

PR Systems for the UK

Summary: Describes the three UK familiar proportional voting systems, each with an illustrative constituency map. It also has instructions on how to move to legislation for whichever system is chosen for UK General Elections

This paper is written by Professor Denis Mollison, executive member and former Chair of Liberal Democrats for Electoral Reform. The sections on Criteria and The Three Systems draw on several sources including cross-party collaboration.

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(* see separate paper, <i>'Electoral Representation Bill'</i>)	

INTRODUCTION

Any reform of the UK electoral system to fair, equal votes will ultimately require an Act of Parliament to bring it into being. This paper paves the way for that legislation, setting out instructions for three alternative systems, so that parliamentary drafters can quickly and efficiently present a bill to Parliament when that time comes. The appended paper, 'Electoral Representation Bill' offers a more detailed prototype for such a Bill.

While these papers neither formally recommend a replacement electoral system, nor the process by which a new system should be selected, they do narrow the choice to one of three UK familiar proportional systems.

Millions of voters in the UK have extensive practical experience of and familiarity with proportional voting systems. Accusations that proportional representation is 'alien' to the UK and that the perceived negative experiences of Italy and Israel are relevant to us, are untrue.

The options under consideration here therefore are:

Single Transferable Vote (STV)

Used for nearly all Northern Ireland elections (except UK parliamentary) since 1973; for Scottish local elections since 2007; optional for Wales local elections from 2027. Also used for all Republic of Ireland elections since 1921; commonly used in 'civic society' elections, such as the Church of England Synod. STV was also used for some parliamentary seats (the university seats) from 1918-1950.

List Proportional Representation (List-PR)

Used for European Parliamentary elections (except in Northern Ireland) from 1999-2019; currently in the process of being adopted for the Welsh Senedd (replacing MMP) from 2026. List-PR is used in many countries, notably Scandinavia and Finland.

Mixed Member Proportional (MMP)

(also known as the Additional Member System (AMS))

Used for Scottish Parliamentary elections since 1999, for the Welsh Senedd 1999-2021, and for the Greater London Assembly since 2000. MMP, in various forms, is used in Germany and New Zealand.

CRITERIA

The advantages and disadvantages of each system are assessed against four key criteria:

fairness (all votes have equal influence; in particular a party's % of seats is close to its % of votes)

accountability (voters determine which individuals are elected or rejected)

local identifiability (constituencies should not be too large and should as far as possible have meaningful and stable boundaries).

These correspond closely to the criteria used by other studies, for example the Jenkins Commission of 1998 ('broad proportionality, voter choice and constituency links'). They also align closely with other recommended criteria, notably the McAllister report for the Welsh Senedd (2017) and the Make Votes Matter Good Systems Agreement (2019).

We have added one further crucial practical criterion:

implementability – how easily can the new system be transitioned in as a replacement for the current ‘first-past-the-post’ voting system? This key requirement has not previously received sufficient attention.

More analysis can be found at www.lder.org/the-change-we-need

For practicality we here concentrate on versions that could, as far as possible, be implemented easily. In particular, for both List-PR and STV; and also for the ‘top-up’ element of MMP, we propose multi-member constituencies and regions based on existing county and local authority areas. These also score well in terms of local identifiability; and their boundaries can remain unchanged long term, with changes in numbers of voters being accommodated by changing the number of MPs they elect, not their boundaries.

Because having local representation, and a number of MPs to which an individual voter or constituent can relate, are valued parts of accountability, we recommend schemes where that number is as small as possible consistent with a high level of proportionality - at most around ten; and to optimise that trade-off between size of constituency and proportionality we recommend using the modified St-Lague method of allocating seats rather than d’Hondt.¹

Because voter choice of individual candidates is a valued part of our existing system, we recommend that any lists are ‘open’, preferably following the model of Finland where each vote is for a preferred candidate within a party’s list, not simply for a party.

For each option, we add notes on how it might be varied within the umbrella of fitting well to our criteria.

Draft Bill Instructions for each of the three systems are included here as appendices, aiming to help assess the ease or difficulty of implementation. Each of these includes a map, which illustrates the constituencies that might result with each option. [Note that the colours used for these maps have no party political meaning – they are used purely to show the patterns of constituencies clearly.]

Additionally, a draft bill is included (as a separate paper) for one option: STV. A bill for List-PR would be very similar; a bill enacting MMP, however, would differ substantially. It would need to retain something like the current process of a detailed Boundary Review every 8-12 years; and, if it is to be implemented quickly, would need an interim set of regions and constituencies that could be introduced without the need for an initial detailed Boundary Review.

¹ For a comparison of d’Hondt and St-Lague see Curtice *et al* ‘The 2016 Scottish Parliament Election’, Electoral Reform Society report, February 2017.

THE THREE SYSTEMS

STV

We suggest that constituencies should be based on local authority areas (LAs), mostly electing between 3 and 6 MPs. Many of these could consist of just one existing LA, for example, Edinburgh, Bristol, or Cornwall and Scilly. This size also fits well with that of recently created unitary authorities (populations of 300 to 600 thousand).

Match with principles:

Fairness

Good proportionality: preferential voting avoids wasted votes and any incentives to vote tactically, and encourages collaboration between parties with common interests.

Accountability

Maximises voter choice, and hence accountability of individual MPs.

Local identifiability

Constituencies are matched to natural communities at the smallest scale that allows each to represent a cross-section of local political preferences.

Implementability

Because the multi-member constituencies are based on existing local authority boundaries, STV could be quickly introduced (and subsequently maintained)

Notes:

1. An alternative would be to have equal numbers of seats in each constituency, as is done for the Northern Ireland Assembly (was 6, now 5 each); however, varying sizes combines the advantages of fitting natural communities with better overall proportionality: as example, Ireland with its smaller constituencies (3-5), fitted better to communities, delivers better proportionality than the NI Assembly.

List-PR

We again suggest that constituencies should be made up from one or more Local Authority areas, but as these need to be larger than for STV to provide adequate proportionality we suggest that they should mostly each elect 7 to 12 MPs. As mentioned above, we recommend the use of open lists as in Finland but using modified St-Lague for the allocation of seats.

Match with principles:

Fairness: Using St-Lague with constituencies mostly electing 6-12 MPs should ensure good proportionality between major parties, with threshold for representation of at most

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about 5% of the national vote, and considerably lower for parties with local concentrations of support.

All constituencies will be competitive, so that votes matter equally everywhere.

Accountability: Using open lists gives a good measure of accountability, though voters are restricted to expressing support for just one candidate of one party.

Local identifiability: Constituencies based on local authorities give good identifiability. Their greater size than single-member constituencies is balanced by citizens having a representative range of MPs to work for them.

Implementability

Because the multi-member constituencies are based on existing local authority boundaries, List-PR could be quickly introduced (and subsequently maintained).

Notes:

1. Nordic countries other than Finland have similar systems but with extra 'levelling' seats to achieve greater proportionality. They also use formal thresholds to deter minor parties (2-4%).
2. The present statutorily special constituencies, such as the Scottish islands and Isle of Wight, could be allowed as exceptions (as Finland does for Åland which elects just one MP).

MMP

Under MMP the voter is represented by one constituency member and a number of list members, where list members make up half or slightly less of the total of MPs.

For example, for the Scottish parliament, most electoral regions elect 9 constituency and 7 list MPs, so that the individual citizen has 8 representatives.

We suggest electoral regions again made up from traditional counties and local authority areas, mostly electing 15-20 MPs, with numbers of constituency and list MPs equal, or differing by 1 where the total is an odd number; again with list seats allocated using modified St-Lague rather than d'Hondt.

Match with principles:

Fairness

If the system is working as intended – that is, with the party balance determined by the list allocation – the result will be more proportional than List-PR because of its larger districts. But overhangs – where a party wins more constituency seats than its fair share according to the list vote – can lead to significant disproportionality; this may be a small problem in the short term, but the example of Germany, where in each of the last two elections they have had to add over 100 MPs to restore proportionality suggests that this is likely to be a

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long term problem.² MMP is also open to abuse through the use of 'shadow parties': the Alba Party in Scotland tried unsuccessfully to exploit this possibility in 2021, but it has been used to considerable effect in, for example, Italy and Albania, leading to the abandonment of their MMP systems. Also, the presence of tactical voting on the list as well as in constituencies means that votes themselves are not proportional to voters' real preferences.

Accountability:

Constituencies have the well-known problems of tactical voting and safe seats, and concentration of interest and influence in marginal seats, particularly where there is the possibility of an overhang. On the list, there is tactical voting by supporters of minor parties unlikely to win seats, and of major parties likely to win their entitlement in constituencies and thus not need list votes.

There are a number of problems associated with having two kinds of MP, both at election (for example, candidates who perform poorly in constituencies winning list seats, and good candidates on the list losing their seat because colleagues are unexpectedly successful in constituencies) and in the demarcation between their roles once elected.³

Local identifiability:

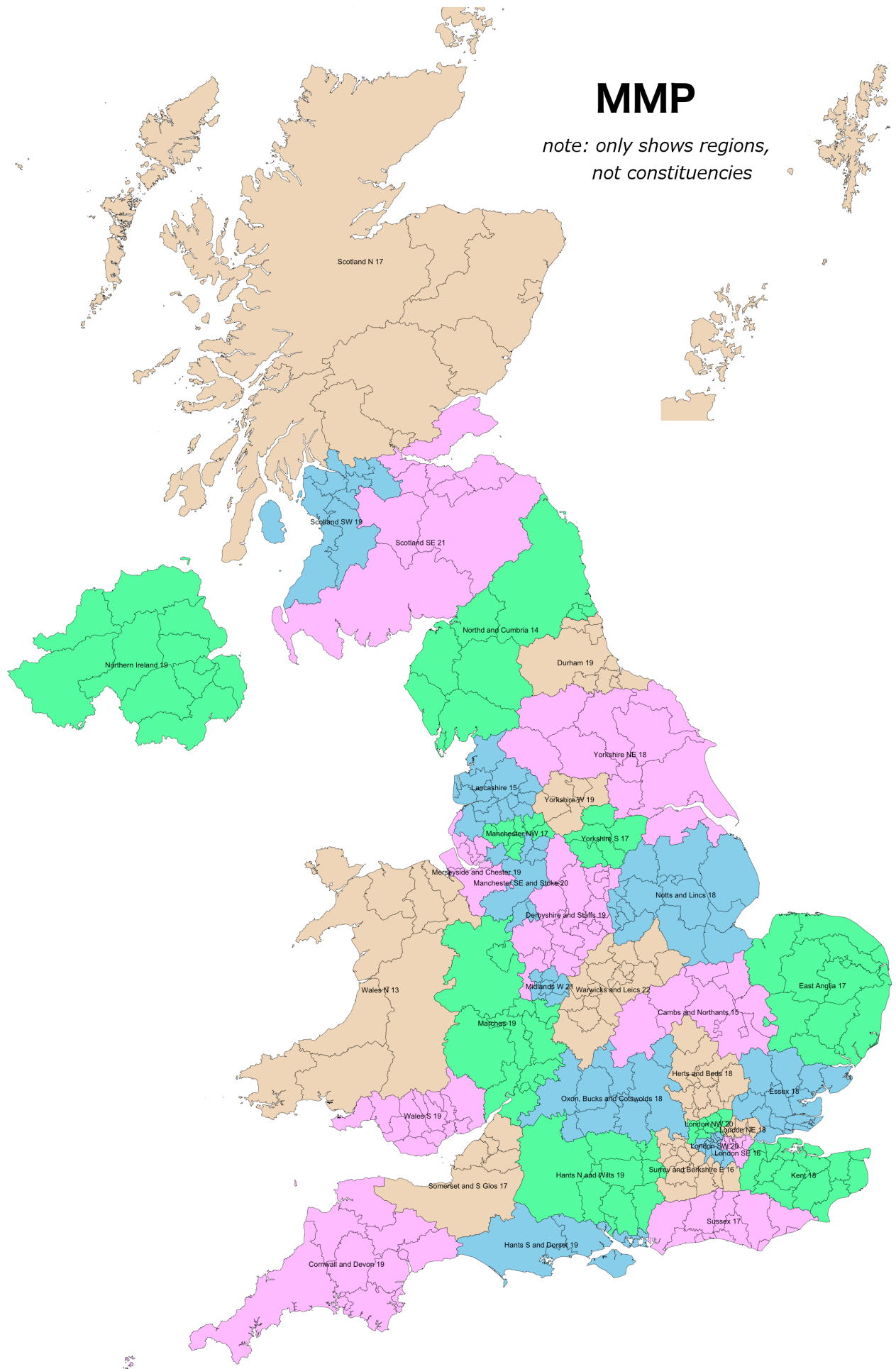
MMP gives the strong local identifiability – particularly for the half who vote for the winner - of the current FPTP system, albeit with constituencies approximately twice the size. Most voters will have at least a list MP of the party they support, but who will be representing a much larger area.

Implementability:

1. Unlike the other two systems, MMP would have an initial and ongoing need for a Boundary Commission to delineate the single-member constituencies.
2. However, for easier implementation, avoiding immediate need for a Boundary Commission review, it would be possible to start with a temporary scheme with districts each made from an even number of existing single-member constituencies, which would be paired to create the MMP constituencies.

² The German parliament is supposed to consist of 299 constituency and 299 list seats; but in 2017 it required an additional 111 list seats to attain overall proportionality, and in 2021 it required 137.

³ See 'Britain's Experience of Electoral Systems', Electoral Reform Society report, April 2007, pp. 62-67.



APPENDIX 1 - BILL INSTRUCTIONS FOR STV

This Bill is intended to implement proportional representation for the UK parliament, using the Single Transferable Vote (STV) in constituencies based on Local Authority areas, each (with a few exceptions) electing 3-6 MPs.

It would replace the current (1986) Parliamentary Constituencies Act.

Overview

1. The proposed scheme would continue to elect a total of 650 MPs.
2. Constituencies would be formed following Local Authority (LA) boundaries, each electing up to a maximum of 7 MPs. Except that if a Local Authority would be entitled to elect more than 7 MPs it may be divided between different constituencies. MPs for each constituency will be elected using the Single Transferable Vote (STV).
3. The number of MPs elected from each constituency (its 'entitlement') would be updated for each election to reflect the most recent electoral data.
4. Boundaries of constituencies would only need changing if their entitlement would otherwise fall outwith prescribed limits, or if Local Authority boundaries are changed so that a constituency's boundaries no longer coincide with Local Authority boundaries. The precise Rules for the distribution of seats will be defined in Schedule 2.
5. Boundaries could also be changed if a strong case is presented that combining existing LAs in a different way would better reflect local ties.
6. While it is important to allow changes for the reasons given in clauses (4) and (5), such changes are expected to be rare, and will only affect a few constituencies at a time. And clause (3) ensures that fair representation for each constituency is kept very much up-to-date.
7. Therefore, while Boundary Commissions will still be needed, large-scale, lengthy (and contentious) Boundary Reviews will no longer be required. However, the formal role of the Boundary Commissions can remain largely unchanged (Schedule 1).
8. Except that it might be appropriate to have an initial overall review of boundaries, to be started after two general elections and a minimum of 5 years have elapsed.
9. The initial constituencies will be prescribed in Schedule 3. [See map on page 5.]
10. The precise voting system and rules for election counts will be prescribed in Schedule 4.

SCHEDULES

Schedule 1 The Boundary Commissions

To replace Schedule 1 of the 1986 Act – little change should be necessary.

Schedule 2. Rules for the distribution of seats

Schedule 3 Initial constituencies and allocation of seats

To specify the initial constituencies, each composed of a list of the LAs comprising it, except for Birmingham, Leeds and North Yorkshire which will need dividing, together with the number of MPs to be elected from each according to the current electoral roll.

Schedule 4 Single Transferable Vote

To set out two counting processes: (a) a process for immediate adoption, suitable for handcounting as in Northern Ireland, (b) a process to allow for electronic counting, for introduction as soon as practicable.

Schedule 5 Consequential amendments

Implications of new Act for other existing Acts.

Schedule 6 Repeals and revocation

To list superseded legislation.

Details

Appendix 4, the separate paper 'Electoral Representation Bill', is a draft indicating how the above points might be made in a detailed bill, including drafts of Schedules 2 and 3.

APPENDIX 2 - BILL INSTRUCTIONS FOR LIST-PR

This Bill is intended to implement proportional representation for the UK parliament, using List Proportional Representation (List-PR) in constituencies based on Local Authority areas, each (with a few exceptions) electing 8-12 MPs.

It would replace the current (1986) Parliamentary Constituencies Act.

Overview

1. The proposed scheme would continue to elect a total of 650 MPs.
2. Constituencies would be formed following Local Authority (LA) boundaries, each electing up to a maximum of 12 MPs. MPs for each constituency will be elected using Open-list List Proportional Representation (List-PR).
3. The number of MPs elected from each constituency (its 'entitlement') would be updated for each election to reflect the most recent electoral data.
4. Boundaries of constituencies would only need changing if their entitlement would otherwise fall outwith prescribed limits, or if Local Authority boundaries are changed so that a constituency's boundaries no longer coincide with Local Authority boundaries. The precise Rules for the distribution of seats will be defined in Schedule 2.
5. Boundaries could also be changed if a strong case is presented that combining existing LAs in a different way would better reflect local ties.
6. While it is important to allow changes for the reasons given in clauses (4) and (5), such changes are expected to be rare, and will only affect a few constituencies at a time. And clause (3) ensures that fair representation for each constituency is kept very much up-to-date.
7. Therefore, while Boundary Commissions will still be needed, large-scale, lengthy (and contentious) Boundary Reviews will no longer be required. However, the formal role of the Boundary Commissions can remain largely unchanged (Schedule 1).
8. Except that it might be appropriate to have an initial overall review of boundaries, to be started after two general elections and a minimum of 5 years have elapsed.
9. The initial constituencies will be prescribed in Schedule 3. [See map on page 7.]
10. The precise voting system and rules for election counts will be prescribed in Schedule 4.

SCHEDULES

Schedule 1 The Boundary Commissions

To replace Schedule 1 of the 1986 Act – little change should be necessary.

Schedule 2. Rules for the distribution of seats

Schedule 3 Initial constituencies and allocation of seats

To specify the initial constituencies, each composed of a list of the LAs comprising it, together with the number of MPs to be elected from each according to the current electoral roll.

Schedule 4 Open-list Proportional Representation

To set out details of the voting system, in which each voter chooses an individual candidate within the party of their choice.

Schedule 5 Consequential amendments

Implications of new Act for other existing Acts.

Schedule 6 Repeals and revocation

To list superseded legislation.

Details

The details required will be similar to those for the STV option, as indicated in the separate paper (Appendix 4) entitled 'Electoral Representation Bill'.

APPENDIX 3 - BILL INSTRUCTIONS FOR MMP

This Bill is intended to implement proportional representation for the UK parliament, using Mixed Member Proportional Representation (MMP, also known as the Additional Member System) with regions based on Local Authority areas, each (with a few exceptions) electing 15-20 MPs.

It would replace the current (1986) Parliamentary Constituencies Act.

Overview

1. The proposed scheme will continue to elect a total of 650 MPs.
2. Slightly more than half of MPs will be elected from single-member constituencies, with the remainder elected from regions made up by combining Local Authority areas, using a form of List proportional representation so as to achieve a good degree of overall proportionality. Each region will elect around 15-20 MPs in all.
3. An initial Boundary Review will define the regional boundaries; an indicative map (page 9) shows how Local Authority areas might be combined into regions in a way that respects national, regional and county boundaries.
4. The single-member constituencies within each region will be drawn up following current review rules, except that their electorates may vary by up to about +/- 10% . [Note: this greater flexibility can be allowed because it is the list element that ensures overall proportionality between parties.]
5. The formal role of the Boundary Commissions can remain largely unchanged (Schedule 1).
6. Boundary Reviews will continue to be held at intervals of 8-12 years. At each such review, first the number of MPs to be elected from each region (its 'entitlement') will be calculated using the current electoral roll, and using the St-Lague formula which is already used for allocating MPs between the countries and regions of the UK. If this number is even exactly half will be elected from single-member constituencies; if it is odd, the number elected from its constituencies will be one more than its number of list MPs. *[But see the Note following clause 9 below.]*
7. Boundaries of regions will normally only need to be changed in subsequent Reviews if Local Authority boundaries are changed such that one or more Local Authorities are no longer entirely in one region. They could also be changed if a strong case is presented that combining existing LAs in a different way would fit the overall criteria for regional boundaries, as specified in Schedule 2.
8. The details of the List election system will be as specified in Schedule 4.

Interim arrangements

9. Because the initial Boundary Review, respecting the Rules of Schedule 2, is expected to need 2 or more years to complete, an initial allocation of regions and constituencies is prescribed in Schedule 3, to be used in case there is a General Election before the initial Boundary Review is completed.

Note

The total number of MPs elected from each region (its 'entitlement') could be updated for each election so as to reflect the most recent electoral data.

Because the constituencies could not easily be changed, they would remain fixed until the next Boundary Review, while the number of list seats would be varied as necessary. This has the advantage of keeping proportionality between regions up to date, but the disadvantage of variance from the target ratio between constituency and list seat numbers.

SCHEDULES

Schedule 1 The Boundary Commissions

To replace Schedule 1 of the 1986 Act – little change should be necessary.

Schedule 2. Rules for the distribution of seats

Schedule 3 Initial constituencies and allocation of seats

The only practicable way to introduce MMP swiftly is to use regions made up of pairs of existing single-member constituencies, with each pair now electing one constituency MP, while an equal number of list MPs are elected for the region. The regions could be chosen to approximately follow the requirements of clause (3), but not exactly.

Schedule 4 Mixed Member Proportional Representation

To set out details of the voting system, broadly following the rules of the Scottish and Welsh Parliaments, but using open lists, meaning that for the list element each voter chooses an individual candidate within the party of their choice.

Schedule 5 Consequential amendments

Implications of new Act for other existing Acts.

Schedule 6 Repeals and revocation

To list superseded legislation.

Liberal Democrats for Electoral Reform (LDER) is an affiliated organisation' of the Liberal Democrats.

We work within and outwith the party to build the campaign necessary to achieve reform. We support other political and constitutional reforms needed for the UK to have a democracy fit for the 21st century.

We favour an electoral system that reflects the fundamental Liberal Democrat values of liberty, equality and community and helps to deliver a just and representative system of government.

We believe that to meet these values, an electoral system should deliver maximum power to the voter, enabling all voters to support representatives of their choice without fear of wasting their vote, and should result in elected members that are genuinely accountable to their electors and a representative body that proportionately reflects the opinions of the electorate.



Further reading ...

Electoral Representation Bill (Appendix 4 of this paper – detailed draft Bill for STV)

PR Options for the UK An analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the three main Proportional Representation systems (STV, List-PR, MMP)

Fair votes in practice An assessment of PR systems against principles and data

... can be found at lder.org/the-change-we-need

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