

A Fixed Tally to Replace First-Past-The-Post

With outrage at the crass disproportion this July between numbers of parliamentary seats won and votes cast, the first-past-the-post system has come under renewed scrutiny.

Since the turn of the century there has, in principle, been a simple – if radical and ambitious – remedy, which was not feasible before. We could now make every vote count such that none go wasted and we are never coerced into voting for the least bad candidate. How we take a first step to implementing change is a separate topic, which I touch on constructively at the end.

The proposal involves a score of interconnected elements, some of which challenge how we have thought in the past. Different readers will immediately raise different questions, which obviously cannot all be addressed at once. Bear with me.

Start with the idea that, for election, a candidate must obtain a fixed number of votes, say seventy thousand. Leaving aside star candidates whose fame and popularity might give them more, almost no-one would garner this many. Not, at least, in any small, geographically defined constituency among the several hundred constituencies across the nation. Therefore we abandon this concept of constituency and replace it with another, namely that an MP should represent those unknown individuals who voted for him or her wherever they may live. A local anchor can still be retained, as I explain later.

A while after the polls close there would be a public convention for the redistribution of votes for candidates who fell far short of the threshold. Those closer to the threshold would canvass votes from these minority candidates, adding to their tally until they had the magic seventy thousand. Star candidates would be able to redistribute their surplus votes. This amounts to recycling of votes cast. But, note, the recycling is done by minority candidates using their best judgment, not by any ranking or second round of voting by ordinary citizens, which would be prohibitively complicated. Nor can any minority candidates be instructed on how to use their contingent of votes. The principle at work here is that the procedure should not be onerous for the ordinary citizen. You identify a candidate you trust, vote for them, and then it is out of your

hands. Otherwise you must stand yourself, which would be affordable and require the usual number of endorsers.

How does this work in the polling booth? There is a screen, keyboard & mouse such as now almost everyone knows. The screen first displays a list of local candidates as you are familiar with on a ballot paper. If you do not wish to vote for any of these, you move to a second screen, where you type in the name of your chosen candidate or search for them. Confirm and vote, whereupon there is a paper printout, which you place in the ballot box. This printout is for purposes of audit and transparency. The main counting is done by computer.

In an introductory phase the second screen would contain only candidates in your wider vicinity, say your county or city. They might number a score or several dozen. But the idea is that eventually you could vote for anyone in the country. Angus at John O'Groats could vote for Susan in Sussex, thus re-establishing or upholding the unity of the United Kingdom. There would then be thousands in the database, so it is imperative to come to the poll with a mental or written note of whoever you have identified as best suited to represent you.

This scheme allows for political parties to continue and for new ones to emerge, but it could also accommodate an absence of parties such that the Commons would consist of independents only, who would naturally form loose and informal alliances depending on whatever is being debated. In a pre-election phase parties could make recommendations, for example, of local candidates. Otherwise citizens would need to identify among the many candidates one whom they trust, which might not always be easy.

In view of relatively recent and radical constitutional shifts (e.g. with assemblies in Wales and Scotland, mayoral elections), the above proposal is not far-fetched. A beginning could be made by instituting on a trial basis a few dual-member constituencies, say in large towns. Otherwise, sometime things will come to a head when events lead to a real crisis and complete discrediting of the party oligarchy. At such time is it imperative to have at hand a sound and properly thought-out replacement which reinvigorates democracy, democracy being here understood as the principle that any citizen can make their voice heard. This principle is the icing on the cake of rule of law, property rights, freedom of speech and openly regulated markets.