

A vertical bar on the left side of the cover, consisting of six colored squares stacked vertically: yellow, blue, red, green, orange, and cyan.

# The Scottish Parliament Voting System

Guidelines for Reporting on Polls and Results

Allan Faulds

Ballot Box Scotland

9<sup>th</sup> of November 2020

## Guidance at a Glance

- **Explain, don't dismiss**
  - Describing the voting system as "complex" is a crutch, and it does the public a disservice. You don't need to explain the maths to explain the principles.
- **Always report both votes**
  - Don't let tantalising narratives about the Constituency vote lead to forgetting it only makes a minor contribution to the shape of parliament. Though the Regional vote seemingly elects fewer seats, it generally does more to determine the overall partisan spread in the chamber.
- **Give both votes the same treatment**
  - Just reporting the figures of the Regional vote as an afterthought at the end of a story is no good. Whether you're writing analysis, composing Tweets, or creating charts, make sure both votes are given equal prominence.
- **Avoid the terminology of First and Second vote**
  - Although these are common descriptions, bear in mind that Scotland uses the preferential STV system for council elections. The potential for people to mistakenly parse First and Second vote as First and Second preference is therefore heightened. Use Constituency and Regional (or List) Vote instead.

## Context

Although Devolution in Scotland is settling into its third decade, there remains a substantial weakness in the public understanding of the Scottish Parliament's voting system. This isn't confined to ordinary voters, with journalists and even politicians often making mistakes or demonstrating a lack of understanding. This isn't necessarily surprising.

Whereas most countries settle on one voting system, or at least one category of system, Scotland uses a whopping three different systems. Every level of government in Scotland is elected in a different manner, and indeed before Brexit we used a fourth system for the European Parliament too. Add in the cultural and political dominance of the least democratic of those systems, First Past the Post, and it's no wonder folk across the country are left with a Holyrood headache.

Understandable though this is, it can be disappointing when seen in print and/or broadcast media. Journalism rightly prides itself on informing the public, but on this issue instead all too often lets that public down. Reliance on tired clichés around "complexity" and a cultural bias towards the comforting familiarity of the Constituency element of the system thicken rather than lift the fog of confusion around the voting system.

This guidance is intended as a little helping hand for anyone likely to find themselves reporting on the Scottish Parliament's voting system. What things should you avoid saying? What things definitely need said? How do you explain the system without inflicting death by maths on unsuspecting voters? How do you report accurately on the figures?

As both a Scotland-focussed elections website and an absolutely giant nerd for voting systems, I thought it would be much more helpful to put together a friendly paper on this, rather than keep grumping cheekily about perceived bad practice!

# How the Scottish Parliament Voting System Works

## Basics

The system used for elections to the Scottish Parliament is known as the “Additional Member System (AMS)”. This is a version of a wider category of electoral systems known as “Mixed Member Proportional (MMP)”, which are most notably used in New Zealand and Germany. As the name suggests, this system results in a “mixture” of members elected from two different elements – single-member constituencies, and multi-member lists.

## The Constituency Vote

- Scotland is divided into 73 Constituencies.
- Each constituency elects one MSP.
- The candidate with the most votes wins.

Often referred to somewhat unhelpfully as the “First Vote”, the Constituency Vote is the single-member part of the system. This uses the familiar First Past the Post system, where the candidate winning the most votes wins the seat. It doesn’t matter how much most is – it can be 1 vote or 10,000, it can be 29% of the total or 65%, all that matters is that they come first.

Although voters across the UK are culturally inured to this system, it is deeply inadequate for representing the diversity of views present in the electorate. Though often thought of here as the “default” voting system, the norm across the democratic world is Proportional Representation. Referring to the Economist’s Democracy Index<sup>1</sup> from 2019, 77.3% (17 of 22) “Full Democracies” use forms of PR to elect their national legislature. When extended to include “Flawed Democracies”, it’s a slightly lower but still overwhelming 69.7% (53 of 76).

## The Regional List Vote

- Constituencies are grouped into 8 Regions, of 8 to 10 Constituencies.
- Each region elects 7 MSPs.
- These seats are allocated proportionally, taking into account how many Constituency seats each party won in that Region.

Often referred to simply as the “Regional”, “List”, or again unhelpfully as the “Second Vote”, this is the bit that ensures diversity amongst voters is (reasonably) accurately represented. Crucially, although the ballot papers are separate, the seats aren’t. The list seats are allocated so as to deliver an overall balance across the whole region, accounting for constituency seats won, using the “D’Hondt Method”

This is where explanations often get either bogged down in the mechanics of D’Hondt, or default to “it’s complex” for fear of having to explain. Whilst your average voter doesn’t spend their life looking for division opportunities, this doesn’t actually use maths any more difficult than people will have learned in Primary School, just with much bigger numbers. The process is simply “divide each party’s regional vote by one more than the number of seats won so far.” You start with the constituency seats, and the party with the highest number wins the first list seat. You add that to their total and re-calculate, rinse, and repeat until all seven seats are allocated.

**You don’t need to explain even to that level of detail, however!**

---

<sup>1</sup> The Economist Intelligence Unit – Democracy Index 2019 - [https://www.eiu.com/public/topical\\_report.aspx?campaignid=democracyindex2019](https://www.eiu.com/public/topical_report.aspx?campaignid=democracyindex2019)

# How to Explain the Voting System

## Basics

If you're writing an article or going on air to talk about a Scottish Parliament election, or even just Tweeting, you have a platform that will reach a lot of voters. You have two options – you can fob the voting system off as being beyond their comprehension, or you can take the opportunity to educate people about it. You should choose education!

## What to Avoid

Don't talk about the Scottish Parliament's voting system as if it's some ineffable mystery (unless you are Frances McDormand). Don't use the word "complex", or its derivatives, or synonyms. Even where things are complex, part of your role is to break that down and communicate it to the public in a more easily understood way.

You should also, ideally, avoid getting into the nitty gritty of how the D'Hondt method works if your audience is meant to be general. That's boring, unnecessary, and can be confusing. If it's a more politically engaged audience, trying to briefly explain the maths will probably be okay – but again, do so without reliance on "complex!"

With apologies once again to the (otherwise excellent) journalist who wrote this, here's an example of quite poor practice I've previously highlighted:

**The "additional member system" features 73 constituency seats, elected on a traditional first past the post (FPTP) basis, and 56 "list" seats scattered across eight regions.**

**The system itself is complex, but in short the more constituency seats you win, the harder it is to win list seats.**

We can immediately see our main red flag – "complex" – and not only does this segment not try to explain that the system is proportional, nowhere else in the article did either. That's basically a complete failure to even try to explain the system, and it lets the public down.

## What to Say

So, what could this journalist have said instead? Here's my suggestion:

**The "additional member system" features 73 constituency seats, elected by traditional first past the post (FPTP), and 56 proportional "list" seats in eight regions.**

**List seats ensure proportionality within each region, so a party that wins many constituencies doesn't usually need list seats for their fair share overall.**

This is the exact same number of words, though some are slightly longer. Not only does this not handwave it away as "complex", it also highlights the crucial fact the system is meant to be proportional. It also touches on one point of regular confusion by explaining why winning lots of constituency seats means few list seats, even if the party wins lots of votes.

This would successfully convey the basic principles of the system, without you once having to say "the D'Hondt method" or start talking about successive divisors. Basically, the key thing is to do your best to avoid treating voters like they couldn't possibly understand the system. Trust that they at least understand the principle of a proportional vote, drive the point home, and if appropriate to the piece remind them that proportional systems are fairer.

# How to Report on the Voting System

## Basics

Everything in this section applies both to actual election results and to polls. In short, the system has two votes, and you need to show both to give voters the full picture.

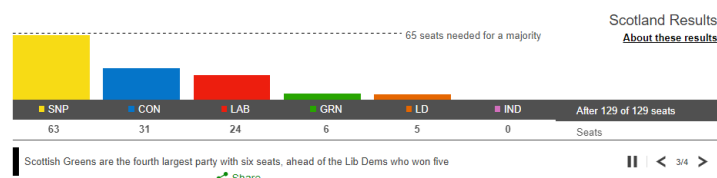
## Always Report Both Votes

Never simply report one vote. If it's the Constituency vote, the fact it is FPTP means it is seriously unlikely to be fully representative of the electorate's diversity. If it's the Regional vote, which would at least be a pleasant change in most cases, people may be surprised by projected or actual Constituency results that seem out of kilter.

## Give Both Votes Equal Prominence

It's not good enough to report both votes, but give one central importance and treat the other as an afterthought. Given the previously mentioned cultural comfort with FPTP, when this happens, it's generally with the Constituency Vote. For example, one Scottish edition of a paper which commissions reasonably regular polling consistently includes the Constituency Vote and a projected seat share in a neat explanatory graphic. The Regional Vote however is only mentioned in the article.

We can see a similar thing on the BBC's front page for the 2016 election. This has a really neat little set of bar charts showing vote shares and the change since the 2011 election... for the Constituency vote only. In both of these cases, voters might rightly ask for example "how on earth do the Greens have so many seats?" If the Regional Vote was as prominent, that'd be more obvious. Sure, it is available, but in the paper it is usually tucked away in the depths of the article, and on the BBC it's on a different tab.



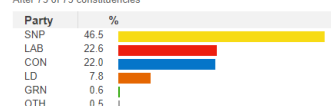
## Results

### SNP celebrate victory in Scotland

Nicola Sturgeon's SNP win a third victory and the Conservatives achieve their best electoral performance in Scotland since 1992, pushing Labour into third place.

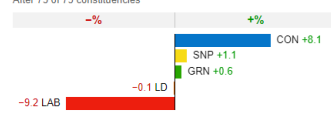
#### Constituency vote share

After 73 of 73 constituencies



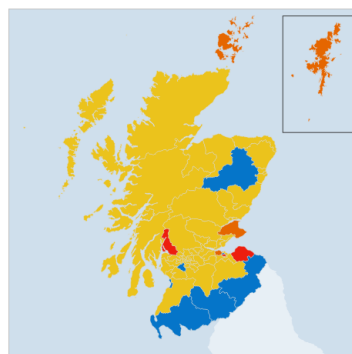
#### Constituency vote share change since 2011

After 73 of 73 constituencies



### Find a constituency

Scotland Constituencies and Regions A-Z



If you've got a chart or graphic, just make sure it features both votes. It's as simple as that! In a written piece, you can do something like dedicate one paragraph to one vote, and the next to the other, or report each party's figure for both votes together. And if analysing one vote, make sure to give a similar degree of analysis to the other.

## Don't Number the Votes

Although the terminology of "First" for Constituency and "Second" for Regional is common, it is slightly confusing. Remember that for Local Council elections, we use the Single Transferrable Vote system, which is a form of preference voting. In that context, voters will encounter first, second, third etc preferences. Using similar terminology for the Scottish Parliament risks conflating the two.

Most voters do understand you can vote for the same party on both ballots – if they didn't, results would be very different. Nonetheless, it's common enough to encounter people who are confused about this, and think the Regional ballot is a second preference – or, alternatively, people for whom cultivating that notion suits their narrative.

Getting this one wrong probably isn't too bad in general, but it's still something you'd be better off avoiding. There's nothing to stop you saying "one vote is... and the other is..." or something like that if you're trying to explain things, just make sure you don't give the impression one vote is more important...

## Even Though One Vote IS More Important

All of the above said, the Regional Vote is the more important of the two. That may seem counter-intuitive since it seemingly only elects 56 seats, versus the 73 that come from the Constituency vote. What makes it the more important vote is that it is this vote that does the most to determine the overall shape of Parliament.

In 1999 and 2003, it was the difference between Labour majority governments with the SNP the third largest party, and Labour-Liberal Democrat coalitions with the SNP in clear second place. In 2007, without the regional vote, there'd have been a narrow Labour majority rather than the historic SNP minority despite a very small SNP lead in votes. Then, 2011's SNP majority would have been even more inflated, and in 2016 they'd have had unparalleled control of the chamber and threadbare opposition, rather than being back in minority and forced into co-operation.

In short, the Regional Vote is both the more impactful and the more democratic of the votes. As much as it goes against the norm here, that's why on Ballot Box Scotland I always report it first followed by the Constituency Vote. I don't necessarily expect folk to join me on my one-man crusade against the cultural and political dominance of FPTP, mind you! Just bear this in mind in your reporting – tempting though it may be to default to what's most familiar in the UK context, the bit that really matters is the side of the system that at least tries to give voters the representation they deserve in parliament.

## Final Notes

Hopefully, this guidance is useful for helping you navigate the Scottish Parliament's voting system. Ideally, it'll have made you reflect in a positive manner on the common journalistic tropes about it, and how to move away from those, and not put you on the defensive! Improving public understanding of politics is a fundamental public good, and one I'm certain motivates everyone on the front line of reporting.

As Ballot Box Scotland, I'm always happy to offer further advice or explanation of Scotland's myriad voting systems, and how best to navigate them, in addition to all the other work I do. Just get in touch via [allan@ballotbox.scot](mailto:allan@ballotbox.scot), or check out the [ballotbox.scot](http://ballotbox.scot) website for useful bits and pieces to share.