

Comments on MVM's Good System Proposals

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Context: an opportunity for coordinated electoral reform

MVM's discussion paper on good electoral systems is very welcome. I assume that the main context is reform of the UK Parliament. However, there are also important current reform moves in the devolved nations.

Northern Ireland and Scotland already use STV for council elections. Wales are now considering following suit. Northern Ireland already use STV for their Assembly (and for EU elections); Wales are considering changing from AMS to STV following the recommendation of the recent McAllister Report; Scotland also have a current electoral reform consultation, and the Scottish National, Liberal Democrat and Green parties have all indicated in the past that they would prefer STV to AMS. These initiatives open up a vision in which all three devolved nations share a common approach to 'democratic renewal and putting the voter first', as the Welsh minister Alun Davies put it in introducing their consultation on electoral reform. We could replace the present confusion of three different systems with one fair, voter-centred, system for all elections within the devolved nations. This, perhaps in tandem with getting proportional representation for English council elections, would build up pressure for the most difficult task - reform of the UK Parliament.

Here I will try to explain why basic Principles and Values for a democratic and voter-centred electoral system, as considered by MVM, point to STV as being preferable to Openlists, which in turn is preferable to AMS. I will also mention a few aspects of designing a good electoral system that are not - or not fully - covered by MVM's Proposals paper.

Principles and values

MVM's headings are good, but some of the explanatory sentences miss important points. In particular:

Proportionality is described in terms of parties, and the criterion cited, the Gallagher Index, is only appropriate for comparing systems that deal only in first preferences. The Gallagher Index fails to give any credit to STV for its avoiding wasted votes by taking account of voters' second and later preferences. Voters don't always vote on exact party lines, so it is wrong to suppose that every first preference should be counted as a vote for the whole party of the candidate of the first preference.

Diversity: all three proposed systems would probably increase diversity, but it is a mistake to think that changing the voting system is the only or best way to improve diversity. Other interventions, such as changing working conditions (*e.g.* job sharing, maternity leave, family-friendly working hours) and culture (*e.g.* no tolerance of aggressive or bullying behaviour), are likely to be more effective.

Voting simplicity: it's not so much the ballot paper that needs to be 'easy to understand and use' as the voting system. Ideally, the voter should be able to understand how her or his vote can influence the outcome, express their real preferences without worries about tactical voting, and expect that their vote will be used effectively to advance their preferences.

STV is better than Openlists

For any given size of multi-member constituency (the ‘Good System Proposals’ suggests 5-7), you can take the Openlist system and by a series of steps, each of which is a clear improvement, change it into STV, thus:

1. treat the candidates as individuals

(allowing voters to decide which of a party’s candidates get elected, and voters who don’t only think in party terms to vote for some of a party’s candidates but not others);

2. only elect candidates whose support is definitely enough to warrant it; if you are electing n representatives, they need to have more than a $1/(n + 1)$ share of the votes;
3. if a candidate has more votes than they need, allow the surplus votes to be transferred;
4. when excluding a candidate allow their votes to transfer to a candidate still in the contest.

Note that (3) and (4) avoid wasted votes; this is particularly important for the viability of independent candidates, who have a chance under STV but not under AMS or Openlists. [There have been several independent MSPs in Scotland, but all of these had previously held office as a party representative and thus acquired the public credibility needed by an independent candidate under AMS or Openlists.]

Openlists are better than AMS

AMS is often described as a modification of FPTP. But if the list part of AMS is working as intended, the FPTP part makes no difference to the number of seats each party wins. It therefore offers more insight to think of AMS as a modification of Openlists. In that comparison it is inferior in the following respects:

1. Voter choice and simplicity: Most voters view the constituencies as the important contests, despite the fact that AMS is designed with the intention that the list votes should determine the distribution of seats between parties. Thus normally if a constituency changes hands, with the list votes remaining the same, the result is just that list candidates swap places with constituency candidates - the party totals remain the same, as determined by the list votes. So in voting for a party candidate in a constituency you are not voting to increase that party’s representation, only to substitute one party member for another (and it will usually not be clear which of the party’s list candidates would be the one to lose out, so it is difficult for the voter to make an informed decision).

The only exception to this is when a constituency outcome could result in an ‘overhang’, that is where a party wins more constituencies than its list vote justifies (a violation of proportionality). But even then it is uncertain which party will lose out: it will be the lowest in the list count, which more often than not will be different from the party that loses in the constituency.

List voting with AMS is also less straightforward than with Openlists, as there are additional tactical considerations, for example if you think your first choice party likely to obtain an overhang.

2. Accountability to voters: The constituency element suffers from the safe seat problem inherent in FPTP. In contrast, list MSPs who are highly regarded by their electors can lose their seat simply because their party is successful in the constituencies.

3. Local links: The comparison is more balanced in this respect. The FPTP element of AMS has some claim to being superior, in that it is the most local. Being ‘most local’ by using 1-seat constituencies however comes at a heavy price, including: safe seats, geographical segregation

(e.g. almost all Conservatives in the countryside, Labour in cities); parachuted-in representatives (two-thirds of current Conservative MPs had no connection with their constituency before being selected as candidate for it); half or more of constituents not having a member they feel represents them. Also the regions for AMS will typically be much larger than for Openlists: for example, the Highlands and Islands AMS region in Scotland stretches from the Mull of Kintyre whose nearest rail station is in Northern Ireland to Unst whose nearest rail station is in Norway. One of the advantages of multi-member constituencies that STV and Openlists share is that they can be based on natural communities, unlike FPTP's single-member constituencies that often cut across community boundaries, or the too-large regions of AMS.

Conclusions

The arguments above suggest that the system that comes closest to satisfying the Values and Principles set out by MVM is STV. In this they agree with several recent independent studies, most recently the McAllister Commission in Wales. A particularly thorough and voter-oriented exercise was the Citizens Assembly in British Columbia in 2004, where ordinary voters were given information by experts but allowed time to discuss options at length, and came down decisively in favour of STV. This conclusion is not that surprising when one considers that STV is the only system designed from the voter up, and the only one to appreciate that to avoid wasted votes one needs to admit that voters might not only have first preferences.

STV is probably also the only one of the systems on MVM's list that would be appropriate for council elections. STV could thus be used at all levels, and if wards and constituencies are based on natural communities could offer a simple nested structure, in which council areas form the basis of the constituencies of devolved parliaments/assemblies, which in turn are grouped to provide UK parliamentary constituencies.

There is an argument to be had as to whether 5-7 seat constituencies are slightly on the large and inflexible side. Ireland has used the range 3-5 since 1947, having previously used larger constituencies; and the range of 3-4 for Scottish Council elections has provided good proportionality. There is a balance to be struck: larger seat numbers do offer slightly better proportionality, but smaller ones are better for local accountability. For the UK Parliament, a good compromise might be to aim generally for 4-5, but allow up to 7 in cities, and down to 3, or in exceptional geographical circumstances fewer, in rural areas.

For councils, where numbers are smaller and close proportionality less crucial, the ranges currently being considered in Scotland's electoral review – namely 3-5, with in exceptional geographical circumstances fewer – seem about right. The attached paper, 'Community-centred democracy', discusses 'fine-tuning' Scotland's council election system, including some general points on ballot paper design and the finer details of STV that would also be relevant to parliamentary elections.