

Party Lists and Preference Voting

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Abstract

Elections by party lists, where voting is just by choosing a single party, can lead to unrepresentative results because of wasted votes. A system is suggested that would allow voting by preference rankings for parties. It is suggested that this would be an improvement.

Keywords: elections; party lists; European Parliament; wasted votes; preference voting; STV

1 Introduction

In 2009, following the election of two candidates representing the British National Party (BNP) to the European Parliament, the BBC felt bound to treat that party with impartiality and invited its leader to be on the panel for an edition of its “Question Time” television program. There followed much public criticism of the party. There was also criticism, unfair in my opinion, of the BBC for doing so. Yet there seems to have been no such criticism of the “closed party list” rules by which European Parliament elections are currently conducted in the United Kingdom (except Northern Ireland who use STV), or of Jack Straw, who was also a member of that panel, and who, as the relevant member of the Government at the time, had been responsible for forcing those rules through Parliament. They certainly played a part in allowing the BNP to take those seats.

I strongly support the right of the electorate to elect whom they wish, whether or not I personally approve of those individuals or of their parties, but that does assume that the

electoral system used was one that reasonably represented that electorate. I do not believe that a party list system is capable of doing so but, so long as it is difficult to move politicians away from party lists where they are already in force, it is worth considering how party-list voting systems might be improved.

Party lists force voters to consider political party as of major importance whether they wish to do so or not, thus increasing the already excessive power of party organisations. Apart from that, the main trouble is that party-list voting is just by an X for a single party, which has the same disadvantage of wasted votes that an X vote has when voting for individual candidates.

2 European Parliament Election 2009¹

There were two constituencies where a BNP candidate was elected. In the “North West” constituency there were 12 parties standing, plus 1 independent candidate, who counts for these purposes as a 13th party. In the “Yorkshire and the Humber” constituency there were the same 12 parties but no independent candidate. In order of their numbers of votes, they were as shown in Table 1. In the remainder of this paper I shall concentrate on just the North West constituency. The arguments would be just the same for either.

The results were determined using the d'Hondt system. In the North West constituency, there were elected 3 Conservatives, 2 Labour, 1 Liberal Democrat, 1 UKIP and 1 BNP. The BNP candidate got 132094 votes out of a total of 1651825. Now if 132094 are enough to secure a seat, all 8 seats need a total of 8 times that or 1056752,

¹ See Mellows-Facer et al. (2009) [1] for details of the election.

Table 1: Results of the European Parliament Election of 2009 in Two Constituencies

		North West	Yorkshire and Humber
Conservative Party	[Cons]	423174	299802
The Labour Party	[Lab]	336831	230009
United Kingdom Independence Party	[UKIP]	261740	213750
Liberal Democrats	[LibD]	235639	161552
British National Party	[BNP]	132094	120139
The Green Party	[Gree]	127133	104456
English Democrats Party	[Engl]	40027	31287
Socialist Labour Party	[SLP]	26224	19380
Christian Party "Proclaiming Christ's Lordship"	[Chri]	25999	16742
No2EU: Yes to Democracy	[NoEU]	23580	15614
Jury Team	[Jury]	8783	7181
Pro Democracy: Libertas	[ProD]	6980	6268
Independent: Francis Apaloo	[Ind]	3621	

indicating wasted votes of $1651825 - 1056752 = 595073$. That is to say wasted votes were more than 4 times what the BNP got, or 36% of the total, compared with the unavoidable wastage of 1 Droop quota which, for 8 seats, is just over 11%. This wastage consists of the votes for parties that did not achieve a seat, plus the surplus votes of those that did achieve one or more seats.

Could anything be done to reduce this wastage? What I should wish to see would be the complete replacement of the party list method with STV for individual candidates, who could bear party labels if they wished of course. In fairness we should note that under STV, assuming the same number of votes, the quota would be 183537, so the BNP attained 72% of a quota. If those were translated into first preferences it is quite possible that transfers would have enabled BNP to take a seat, but if they were capable of taking a seat on a fair electoral system, then so be it. The electorate have the right to choose what they want.

3 Preference voting

But if we assume that no Westminster Government is likely to enact STV in the near future, can anything be done that would partially rectify the situation? Even restricting voters to voting only for parties, not

individuals, it would be an improvement to let each voter list the parties in order of preference, so as to allow redistribution of the votes, as in STV.

In investigating how this might work in practice, we face the difficulty that we do not know what the voters' preferences would be. To some extent we can guess, where the big well-known parties are concerned, but even that is difficult for the minor parties where we know little about them and what they stood for. Nor do we know whether voters for a big party would prefer even a rival big party to a small party, and sometimes parties that have similar aims, or similar names, are nevertheless bitterly opposed to one another. The work of Clarke et al. (2010) [2] can help to some extent, but it tells us nothing about the minor parties. Nor can we assume that what voters say that they would do for a second preference among the bigger parties represents what they would do for a seventh preference, say. We can but guess, taking [2] into account where possible, but I need to make clear that what I have assumed does not represent what the real voters would actually have done. I have also had to guess what proportion of voters would express further preferences at each stage, and what proportion would stop short of a full listing.

The proposed voting procedure is similar in principle to STV, except that when a party attains a seat, it is still possible for it to attain further seats, so it keeps its surplus in hope of

doing so. I have calculated the result using Meek's method, but other versions of STV could be used if desired.

Introducing some new terminology, I define a party's "balance" to mean its total votes if it has not yet attained a seat, or to mean its surplus if it has attained one or more seats. I define a party being "dormant" to mean excluded if not having attained a seat, or to mean not allowed to take any further seat if having already attained any. Using Meek rules implies that a party can accept further votes, to be passed on to other parties in fair proportion, even after becoming dormant.

The plan, then, is to treat a vote for ABC, say, where A, B and C are parties that each have a list of 4 candidates, as if it had been a vote for the individual candidates A1, A2, A3, A4, B1, B2, B3, B4, C1, C2, C3, C4, in that order, and use STV with one modification: that when an exclusion is necessary, all of the non-elected candidates of the party that has the smallest balance are excluded together, and the party becomes dormant.

4 An example

Table 2 shows how this could work, taking the actual votes for the various parties and my assumptions as to how the transfers might go. I must emphasise that this is for illustrative purposes only. It is not intended to show what would actually have happened, which we can never know.

While each party, except the Independent, had a list of eight candidates, the table shows only those who will be actually involved in the count. The figures are shown rounded to integers for simplicity, though the calculations were actually to more figures.

At stage 1 we have first preferences to match the actual result. Four candidates have passed the quota and are marked E (for Elected). At stage 2 their surpluses have been moved on to the next in the list; the second Conservative candidate has now also passed the quota and is elected.

At stage 3 nobody can be elected so the Independent candidate is excluded and his votes are redistributed in stage 4. Similarly at stages 4 - 9, but it is seen that the Christian Party has overtaken the Socialist Labour Party,

so SLP goes out at stage 7, although having had more first preferences.

Up to stage 9 the Xs indicate the exclusion of a whole party, but thereafter the Xs indicate the exclusion of the candidates shown, their parties becoming dormant, while keeping their elected candidates.

In the later stages a candidate is sometimes elected before the iteration to the final result of the stage is complete, so the already-elected candidates have more than a quota. This is not incorrect.

The hypothetical result shows the Conservatives and BNP as each having lost a seat compared with what actually happened, with UKIP and the Green Party taking them instead, but it must be stated again that this is wholly hypothetical. It would be perfectly easy to make up supposed transfers that let the BNP take a seat after all.

Given the huge wastage of votes in what actually happened, I suggest that the proposed system would have been likely to achieve results that better represented the wishes of the voters. I say again, though, that the aim of a system should be to represent what the voters want, not to support or oppose any particular party.

5. Conclusion

It may be noted that, had the Sainte-Lagué system been used instead of the d'Hondt system, a Green candidate would have been elected instead of the third Conservative candidate, but I regard argument about the merits of Sainte-Lagué compared with the merits of d'Hondt, while ignoring the question of wasted votes, as noticing the mouse but not the elephant.

The referee has suggested that a simple way to avoid the perceived problem of electing extreme parties is simply to have smaller constituencies. That would, indeed, make the election of extreme parties less likely, but it would be likely to increase rather than diminish the number of wasted votes. To avoid misunderstanding, I must emphasise that the aim of this paper is not to show that extreme parties would not be elected with preferential voting. It is merely to examine whether a system is possible, within a party list

Table 2. Hypothetical Results for the North West Constituency under the Proposed System.

Stage	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Cons1	423174 E	183536	183536	183425	183214	182949	182539	182049
Cons2		239638 E	183536	183425	183214	182949	182539	182049
Cons2		239638 E	183536	183425	183214	182949	182539	182049
Cons3			56102	56526	57246	58576	60294	61691
Lab1	336831 E	183536	183536	183425	183214	182949	182539	182049
Lab2		153295	153295	153607	154117	155282	156492	165800
Lab3								
UKIP1	261740 E	183536	183536	183425	183214	182949	182539	182049
UKIP2		78204	78204	78516	79026	79790	89999	90904
LibD1	235639 E	183536	183536	183425	183214	182949	182539	182049
LibD2		52103	52103	52415	52925	54090	55300	62637
BNP1	132094	132094	132094	132094	132194	132294	132394	132809
Gree1	127133	127133	127133	128040	130036	132834	136733	141500
Gree2								
Engl1	40027	40027	40027	40128	40526	41025	44624	45039
SLP1	26224	26224	26224	26325	26524	26824	26924 X	
Chri1	25999	25999	25999	26100	26399	26898	27398	27813 X
NoEU1	23580	23580	23580	23681	23880	24180 X		
Jury1	8783	8783	8783	9185	9983 X			
ProD1	6980	6980	6980	7081 X				
Ind1	3621	3621	3621 X					
n/t	0	0	0	1003	2899	5288	8971	13388
quota	183536	183536	183536	183425	183214	182949	182539	182049
Stage	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
Cons1	182049	181488	180631	179433	179391	179366	190075	177500
Cons2	182049	181488	180631	180290	179391	179366	190075	179962
Cons3	61691	64977	70261 X					
Lab1	182049	181488	180631	179483	179391	179366	194115	177387
Lab2	165800	169969	174501	180278 E	179391	179366	194115	179360
Lab3					1039 X			
UKIP1	182049	181488	180631	179827	179391	179366	186775	178871
UKIP2	90904	93833	104461	137756	138619	138829	144564	177046 E
LibD1	182049	181488	180631	179670	179391	179366	179365	178302
LibD2	62637	70104	80087	98171	98676	99276 X		
BNP1	132809	133015	134800	137332	137365	137378	138639	140201
Gree1	141500	148188	158414	162422	162474	162615	181044 E	178613
Gree2								14582
Engl1	45039	45864 X						
Chri1	27813 X							
n/t	13388	18435	26146	37163	37307	37532	53055	69998
quota	182049	181488	180631	179407	179391	179366	177641	175759

context, that would better represent what the voters actually want, whether that includes extremist parties or not.

I continue to dislike in principle anything of a party list nature, following Enid Lakeman's dictum that party should matter only to the extent that voters wish it to matter. Still, a small improvement in representativeness achieved by reducing wasted votes is better than no improvement at all.

6 Acknowledgements

Discussion with Simon Gazeley about an earlier version of this proposal greatly improved it. I also thank the referee whose remarks on my first submission were very useful, and who brought reference [2] to my attention.

7 References

- [1] Mellows-Facer A., Cracknell R. and Lightbown S.(2009). European Parliament Elections 2009, Research paper 09/53, House of Commons Library.
- [2] Sanders D., Clarke H.D., Stewart M.C. and Whiteley P. (2010). Simulating the Effects of the Alternative Vote in the 2010 UK General Election. *Parliamentary Affairs*, Oxford University Press on behalf of the Hansard Society.

About the Author

David Hill is a retired statistician. He was formerly a member of Council of the Electoral Reform Society and chairman of its Technical Committee.