

## Electoral reform in local government: lessons from the rest of Europe

Moving to a proportional representation (PR) system in local government is under consideration in Scotland after the recommendation of the McIntosh Commission. The issue of PR for local government in England and Wales is likely to be decided after the next general election. So far, the experience of other European countries, all of which use PR in local elections, has not fed into the debate. This research, by Michael Thrasher, Colin Rallings and Gerry Stoker, highlights some lessons. Key findings are:

- f** Britain's first-past-the-post system favours but does not guarantee single party control. Since the early 1990s a third of all councils have had no party in overall control.
- f** Britain is the only EU country to use a first-past-the-post system. All three basic varieties of PR - list, Additional Member and Single Transferable Vote - are in use elsewhere in the European Union.
- f** Beyond these basic forms all systems vary according to: the size of electoral constituency or district; voters' choices in terms of supporting individual candidates; the rules used to allocate votes to seats; and whether a 'threshold' is set, with candidates needing to achieve a proportion of the vote before gaining any seats.
- f** Voting systems vary in their impact according to local conditions and circumstances. This can be explained by the state of party competition in different localities and in some cases by the impact of a 'vote threshold' before seats are allocated to parties.
- f** The way electoral systems work varies over time. For example, in Hamburg the 1991 elections achieved a 'good' ratio of votes to seats of 4.3; by 1997 this had risen to 19.2 because more small parties had stood but had found their share of the seats blocked by a five per cent vote threshold.
- f** Local elections under PR tend to result in government based on stable coalitions. However, coalitions are formed according to the contingencies of local politics and may not follow, indeed may stand in contrast to, political coalitions formed at the national level.

There is no single perfect electoral system: much depends on judgements about what forms of democracy and governance are seen as desirable. Two common measures to judge a system - used in this study - are:

- the degree of 'proportionality', i.e. the extent to which a party's share of the votes equates with its share of seats; and
- the impact on the composition of the council and the nature of any governing coalition, usually measured in terms of the number of parties represented.

### Britain's system: setting a benchmark

The first-past-the-post system currently operates throughout British local government. Three features emerge from the experience of the last few decades.

- First, the system regularly delivers highly disproportionate results in terms of relating vote share to seat allocation (see Table 1).
- Second, the system does not guarantee strong single party government given the rise of non-majority administrations. In 1973 over a quarter of councils in Britain had no overall control. By 1980 that number had dropped to just over 12 per cent. However, by 1999 it had risen again to over a third of all councils. Indeed, around that proportion of councils have been without overall control since the early 1990s.
- Third, the current system penalises parties whose support is spread thinly across several constituencies. Minor parties that are able to concentrate their support can enjoy a favourable seat/vote ratio.

Table 1: Index of proportionality for English Shire Counties (1997) and London Boroughs (1998)

| County Councils |                    |      |
|-----------------|--------------------|------|
| Lowest          | Gloucestershire    | 1.6  |
| Highest         | Durham             | 25.5 |
| Average         |                    | 13.7 |
| London Boroughs |                    |      |
| Lowest          | Redbridge/Kingston | 7.7  |
| Highest         | Newham             | 42.7 |
| Average         |                    | 20.4 |

Note : With pure proportionality, where vote and seat shares are identical, the proportionality index would be zero.

### The list system: the case of France

The most common system used in sub-national elections in Europe is known as 'party list'. This system was used in the UK for the 1999 European Parliament elections. The system asks the voter to choose between parties, each of which presents a list of candidates. Lists can be 'closed' - voters are not allowed to vote for different parties - or 'open', when they are. Lists may also be 'blocked', i.e. the voter is not allowed to influence the order of candidates on a party list. Generally speaking, open lists are used in the smaller authorities and in most countries non-party or independent candidates are allowed to stand.

The French use a list system for electing their regional assemblies. The rule that a party list must secure five per cent of votes cast has a crucial impact. This legal threshold tends to favour larger parties, although its influence varies according to the local circumstances of party competition and the size of the districts or constituencies used.

The overall proportionality index for the 1998 regional elections was 12.0 but there were wide variations within this. In the Lot and Garonne Department, for example, because a range of smaller parties stood, nearly a quarter of all votes were 'wasted' in that they found no reflection in seats allocated. Several smaller parties failed to reach the legal threshold of five per cent and the 'green' party (MDC, Verts, LCR) was not allocated any seats because of a *de facto* threshold created by the system used to allocate seats from votes cast (see Table 2). The main 'left' and 'right' lists took seven out of ten seats although they received only five out of ten votes.

The largest parties (or combinations) of both 'left' and 'right' tend to gain the most advantage from the list system. They tend to form the cornerstone of the governing coalitions created in different localities, since no single party is usually able to form a majority administration. Coalitions involving the socialists, the communists and the ecologists control around half of all regional assemblies. The main right parties have faced a difficult calculation in recent years in terms of whether to accept the support of the National Front to form governing coalitions. Sometimes it has been accepted but on many occasions it has been refused. In some regions, the right wing block has allowed power to pass to the socialists rather than do a deal with the National Front.

Table 2: French Regional Assembly elections in Lot and Garonne Department

| Party list          | % shares of votes | Number of seats |
|---------------------|-------------------|-----------------|
| PS – PCF *          | 28.0              | 4               |
| MDC, Verts, LCR     | 5.3               | -               |
| PRG                 | 1.9               | -               |
| DVG                 | 2.6               | -               |
| Regionalists        | 2.3               | -               |
| Other               | 3.8               | -               |
| Other               | 2.5               | -               |
| CPNT                | 6.1               | 1               |
| RPR-UDF **          | 24.4              | 3               |
| RPR – UDF – dissent | 3.9               | -               |
| MPF                 | 3.8               | -               |
| FN                  | 15.4              | 2               |

Note: \* Main 'left' list, \*\* Main 'right' list

### The Additional Member System: the case of Germany

The Additional Member System was used to elect the new assemblies for Scotland, Wales and Greater London. This two-stage system is used in Germany for both national and sub-national elections. The first stage is to count the votes cast in each constituency to find the winning party or candidates. The second stage is to count the second cast by voters for lists or candidates. Additional seats are allocated according to share of vote received in this second stage, taking into account the seats won by parties or candidates in the first stages.

The Scottish and Welsh elections achieved a 'fairer' distribution of seats to votes than is normal in British sub-national elections. In Scotland the proportionality index was 4.6, in Wales it was 9.1. Both these figures compare well with the proportionality index of 13.7 in the 1997 Council elections and 20.4 in the 1998 London Borough elections.

The German electoral system can also make reasonable claims for achieving a strong relationship between votes cast and seats allocated. However, its capacity to deliver proportionality is closely linked with the numbers of parties contesting elections. As a result, the level of proportionality achieved can vary between elections and localities.

Over time, the proportionality index in German sub-national elections appears to have been

worsening. In the 1960s and 1970s three main parties typically contested elections and minor parties attracted little support. Seats were allocated in relation to votes in a highly proportional way. However, as the party system has become more complex - particularly with the emergence of the Greens, the level of proportionality has declined. Elections in the newly reunified East German regional states have continued this. The result can be a lot of 'wasted' votes (see Table 3). Nearly 20 per cent of votes in the Hamburg 1997 elections found no reflection in the allocation of seats because parties failed to achieve the legal threshold of five per cent or the *de facto* threshold in the seat allocation process.

Table 3: Voting in state of Hamburg 1997

| Party list   | % shares of votes | Number of seats |
|--------------|-------------------|-----------------|
| CDU          | 30.7              | 46              |
| SPD          | 36.2              | 54              |
| FDP          | 3.5               | -               |
| Green/GAL    | 13.9              | 21              |
| Republican   | 1.8               | -               |
| STATT-Partei | 3.8               | -               |
| DVU          | 4.9               | -               |
| Other        | 5.1               | -               |

There is evidence to suggest that 'ticket-splitting' (voting for candidates from different parties) between the first and second votes is a growing feature of German elections. This was also observed in the parliamentary elections in Scotland and to a lesser extent in the assembly elections in Wales.

Again, post-election coalitions lead to relatively stable regional government in Germany. The main parties dominate the coalitions. However, the largest party is not always part of the governing coalition. One calculation was that in regional state coalitions over a thirty-year period the largest party was absent more often than it was present.

### Single Transferable Vote: the case of Ireland

The Single Transferable Vote (STV) is used in elections in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland. This system allows voters to express not only a first preference but also a second and third choice

and so on. Candidates are elected when they reach a certain quota on the basis of first preference support or additional preference support as the counting unfolds. The system's strength is that it maximises voters' freedom of choice and allows them to express a more complex set of preferences. This allows for the election of a sizeable proportion of independent councillors (as, for example, in Donegal).

The level of proportionality achieved depends on a variety of factors, including the size of the constituencies and the nature of party competition. The proportionality indices are 'respectable' but there can be considerable disparity between votes cast and seats allocated (see Table 4).

Table 4: Voting in Dublin County Borough elections 1999

| Party list     | % shares of votes | Number of seats |
|----------------|-------------------|-----------------|
| Fianna Fáil    | 34.7              | 20              |
| Fine Gael      | 17.8              | 9               |
| Labour         | 17.7              | 14              |
| Ind            | 9.5               | 3               |
| Sinn Féin      | 7.9               | 4               |
| GP             | 7.7               | 2               |
| Prog Dem       | 2.5               | 0               |
| Workers' Party | 1.9               | 0               |
| Other          | 0.5               | 0               |

Fianna Fáil and Labour 'gained', achieving respectively 38.5 per cent and 26.9 per cent of seats which, in both cases, was higher than their share of first preference votes, in Labour's case considerably so. Overall the proportionality index for this Dublin election was 13.1. Labour's 'gains' could, of course, be justified on the grounds that their candidates had a broad appeal beyond their core supporters. STV tends to lead to coalitions but, again, there seem to be no particular problems with the stability of the governing coalitions that emerge.

### Conclusion

Britain's first-past-the-post system favours but does not guarantee single party control. Since the early 1990s a third of all councils have had no party in overall control. Local elections under PR tend to be followed by government based on stable coalitions. However, coalitions are formed according to the

contingencies of local politics and may not follow, indeed may stand in contrast to, political coalitions formed at the national level. The workings of PR systems in terms of relating seats to votes are affected by detailed rules governing each system and by difficult-to-predict changes in voting behaviour.

### About the study

This study is based on 'desktop' research, with the researchers relying on documents and other information. While the study is therefore limited, it is informed by the latest information.

### How to get further information

The full report, **Proportional representation and local government: lessons from Europe** by Colin Rallings, Michael Thrasher and Gerry Stoker, is published for the Foundation by YPS (ISBN 1 902633 77 6, price £10.95). It is available from York Publishing Services Ltd, 64 Hallfield Road, Layerthorpe, York YO31 7ZQ, Tel: 01904 430033, Fax: 01904 430868, email: orders@yps.ymn.co.uk. Please add £2.00 p&p per order.

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