

Higher Politics Paper 2 – Specimen ‘A’ pass answer

Question: Using appropriate examples, compare and contrast the effects of introducing proportional electoral systems into the United Kingdom. (20 marks)

Answer 2

A number of different and contrasting proportional electoral systems have been introduced into the UK over recent years in order to bring about fairer results, better reflect the wishes of the electorate and in so doing improve the UK's claim to be a democratic country. These systems have been introduced to ensure that a party can no longer form a government with an overall majority of seats from less than half the total votes cast in an election. Three appropriate examples are the Single Transferable Vote, introduced in 1973 to elect local councillors and used to elect the Northern Ireland Assembly; the Additional Member System, as used in Scotland and Wales and the Party List System which has been used for elections to the European Parliament since 1999.

The STV uses preferential voting, where electors place the candidates in an order of their choosing, and it involves multi-member constituencies. A candidate is elected on achieving a quota of votes using the formula: number of votes cast divided by the number of seats +1, +1. Votes cast in excess of the quota needed to be elected are reallocated proportionately to the other candidates using second preferences. If no candidate achieves the quota the one with the fewest first preferences is eliminated from the count and his/her second preferences are reallocated. This continues until all the seats in the constituency are elected. In Northern Ireland the use of STV has enabled a divided community to have opposing and minority viewpoints fairly represented at constituency level. Results have been fairer with the once discriminated Nationalist party gaining representation alongside the Unionists. Votes are not wasted in the way they were under first past the post. This means that constituents have a choice about which representative to go to – and it allows them to contact the member they feel is best able to meet their needs and solve their problems.

STV is not as accurate in terms of proportional representation as the Regional Party List system which is used for UK elections to the European Parliament. Under this system if a party gains 40% of the votes they get 40% of the seats which is not the case with STV or AMS. This system also leads to each region becoming a huge multi-member constituency. The elector votes for a party and the votes are added up

and the percentage of votes for each party is translated into seats. Each party has a list of candidates for each region and if party A gets 50% of the votes in a 10 seat region then they will get 5 seats so the top 5 on their list get elected; if party B gets 20% of the votes in that region the first two names on their list get elected.

Generally this system has led to a fairer representation that more closely reflects the wishes of the voters. The anomalous situation of parties receiving hugely disproportionate number of votes to seats has in the main been avoided. It is fairer for minority parties with the Liberal Democrats, the Green Party and the UK Independence Party all benefiting from the change. The Liberal Democrats have seen a large rise in the number of their seats while the Greens and UKIP gained seats for the first time in 1999 and increased them in the last European Parliament elections. Some would argue though that the party list system means the link between constituent and representative is lost. The elector does not vote for a person and does not have a real say in who the leadership of his/her party of choice has put on their list or the ordering. This has increased the power of the party leadership. At least under STV there is a choice and preferences can be shown even within the same party.

The Additional Member System used in Scotland and Wales is a variant of the system used in Germany. It involves two systems - the first past the post, to elect the constituency MSP and the party list system as a top-up to help the parties who may fail to win constituency seats and receive a fairer proportion of the 129 seats. Some 73 MSPs represent a constituency whereas the 56 additional members do not. This leads to confusion some would argue in terms of who your MSP is while others argue that you still have a clear constituency MSP but other 7 other regional MSPs to approach also.

One of the main effects of this is that government in Scotland and Wales is more broad-based, due in part to the need to have coalition governments. It is difficult to maintain periods of single party government when no single party has a majority of seats. The Liberal Democrats have been able to have a direct impact on policy outcomes in Scotland in return for their support of a coalition - most noticeably on the issue of student tuition fees. This has also meant a degree of policy divergence in different parts of the UK. Scotland has also seen radical Socialists such as Tommy Sheridan being elected and then have another five of his colleagues join him after last year's election. This shows that it is not just the centre parties that benefit from proportional electoral

systems. Independent candidates like Margo McDonald have also been elected having been unable to get a good position on their Party list in the first instance. The Conservatives have been an unusual beneficiary of the AMS winning a substantial number of seats in Scotland where they ended up without any MPs after the 1997 General Election.

Despite these benefits, opponents of proportional representation would argue that fears about the loss of strong, stable single-party government have been borne out but Scotland's coalition has done very well and been stable, unlike the situation in Wales. The situation in Northern Ireland has been much improved due to better and fairer representation and the UK has more parties representing them in Europe thanks to the changes in the electoral system. Overall the introduction of these diverse systems has helped to make the UK more democratic.