

NEWS

Overview of Radstats 2012 conference session 'Is a fair voting system really achievable?'

Russell Ecob showed the results from a range of countries on the deviation from proportionality over time since 1951. This increased in UK, Australia and New Zealand, though not in US and Netherlands. In the breakout session possible reasons for this were discussed, in particular the rise of third parties. This may have been a factor in the referendum in New Zealand in 1994 as a result of which the Additional Member system was adopted, resulting a much higher degree of proportionality.

A suggested system of voting (RCV or Ranked Constituency Voting) was presented which satisfied four stipulated major requirements:

- Proportionality
- vote for a known party representative
- uses existing constituencies
- requires one vote only.

This was evaluated on a further range of 8 stipulated desirable characteristics:

- No 'wasted' votes
- Promotes high voter turnout
- Elected representative should have most votes of all standing candidates
- Robust to manipulation either due to party or to voter
- All representatives have identical remits, priorities, and perceived statuses
- Minority or single issue (local?) candidates should get fair representation
- Easy and quick to tally
- Easily understandable and transparent to the voter

In the breakout session, an empirical example of the operation of RCV was gamed on 10 selected (mainly conservative) constituencies, formed by taking successive constituencies in alphabetical order from a random starting point, through teams representing each of the major parties in order to show the operation of this system in practice. This showed a more proportional result to the 'First Past the Post' system in the 2010 general election.

In a lively discussion, it appeared that a major stumbling block to the acceptability of this system was the fact that in a constituency the person with the most votes of all candidates would not always win the seat. A reformulation was developed which put forward the idea of 'mega-constituencies', formed by a geographical clustering of existing constituencies within which proportionality was ensured whilst retaining the local (constituency) representation, and the one vote. In this way proportionality is ensured at all levels, mega-constituency and above. Further work would be needed to develop sensible mega-constituencies and to assess the influence of this choice on any election result. In a final vote, offering as alternatives, First Past the Post, AV, List, STV and RCV, RCV emerged as more preferable overall to 'First Past the Post' but less favourably rated to other systems. 'Single Transferable Vote' came out as the most preferred.