

Review of Voting Systems

Initial note

ERS research, 24 January 2008

The review in general

The content of the Ministry of Justice's Review of Electoral Systems is, in the main, a fair and detailed treatment of the issues around electoral systems. It is not flawless, but it is a good civil service piece of work. It did not commission new research and consultation but is a synthesis of existing published evidence and arguments.

The press release issued by the Ministry this morning failed to give an accurate version of what is in the report, and the media coverage that followed it was seriously misleading.

The truth about the review is that it demolishes some of the arguments most cherished by opponents of electoral reform. The conclusion of the study of the UK's recent experience of electoral system (pages 131-133) includes:

- **“We do not find a difference between PR systems and FPTP in terms of delivering stable and effective government** although, with a greater number of parties involved under PR, the political landscape can be more dynamic. In the experience of the UK, coalition governments can be just as stable as single-party governments.” (para 6.168)
- **“One of the main benefits of PR, and in particular STV, is that voters have a greater degree of choice in elections and a greater chance of their vote counting in terms of who gets elected.”** (para 6.169)
- **“We do not find, on balance, any evidence to suggest that voters find one voting system easier or more confusing than another voting system.”** (para 6.170). The report goes on to note that ‘combined election with different voting systems have caused voter confusion and problems of invalid votes, largely due to the design of ballot papers and information provided to voters, with some evidence of a greater impact in socially deprived areas.’ The actual finding on this point utterly contradicts some claims that have been made in the media.

It also provides support, although carefully phrased, for arguments favoured by reformers.

- **“On the criteria of social representation, the newly introduced voting systems have improved the situation of women,** although Labour's positive action policies have also been an important contributory facto.

There has been very little improvement in the representation of BME groups across all voting systems and it is clear that for both ethnic and gender representation, party behaviour in terms of selecting candidates is more critical than the voting system alone.” (para 6.172) The report therefore clearly states that PR has in fact helped, although everyone would concede that it is not the only factor involved. Contrast the text with the spin of the press release: “positive action policies have a greater impact on increasing women's representation than more proportional voting systems.”

(<http://www.justice.gov.uk/news/newsrelease240108a.htm>)

- The report, correctly, is cautious about making claims relating to the effect of electoral systems on **turnout** at the different levels of government in the UK. But because we are dealing with different (sometimes new) institutions and contexts, there are too many different factors to make direct conclusions from the UK evidence. The UK evidence leaves the question open (a ‘no evidence’ finding here does not mean that an effect does not exist once you allow for other variables).
- However, the report does find that using systematic international comparisons PR systems tend to have 5 percentage points or so higher turnout than majoritarian (including FPTP) systems. “Five percent is probably a reasonable average differential worldwide in the 1990s.” (para 7.92, page 164). The press release belittles this by referring to the effect as ‘marginal’, but 5 per cent is actually quite significant – and certainly does better than the gimmicky changes in voting techniques that the government seems to favour.

It should be noted that, although there are occasional references to the Alternative Vote (AV), because it is not used in the UK it was not a core element of the Review. The Review did not go into the pros and cons of that system.

The report is not intended to be the end of the **process** and the comment by Michael Wills, the Minister immediately responsible, that the review will ‘inform that ongoing debate’ is welcome. Nor was the report intended to set out how that debate will continue; that is a matter for the Government at least initially. It is a pity that the Government seems so reluctant to do anything to foster that debate. The ERS favours a process that opens out the process of consultation and decision, and does not think it is satisfactory that the main beneficiaries of the current system are in control of the process.

The review document is therefore a useful contribution, but it does not purport to be the end of the discussion. It does not refute the arguments most generally used by reformers, and it does refute some arguments commonly made by critics of PR.