

The Relay System

A New Electoral System for the 21st Century

The Relay System is a weighted voting system combining the present First Past the Post voting system with spread sheet technology to produce the most representative electoral system yet.

Using the Relay System in a General Election you vote as you do now, for the candidate of your choice in your constituency. If they receive the most votes in your constituency they become your MP and keep your vote and all the other votes they collected as 'Constituency Votes'. But if they lose, your candidate passes on their votes to their party, who collect them together as 'Party Votes' with those of the other unsuccessful candidates from that party.

After voting is completed and the results and MPs confirmed, each party's 'Party Votes' are divided amongst their MPs by the Electoral Commission who then add them to the MP's 'Constituency Votes' to produce their 'Total Vote', which they can then use when voting at 'Divisions' in the House of Commons.

With the Relay System, voting and the constituency link to MPs remains the same and you gain a representative system that treats all the electorate's votes equally so that their votes count rather than just being counted!

Key Terms of the Relay System

Constituency Votes

These are the votes each MP received from their own constituency at the General Election.

Party Votes

These are all the votes cast in favour of a party for their unsuccessful candidates at a General Election which are divided equally amongst the party's successful MPs. Any votes that cannot be distributed equally as whole votes amongst the MP's go to the party's leader in the House of Commons.

Total Block Vote

This is the sum for each MP of their Constituency Votes plus their Party Votes, to be used whenever 'Divisions' are called for in the House of Commons and the MPs vote.

Additional Members and the Upper Vote Limit

The object of the Relay System is to provide the least complicated voting system coupled with the most representative electoral system practicable. However the situation whereby a party has a significant percentage of votes nationally but has one, two or even no seats has to be considered, especially in light of the results of the 2015 UK General.

In the 2015 UK General Election for example the UK Independence Party had 3,881,129 votes and the Green Party had 1,157,613 votes or 12.6% and 3.8% of the UK vote respectively but both parties only had one MP each. This means that the UKIP member could have a vote equivalent to eighty or more 'Average' MP's Total Vote*.

Having a single individual with such an overwhelming 'Total Vote' would be unhealthy for the democratic process to say the least and therefore some sort of check should be put in place. With the Relay System this is called the Upper Vote Limit.

The Upper Vote Limit or UVL puts a ceiling on the Total Vote any single MP can have. The UVL is expressed as a percentage of the votes cast because of the variations in votes cast at General Elections. A UVL for example of 3% would with the present number of MPs in the House of Commons being six hundred and fifty, mean the maximum total votes any individual MP could have, would be equivalent to that of twenty 'Average' MPs' Total Vote. However as one of the two objectives of the Relay System is to be the most representative electoral system practicable there has to be a balance to the UVL and the balance is 'Additional MPs'.

Additional MPs would have no constituency but would be allotted when the 'Total Vote' of one or more MPs from a political party was curtailed by the UVL. For example with a UVL of 3%, the UKIP MP with 12.6% of the vote would be allotted a further four Additional MPs all sharing the UKIP 'Party Votes'.

Any 'Additional MPs' should however have been subject to some public scrutiny and should therefore been a candidate for that party in the General Election and their allotment made according to the number of votes they received in their constituencies at the General Election in descending order and not selected from a party list.

Moreover it follows that any party getting a significant percentage of the vote but not winning a single constituency should also be allotted 'Additional MPs'. Again this significant percentage should be a predetermined percentage of the votes cast. Were this for example 1%, which may appear low but is still equivalent to six times the 'Average' MPs' Total Vote, in the 2015 General Election no further 'Additional MPs' would have been allotted.

* An 'Average' MP's Total Vote is based on taking the total votes cast in the UK General Election and dividing them by the number of constituencies, each of which has an MP. For example in the 2015 UK General Election 30,697,845 votes were cast and there were 650 constituencies, giving a Total Vote for an 'Average' MP of 47,227 votes. This figure is slightly higher than the actual mean average of all MPs Total Votes but is a reasonable estimate and easily calculated.

Prior to a General Election

Once a General Election is called the Electoral Commission would create a new Election Database with all constituencies listed and a register of all the political parties taking part started, which would require each party to register with the Electoral Commission.

On the Election Database there would a sub-database for each constituency or Constituency Sub-Database. The data on the Constituency Sub-Database would be the responsibility of the returning officer for that constituency and the details of election candidates for that constituency would be entered on it. If the candidates are representing a registered party they are linked to the party on the main database. If they are not a member of a registered party they are entered as an independent candidate.

Forming a Government

Once the Polling Stations are closed on General Election day, the votes will be counted and recounted if necessary. After the Returning Officers have declared the final results for their constituencies the results would be entered on the respective Constituency Sub-Databases, which would feed into the main Election Database that would then process the results. Once all the constituencies have finalised their results and all the votes have been counted and the total number of votes cast is known the UVL and the threshold figure for Additional MPs would be calculated. Then the number of MPs each party had would be confirmed, then the total number of votes for each MP in Parliament calculated, and from that the total distribution of votes in the House of Commons finalised.

When all of the results are known the Queen would invite the leader of the party winning the most votes in the House of Commons to be Prime Minister and form the new Government. The party receiving the largest number of votes without forming part of the Government would become the Official Opposition with a number of it's MPs forming the Shadow Cabinet. Similar to what happens presently.

The Speaker and Deputy Speakers

The Speaker and their Deputy Speakers are all MPs. The Speaker acts as a chairman during debates, and sees that the rules laid down by the House for the carrying on of business are observed. The direction and the guidance the House receives from the Speaker, is central to the way the House of Commons works. Using the Relay System the role of the Speaker and their Deputies would not change.

The Speaker has three Deputies. The Chairman of Ways and Means takes the chair when the House is in Committee or discussing ways and means resolutions. There is also a First Deputy Chairman and Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means. The Speaker and three Deputies do not vote in Divisions of the House, if however there is a tied vote, the occupant of the Chair must exercise a casting vote. The Speaker and their Deputies represent their constituencies like any other MP dealing with constituents' letters and problems. (The Speaker HC Fact sheets – M2)

By tradition the House of Commons Speaker on election to that post resigns from their political party as a courtesy gesture, as they are expected to be politically impartial when presiding over the House of Commons and traditionally the main parties do not challenge the seat of an incumbent Speaker, though smaller parties have been known to do so. The Deputies also give up their party affiliation on becoming a Deputy however they do not distance themselves as far from party politics as the Speaker. They remain members of their respective political parties and when the next General Election takes place they contest their seats for their respective parties.

Using the Relay System the Speaker and their Deputies, would still have a single vote to use as they do now. So after a General Election any new Speaker or their Deputies would be appointed by ballot as they do presently and for which in this instance the MPs would only have a single vote each. Then once the positions of the Speaker and their Deputies are confirmed all their 'Constituency Votes' and 'Party Votes' are converted back to 'Party Votes' for their former parties. At which point the parties effected have the 'Total Votes' for their remaining MPs recalculated.

Voting at Divisions

Presently the House of Commons votes by dividing; those voting Aye (yes) to a proposition walking through the Division Lobby to the right of the Speaker and those voting No through the Division Lobby to the left of the Speaker. In each of the lobbies there are three desks occupied by Clerks, who tick member's names off on Division Lists as they pass through. Then at the exit doors the members voting are counted by members acting as Tellers. (HC Fact sheets – Series P No.9)

Using the Relay System, votes could still be carried out by dividing and the procedure remain the same except the Division Lists would be scanned, inputting the information of who voted for and against into a computer interface linked to a copy of the Election Database, which would have a record of the Total Vote of each MP. The computer system would then be able to calculate the results of divisions using spreadsheet software.

The clerks would have the results in a matter of seconds of the last MP exiting the lobby and would check the spreadsheet results against the division lists and the numbers of MPs as recorded by the Tellers. Once checked the result could be passed to the speaker and later the results would be sent to Hansard and the Editorial Supervisor of the Vote for printing and published on the Internet for total transparency.

Note that the layout of the Division Lists may need to be amended for scanning purposes or rather than scanning the system could be configured so information could be entered directly, the exact methods used would have to go through a discussion phase prior to being implemented. The main point being the Relay System would work using existing technology and only the way it is applied would be new.

By-Elections and MPs who relinquish the Party Whip

By-Elections would still be held using the Relay System during the lifetime of the parliament to fill vacant seats.

MPs who relinquish the Party Whip or are excluded from the party, with whom they were elected, would be thereafter treated as independents until the next General Election, even if they align themselves with another party. They would only keep their Constituency Votes though and the Party Votes they had would be returned and redistributed amongst the remaining members of their old party, should this situation lead to a By-Election being called, all the 'Total Votes' would be recalculated once the result for the By-Election were confirmed.

Should an incumbent MP die all their 'Constituency Votes' and 'Party Votes' are converted back to 'Party Votes' for their former party and the 'Total Votes' for their remaining MPs recalculated. However should a By-Election be called, all the 'Total Votes' are recalculated once the result for the By-Election is confirmed.

Relay System Options

Some options that could be incorporated once using the Relay System.

University Seats

This option would be to allocate seats for groups of Universities, in effect 'University Constituencies'. Students would be registered on the electoral roll for their University Constituency as part of their joining routine and removed from any other they may have been on, unless they specifically opt to remain registered with another constituency. Many students do not vote because they have not registered or they are registered to vote from where they lived previously and are unlikely to return on Election Day to vote. This would facilitate voting by a large number of young persons and also make it more relevant to them.

Armed Forces Seats in Parliament

Civilian MPs could be allocated for each of the UK armed services, the Royal Navy, Army and Royal Air Force. Each service would then have its own civilian representatives in the House of Commons within Parliament. Presently the number of people in each of the armed forces is similar to those in some constituencies and this could be introduced as part of an extension to the Armed Forces Covenant. This would give better representation for HM Forces who are not allowed to protest normally or take industrial action.

Consensus Politics

Presently in the House of Commons during divisions a difference of one vote is enough to see legislation passed. It is not surprising then when a government comes to power that has broadly speaking the opposite views to the government before it, that the new government spends a large proportion of it's time reversing the legislation and decisions of the previous incumbents. With the same process happening in reverse one or two General Elections down the line.

All this activity may be very impressive in newsprint and to the followers of political parties but it is not very productive or conducive for the creation and delivery of long-term policies for the country. In fact the present situation is very wasteful and expensive for the country and undermines our ability as a country to deliver long-term projects of any value.

Were there to be a system where 55% or even possibly 60% of the vote would be required for any new legislation to be passed, only new legislation with a broad consensus could be passed and it would be less likely that later governments would wish to reverse that legislation. Then rather than going right or left we could go forward more productively without the waste and extra expense there is presently.

In Summary

The Relay System would not be costly to implement for the House of Commons as there would be no requirement to change any of the procedures for electing MPs in the constituencies, the electorate would vote in the same way they do now so there would be no requirement for large scale education programmes as would be required for the Alternate Vote Top-up system for example, existing technology could be used and located within the House of Commons.

The First Past The Post system is not a representative and does not guarantee effective government. The FPTP system evolved over hundreds of years and works best when two parties are competing head to head, a situation it encourages. Over the years the identities of the two parties has changed periodically normally at a time of flux during which the FPTP system has not returned strong governments.

Conversely no one wants endless hung parliaments where the smallest parties swing the balance of power but the events of the 1970s in the United Kingdom with the Lib-Lab pact demonstrate the power of 'swing' parties maybe exaggerated and that poorly chosen alliances or decisions to topple governments can harm the smaller party electorally (Voting Systems: III Arguments, D "Outcome" arguments: Formation of Governments p60). The Relay System's purpose is not to produce a series of coalitions nor weakened governments, but when there is no single party with a majority of the votes due to a hesitancy of national mood it is not the fault of the system, it is in fact the system being representative and working correctly.

This is the main benefit of the Relay System, a truly representative system that holds equal all the electorate's potential votes regardless of their location, the size of their constituency and the demographics of their party's supporters so potentially all the electorate's votes count rather than just being counted.