New Electoral Systems: What Voters Need to Know

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Contents

Executive summary ..................... ...................................... 1

Research background and aims

electoral turnout ............................................................... 3 voter education .............................................................. 4 existing research on voter understanding ........................... 4 current research programme ............................................... 4

Attitudes towards electoral systems

views about First Past the Post ............................................. 6 views about alternative electoral systems .......................... 7

Information on new electoral systems

casting a vote .................................................................... 8 the operation of the new electoral systems ......................... 8 the new institutions and electoral boundaries ..................... 10

Delivering system information

the timing of information ...................................................... 11 conveying information ......................................................... 11 avoiding overload ................................................................ 12

Understanding of new electoral systems

Supplementary Vote ........................................................... 13

Executive Summary

The UK

However, voters should not be overloaded with information about the new electoral systems; while there is a general desire to know how the systems will work, there is a limited appetite for grappling with the details.

Delivering system information

Informing the public about the new systems will not be easy. The subject of electoral systems is too dry to arouse much spontaneous interest and the study found that voters generally have little existing knowledge to build on.

Information about the new systems needs to be delivered well in advance of the election. People do not want to have to struggle with learning about systems at the point of voting; they expect their vote to be a rapid execution of decisions largely already taken. If information about the new systems is not available well before election day, then some may be put off from going to vote at all.

It will be easier to take in this kind of information if it is drip-fed through a variety of media over some weeks, rather than being presented in one indigestible lump. People expect, and want, a serious multi-media information campaign, including TV, press and other media. Voters will also need official education material that they can trust as being objective and neutral. At the very least, this should take the form of a series of leaflets explaining the operation of the new systems, and rationale for adopting them.

Responses to the new electoral systems

Of the three systems tested, the research found that the Supplementary Vote was the most easily understood. The Regional List system was less obvious to voters, although it was soon understood once its main features had been explained. The hardest system for voters to understand (both in relation to the other two systems, and in absolute terms) was the Additional Member System, in particular the basis and reason for having two votes and the relationship between each part of the ballot.

Research background and aims

Introduction
This briefing summarises the main findings from a

Voter education

The first elections to the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly, on 6 May 1999, will be preceded by programmes to educate the public about the new institutions and the electoral
systems being used to elect their members. Both the Scottish and Welsh offices are
committing &2m to these campaigns. There will not, however, be a broad voter education
campaign in advance of the European Parliament elections in June 1999, in spite of
historically low turnout in this contest.

Existing research on voter understanding

Politicians, civil servants and other interest groups can currently draw on groups elect oTd [8ystems , be 199

focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with individual members of the public, conducted in various locations in England, Scotland and Wales in late summer 1997 (further details of the methodology used can be found in the main report). The qualitative approach, unlike mass level surveys, allowed the research to examine in some detail voters' level of understanding. However, the limitation of using small, though purposively selected, samples is that the results cannot show how widely the various views are held amongst the wider voting population.

Views about alternative electoral systems

There is some awareness among voters that alternative voting systems exist, but not generally a great deal of understanding of what the alternatives are, or how they work. The term 'proportional representation' seems fairly familiar, but what it actually means is often not well appreciated.

Information on new electoral systems

Casting a vote
To be able to take part at all in the ballot, people

These are the first major changes to the electoral system experienced by most British voters, and the mere fact of change in a hitherto stable situation tends to raise questions in people's minds. Add to this the fact that the new systems (particularly AMS; page
15) are generally neither familiar nor intuitive, which often makes people feel they do not know what they are doing when they vote;

Some basic understanding of the system might affect the way they want to vote (especially given voters' perceptions of 'wasted' votes under FPTP, and the opportunities for different voter behaviour that the new two vote systems will present).

People's desire to learn about the systems themselves does not arise from intrinsic interest in the subject; on the contrary, electoral systems usually strike people as an arid and abstract topic, certainly once they get beyond simple general concepts like 'fairness' and 'wasted votes'. Indeed, some tensions became apparent during the study sessions, with people wanting to know the answers to questions on system properties, but often finding the job of trying to master the information both tricky and tedious. 'Wanting to know' is not necessarily the same as being 'motivated to find out' (this reinforces the point about the need for a well designed and imaginative education campaign).

Information about the rationale for, and properties of, new electoral systems is harder to convey than instructions on the mechanics of casting a vote. Well designed ballot papers are usually fairly easy to master, but the systems they represent are more intricate and harder to explain. For example, it is comparatively easy to state the fact that electors have two votes, and to show where these are to be expressed on the ballot; but it is often much more tricky to explain why there are two votes, how they fit together and how they determine the outcome of the election.

Our study participants seemed

and 'a fair allocation of seats', while avoiding polemical statements that might compromise its objectivity and deter some voters.

The new institutions and electoral boundaries

Electoral change has followed the establishment of new institutions, in Scotland, Wales and London. The European Parliament is not new, but many people are ignorant of its role and operations, and as a result feel remote from it (NOP, 1998). Our study sessions seemed to reinforce the bleak picture that appears from the low turnout figures for EP elections quoted above (footnote 3); people are less inclined to go to the polling station if they are not sure what they are voting about, what the issues are, or who the candidates
are.

Although the study participants generally seemed vaguely aware of the new devolved institutions, with some being quite well informed, there was little detailed knowledge of their roles, powers and activities. Participants were clear that they both need, and want, such information before voting.

Voters will also require information on any new electoral boundaries being used in the forthcoming contests. Some of the new electoral divisions will be very different in scale to those currently used in parliamentary and European elections, and the new units need to be identified."erms such as 'constituency' are strongly associated with Westminster elections, and need to be explained if used in the context of different elections. Even descriptions such as 'region' are problematic, since many people do not know the boundaries to their region or are even confused about which region they fall into. At a specific level, we found participants in Scotland making associations with the former regional councils; and many participants in London found it difficult to think of their city as a 'region' at all.

AMS in Scotland and Wales will use parliamentary constituencies for the first section of the ballot, and regions (Scotland: 7 regions, each electing 8 members/Wales: 5 regions, each electing 4 members) for the 'top up' section. The inembers of the Greater London Assembly will be elected from 14 electoral areas (amalgamations of 2-4 London boroughs), or from a London-wide top up list. The electoral units for the European Parliament contest will be the standard regions of the UK, with Merseyside incorporated into the North West.

Delivering system information

This section considers when, and how, people want information on the new electoral systems to be delivered.

The timing of information

Explanation of the way new voting systems work is wanted much earlier than instructions on how to vote. Voters will not expect to be learning about system operation in the polling station. They largely expect to decide how to cast their ballot before going to
vote, although some may fine-tune or review their options in the polling booth. Some
people are less likely to vote if they feel uncertain about what they are doing; our study
found that voters need to have information on the electoral systems in order to achieve
their objectives, and that the absence of such material is an important source of voter de-
motivation. People also want the act of voting to be quick and simple, essentially an in-
out process, and did not want ift4tally have need a [(b-259n )-73(Td (to )Tj 0.01063Tc 1.287 0 Td (vj 0

I1 New elections: main desired information flows

Solid arows denote key flows, dotted arrows subsidiary flows

Avoiding overload
It would be easy to draw up a lengthy wish-list of things voters would like to know, but our study clearly demonstrates the

level of support that parties need to get to gain one seat - do exist. It would be

the parties, and hence are elected by a party-based vote through a PR regional list system (as for RLS)
How the elements fit together in determining the outcome of the election: the share of votes is based only on the regional poll, whereas the share of seats takes the local, as well as regional, seats into account
The status, role and powers of the two different 'types' of member.

Dzfficult points to explain: The most difficult feature of AMS was the intrinsic complexity of the system, and in particular the way seats are allocated.

The local FPTP element was usually straightforward and familiar to participants. Difficulties related more to the regional element, and particularly to the combination of the two. In principle, regional AMS should not be much harder to understand than RLS, but in practice it seemed to cause more trouble because AMS brings together what seem to be two disparate elements. There was widespread difficulty understanding the basis and rationale of the regional and local votes, and how they relate to each other. Participants readily understood that they had two votes, but usually found it harder to grasp the way they fit together to produce a particular outcome.
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Use of the concept of 'topping up' the vote did not seem to be helpful unless people had grasped what it was being topped up to; in other words had understand the basic concept of proportionality. It was sometimes assumed that members elected under the two different parts of the ballot would have different powers, responsibilities or status; or even that they might sit on different bodies.

The fact that some individual candidates may stand at both local and regional level was difficult for many

Conclusions

The main findings that emerge from this study are set out below. In the main they relate to the nature and complexity of the systems, rather than to any particular design elements. The main exception arose in relation to the list systems, where the 'closed' nature of the lists was widely unpopular among participants. The main general points that emerged are:

the low level of knowledge about electoral systems; in particular, the operation of First Past the Post and alternative systems, plus the

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