

# Proportional Representation (PR)

Mick Hills Feb 2024

Proportional representation is an electoral system in which parties gain seats in proportion to the number of votes cast for them.

For instance, if a party receives 40% of the votes in an election, a perfectly proportional system would allow them to gain 40% of the seats.

There are different systems in which Proportional Representation can be achieved. For example-

**Alternative Vote (AV)**

**Supplementary Vote (SV)**

**Single Transferable Vote (STV)**

**Additional Member System (AMS)**

**Closed Party List**

## Where the differing systems are used.

The **AV** system is used in Parliament to elect:

- Chairs of most committees in the House of Commons
- House of Commons Lord Speaker and by-elections for hereditary peers.

**SV** system

- Until 2023, elections of Mayors in England and for Police and Crime commissioners in England and Wales.

**STV** system

- Elections of Deputy Speaker in the HOC.
- Northern Ireland Assembly elections.
- Local elections in Scotland and Northern Ireland.
- STV was also used in Northern Ireland to elect members of the European Parliament from 1979 to 2019.

**AMS**

- The Scottish Parliament.
- The Welsh Parliament.
- The London Assembly.

## **Closed Party List system**

- Was used in England, Scotland and Wales to elect members of the European Parliament between 199 and 2019.

The above list is not exhaustive as various forms of PR are used in over 100 countries outside of Great Britain.

## EXAMPLES

- **The Party List** form of PR is used in 74 countries.
- **Mixed member** vote is used in 7.
- **Parallel voting** in 19.

The preferred system advocated by **The Electoral Reform Society** in Britain, is the Single Transferable Vote (**STV**) system.

The most popular form of PR across the world is the **Party List system**

Some examples of how the differing systems work.

## Alternative Vote (AV)

Alternative Vote is used to elect:

- chairs of most committees in the House of Commons
- the Lord Speaker and by-elections for hereditary peers.

Voters rank candidates in order of preference by marking 1, 2, 3 and so on. A voter can rank as many or as few candidates as they like or vote for one candidate.

First preference votes are counted first. If a candidate receives more than 50 per cent of the first preference votes then they are elected.

If no candidate reaches 50 per cent, the candidate with the fewest first preference votes is eliminated. Their second preference votes are reallocated to the remaining candidates. If one candidate has more votes than the other remaining candidates put together, that candidate is elected.

If not, the process is repeated until one candidate has more votes than the other remaining candidates put together. This candidate wins the election.

## Supplementary Vote (SV)

The SV system is like the AV system. Voters are limited to a first and second preference choice. A voter marks a cross in one column for their first preference candidate. They mark another cross in a second column for their second preference if they wish to do so.

If a candidate receives more than 50 per cent of the first preference votes then they are elected.

If no candidate reaches the 50 per cent threshold, the two candidates with the highest number of votes remain. This eliminates the other candidates. The second preferences of voters who voted

for eliminated candidates are then counted. Any made for the two remaining candidates are transferred. The candidate with the most votes at the end of this process is elected.

Up until May 2023, elections for mayors in England and for Police and Crime Commissioners in England and Wales, used SV.

## Single Transferable Vote (STV)

Single Transferable Vote is used for:

- Elections for Deputy Speakers in the House of Commons
- Northern Ireland Assembly elections
- Local elections in Scotland and Northern Ireland

STV was also used in Northern Ireland to elect Members of the European Parliament from 1979 to 2019.

Constituencies which elect more than one representative use STV.

Voters rank candidates in order of preference by marking 1, 2, 3 and so on. A voter can rank as many or as few candidates as they like or vote for only one candidate.

Each candidate needs to reach a quota. This is the minimum number of votes calculated according to the number of seats and votes cast.

The first preference votes for each candidate are added up. Candidates who achieve this quota are elected.

Surplus votes from candidates who hit the quota go to second preference candidates.

The candidate with the fewest first preference votes who do not achieve the quota are eliminated. Voters who voted for an eliminated candidate then have their votes transferred to their second preference. The process of transferring surpluses and second (or third, fourth, and so on) preferences continues until all vacant seats have been filled.

## **Additional Member System (AMS)**

The Additional Member System is used by:

- the Scottish Parliament
- the Welsh Parliament
- the London Assembly

Voters are given two votes on separate ballot papers. One vote is for a constituency member and one vote is for a party list. In Scotland and Wales list members are elected by region. In London there is a single London-wide list.

Constituency votes are counted first and the members for each constituency are elected using first-past-the-post.

Additional members are then elected by counting the party list votes in each region. The number of members elected from the list is based on the percentage of the votes cast but also takes into account the number of constituency members already elected in the region. This is designed to make the result more proportional to the number of votes cast.

**Party Lists** are the most popular way to elect representatives in the world, with more than 80 countries using a variation of this system to elect their parliament.

### **How to vote**

Rather than electing one person per area, in Party List systems each area is bigger and elects a group of MPs that closely reflect the way the area voted. At the moment we have 650 constituencies, each electing 1 Member of Parliament (MP); under a Party List system we might have 65 constituencies each electing 10 MPs.

**There are three main ways to vote in Party List elections in use around the world.**

**Closed List:** Each party publishes a list of candidates for each area. On polling day the ballot paper just has a list of parties. Voters mark the party they support.

In this system, a party gets seats roughly in proportion to its vote, and seats are filled depending on the order of the list the party choose in advance.

**Open List:** On the ballot paper, each party has a list of candidates.

The more votes a candidate gets, the more likely to be in the party's group of MPs that get elected. A vote for a candidate is counted as a vote for their party when it is decided how many seats each party should receive. This means it is possible for a vote for a candidate to help a candidate a voter dislikes, if that candidate is popular with the supporters of the rest of their party.

In some countries, you can just vote for a party and leave the ordering of the candidates up to the other voters.

**Semi-Open List:** In a semi-open list voters are presented with a ballot with the option to vote for a candidate or a party.

Unlike in an open list, voting for a party is taken as an endorsement of the order of candidates chosen by the party. With enough individual votes, candidates can still move up the ordering though.

## Counting the votes

There are two main methods of allocating seats in party-list elections. [The D'Hondt method, which slightly favours larger parties and the Sainte-League method which doesn't.](#)

## Features and Effects

Countries with party-list PR tend to have lots of parties as list systems are highly proportionate. This means that coalition is often the norm. With a lower barrier to entry, new parties can start and be successful if the larger parties do not understand new social issues. Many countries use legal thresholds, generally 4 or 5% to stop parties with very low support winning seats.

It is possible to have party-lists with either very large or smaller constituencies. For instance, in the Netherlands and Israel the entire country is one big constituency. In other countries smaller constituencies are used. For instance, in Finland and Spain provinces are used.

The advantage of smaller constituencies is that MPs are closer to local issues, as different areas will have different problems. But constituencies with fewer MPs are also less proportionate as you need more votes to win an MP.

Party lists, as the name suggests, are based on the idea of political parties, so independent candidates have to create a 'party list' of one. If they win more votes than they need to get elected these votes are wasted.