able to implement bold policies, or b) to allow the electorate to express its will in regard to how the country is run?'* Most people, I suspect, will regard such a question as absurd and take it for granted that the electorate would overwhelmingly choose the second answer.

If we can establish clearly what the essential purpose of elections is, the question of what voting process would best serve that purpose no longer needs to be regarded as political. And that brings us to another question which opens up a new avenue for pursuing reform.

Is it proper for Members of Parliament to decide the details of how they themselves are elected? It is, after all, a well-established principle that people in positions of power should delegate decisions to independent agents when a conflict of interest compromises their own ability to decide impartially. Is there not a clear conflict of interest here between MPs' loyalty to their party and their duty to represent all their constituents?

Electoral reform has to be a high priority for anyone who wants to see a healthy system of government. But the current debate, with its focus on how well parties' vote share is reflected in their share of seats, naturally leads MPs to consider what is in their own party's best interests. Should we not re-frame the debate to make it easier for them to consider what integrity demands? Rather than campaigning for Parliament to endorse some specific electoral system, reformers would do better to urge MPs to step aside from the issue. Let Parliament simply clarify the purpose for which elections are held and instruct some independent body, such as the Electoral Commission, to determine the technical details of how votes should be made and counted.

Once the question of the voting process is dealt with, we might even find it becomes much easier to resolve the thornier problem of ensuring that each party's presence in Parliament truly reflects its support among the public.

What the best form of representation would be, in a well-constituted society, depends on a number of other questions: in particular, how abstentions and protest votes are dealt with; the relationships between different functions and branches of government; and the distribution of

sovereignty. I look at some of those questions in more depth in the next part of this series, and will subsequently explore how we might pursue reform if Members of Parliament wilfully ignore the conflict of interest and insist on their own right to keep a system which is so obviously unsatisfactory.

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[T'Reasonable Man: Reclaiming the Body Politic](#)