

The Twilight of Westminster? Electoral Reform and its Consequences

Pippa Norris

Harvard University

The UK political system has long exemplified 'majoritarian' or 'Westminster' government, a type subsequently exported to many Commonwealth countries. The primary advantage of this system, proponents since Bagehot have argued, lie in its ability to combine accountability with effective governance. Yet under the Blair administration, this system has undergone a series of major constitutional reforms, perhaps producing the twilight of the pure Westminster model. After conceptualizing the process of constitutional reform, this paper discusses two important claims made by those who favor retaining the current electoral system for Westminster, namely that single-member districts promote strong voter-member linkages and generate greater satisfaction with the political system. Evidence testing these claims is examined from comparative data covering 19 nations, drawing on the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems. The study finds that member-voter linkages are stronger in single member than in pure multimember districts, but that combined districts such as MMP preserve these virtues. Concerning claims of greater public satisfaction under majoritarian systems, the study establishes some support for this contention, although the evidence remains limited. The conclusion considers the implications of the findings for debates about electoral reform and for the future of the Westminster political system.

An ancient and ever-altering constitution is like an old man who still wears with attached fondness clothes of the fashion of his youth: what you see of him is the same; what you do not see is wholly altered (Walter Bagehot, 1867).

The UK political system exemplifies 'majoritarian' or 'Westminster' government (Lijphart, 1999), a type subsequently exported with some important variations to Commonwealth countries such as New Zealand, Canada, India, and Australia, as well as to many post-colonial nations in sub-Saharan Africa and South East Asia where these institutions commonly failed to take root. At the apex of British colonial power in the late nineteenth century, President Woodrow Wilson (1884) observed that Westminster parliamentary government had become 'the world's fashion'. The primary advantages of this system, proponents have argued ever since Bagehot, lie in its ability to combine accountability with effective governance.

Yet voices criticizing the Westminster system have strengthened in periodic waves during recent decades. Under the Blair administration, the British constitution has undergone a series of major reforms. Some components, like the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly, and the introduction of party lists for elections to the European parliament, are already locked in place. Others like the future role and powers of the House of Lords remain under debate after publication of the Wakeham report. The prospects for still others, like the Jenkins proposals on electoral reform for Westminster, remains uncertain.¹ As with recent changes in New Zealand, we are perhaps witnessing the twilight of the pure Westminster

model, with only a few states like Barbados continuing to cling to this ideal, as nostalgically as John Major's images of cricket whites, British bobbies, and warm beer.

This study focuses upon perhaps the most important and yet contentious matter that remains to be resolved – the question of electoral reform for the British House of Commons. Debate about reform raises difficult and complex issues about the normative goals that any electoral system should serve, the trade-offs among these values, as well as the best mechanisms to achieve these goals. An extensive literature has discussed these issues (Rae, 1971; Lakeman, 1974; Bogdanor and Butler, 1983; Groffman and Lijphart, 1986; Taagepera and Shugart, 1989; Reeve and Ware, 1992; Nohlen, 1996; Norris, 1997; Farrell, 1997; Cox, 1997; Katz, 1997; Reynolds and Reilly, 1997). In this study we focus upon examining the evidence for two central claims about the virtues of preserving the current system. Proponents of the status quo at Westminster have commonly stressed the importance of keeping single member districts because, it is argued, these maintain the accountability of elected representatives to local constituents. If individual MPs misbehave in any regard – if they prove lackadaisical, miscreants, sinners or fools – then, the theory goes, voters can kick them out. This claim is important since it lies at the heart of the reform debate in British politics, framing the options considered by the Jenkins Commission. Moreover advocates argue that first-past-the-post provides a decisive electoral outcome that is perceived as fairer and more transparent than the process of post-hoc coalition formation, and one that therefore increases overall satisfaction with the democratic process.

To explore these claims, the first part of this study first sketches a broad interpretation about how we can best conceptualize the process of constitutional reform in Britain, drawing upon Lijphart's theoretical framework. The second part then outlines the arguments favoring preserving the status quo of first-past-the-post elections for Westminster and the claims that the use of single member districts strengthens voter-member linkages and promotes public satisfaction with the political system. The third part examines comparative evidence about the consequences of single, combined and multi member districts drawing on data from the 19-nation Comparative Study of Electoral Systems. The study finds that member-voter linkages are stronger in single member than in pure multimember districts, but that combined districts such as those used by Mixed Member Proportional systems (MMP) preserve these virtues. On the claims of greater public satisfaction with the political process under majoritarian systems, the study establishes some support for this contention although the evidence remains limited. The conclusion considers the implications of the findings for the debate about electoral reform and for the future of the Westminster system.

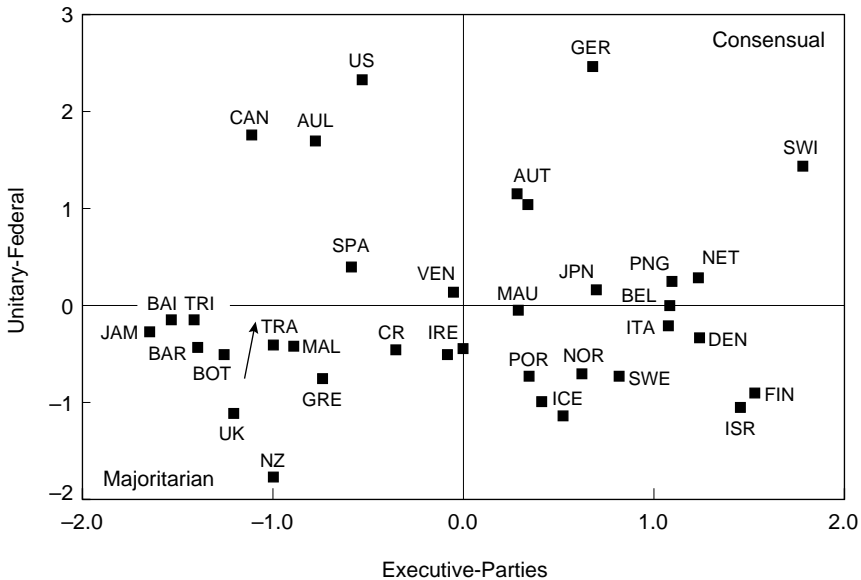
Understanding Constitutional Reform

The conceptual framework for this study starts from Arend Lijphart's classification of political institutions into majoritarian or consensus democracies (Lijphart, 1999). In this well-known theory, majoritarian systems are characterized by the concentration of power in the hands of the largest party, on the grounds that this promotes accountability with effective governance: the party in government is

empowered to take and implement difficult and tough decisions during its tenure in office, assured of the ability to pass its legislative program without many checks and balances so long as they can carry their backbenchers with them. At the end of their term of office the government can be held clearly accountable for the results of their actions and kicked out, if unpopular. In contrast the consensus model prioritizes generating broad participation in government and widespread agreement with the policies that the government should pursue, emphasizing inclusiveness, bargaining and compromise. The major institutions underpinning these forms of democracy cluster along two principal dimensions: the executive-party and the federal-unitary (see Figure 1 and Table 1).

How can Lijphart’s framework help us to understand the changing British political system? The Blair Government’s program of constitutional change covers a raft of major developments, either currently under debate or in the process of being implemented. Like billiard balls ricocheting into each other around a table, the full impact of these reforms currently remains unpredictable. For all the commissions and committees, the reviews and reports, employing the great and the good, there is no over-arching master plan but rather a perfect exemplification of British muddling through. This remains a work in progress, although perhaps the Blair government’s defining achievement during their first term in office, characterized schizophrenically by courage and timidity, radicalism and conservatism, devolution *and* centralization, often with two steps unexpectedly forwards and one back. If Blair’s progress during the 1997 election was best depicted, in Roy Jenkins

Figure 1: Typology of Democracies



Source: Lijphart Patterns of Democracy 1999

Table 1: Lijphart's Classification of Political Institutions

	Westminster model	Consensus model
Executive-parties dimension		
Executive	Single party cabinet government	Multiparty coalitional cabinet government
Balance of Powers	Executive dominance	Executive-legislative balance
Party system	Two-party system	Multi-party system
Electoral system	Majoritarian	Proportional representation
Interest group system	Pluralist	Corporatist
Federal-unitary dimension		
Dispersion of power	Unitary and centralized government	Federal and decentralized
Legislature	Unicameral legislative power	Balanced bicameralism
Constitutions	Flexible constitution amended by simple majority	Rigid constitutions changed by extraordinary majorities
Judicial review	Parliamentary sovereignty	Legislation subject to judicial review
Central banks	Bank dependent on the executive	Independent bank

memorable phrase, as gingerly carrying a Ming vase across a crowded room, the process of constitutional reform can be seen as analogous to gingerly carrying a Ming vase across a crowded room when blindfolded.

The UK political system has been or is being transformed through multiple reforms: devolution in Scotland and Wales; the introduction of multiple types of electoral systems for different bodies including PR for European elections; the regulation of party funding; central bank independence; reforms to the composition and role of the House of Lords; the peace settlement in Northern Ireland; legislation on freedom of information; and the incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights into domestic law (Blackburn and Plant, 1999; Hazell, 1999). The main change can be understood as the erosion of the pure 'Westminster' model of government, representing a highly centralized and unitary political system where executive power was concentrated in the Cabinet and House of Commons, with *multilayered governance* diffusing the process of decision-making to multiple bodies. Government powers are being transferred simultaneously downwards towards elected bodies in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, and London, and upwards towards multilateral agencies of global governance, notably the European Union as well as organizations like the World Trade Organization. Power has also

simultaneously drained away outwards, from Whitehall towards both the corporate and non-profit sectors. The UK is hardly alone in this process – globalization has been eroding the autonomy of nation-states around the world (Held *et al.*, 1999) – but the change is perhaps more dramatic and striking in the home of the Westminster system (Kreiger, 1999). As a result, the UK seems likely to remain a majoritarian democracy in the core executive but one which has moved closer towards Lijphart's 'consensus' model on the federal-unitary dimension, with a more decentralized government, stronger bicameralism, a more rigid constitution, stronger judicial review, and central bank independence. The UK is becoming more like the political systems in Australia and Canada. Comparative studies suggest that the rise of multilayered governance may well have major consequences: for the transparency, accountability, effectiveness and complexity of the decision-making process in the UK; for spending and fiscal flow in economic and social policy; for local, national and cosmopolitan identities; for the role and functions of elected representatives; and ultimately for diffuse levels of public support for the political system (Sartori, 1994; Lijphart and Waisman, 1996).

For all these developments, the Westminster system has arguably still not changed fundamentally on the executive-party dimension. Britain retains single-party majority cabinet government in Whitehall not coalitions, a dominant cabinet rather than executive-legislative balance, two-party predominance of government and opposition in Westminster, despite the rise of popular support for other parties, pluralist rather than corporatist interest groups, and above all a majoritarian electoral system for Westminster, buttressing and reinforcing all of the above. If Westminster moved towards a more proportional electoral system – as in New Zealand – then this would undermine the foundations of the majoritarian structure. Moreover alternative electoral systems have been adopted at almost every level except for Westminster with the introduction of the Additional Member system for the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly, and the London Assembly; the Supplementary Vote for the London Mayor; the Regional List system for European elections; and the Single Transferable Vote for the new Northern Ireland Assembly. The federal-unitary dimension of British government has been transformed far more than the executive-party dimension. Like Harold Lloyd dangling in midair on a skyscraper ledge, one hand has slipped but the other retains its grip.

Claims for the Virtues of First-Past-the-Post

Therefore the argument about electoral reform for the House of Commons is central to the future of the British political system, as well as dividing the major parties, and the central claims in favor of retaining the status quo deserve close and careful scrutiny. The lessons from the flourishing literature in new and old democracies is that we can identify some of the probable *mechanical* results of electoral systems with a fair degree of confidence – such as their impact on the structure of party competition, the proportionality of votes to seats, the representation of women, and patterns of turnout (Lijphart, 1994; Katz, 1997). In contrast, far less is known about what Blais and Massicotte (2001) term the *psychological* effects of electoral systems on the attitudes and behavior of voters, representatives, and parties. Reforms in Israel, Italy, Japan and New Zealand during the early 1990s

illustrate that this process remains fraught with uncertainty and often produces multiple unintended consequences (Norris, 1995; Vowles, 1998).

The debate about electoral reform at Westminster arouses strong passions among advocates, although the rest of the country seems less moved by the minutiae of the Alternative Vote (AV) + versus Supplementary Vote, or the Additional Member System (AMS) versus First-Past-The-Post. Defenders favoring keeping the current system of first-past-the-post for Westminster commonly make a series of claims for its virtues. This study examines the evidence for two core propositions about the psychological effects of electoral systems upon the public, namely that:

(1) *Single member districts promote accountability via strong links between voters and elected members*, so that electors living under these systems know more about parliamentary candidates and have greater contact with elected representatives, than those living under multimember or combined systems;

(2) *Majoritarian systems promote greater public satisfaction with the political system*, so that electors experiencing these systems are more likely to feel that the electoral system is fair, to have a strong sense of political efficacy, to turnout to vote, and to express greater overall satisfaction with democracy, compared with those under multimember or combined systems.

Claims for Strong Voter-member Linkages

What is the reasoning behind these claims? One of the primary virtues of the Westminster system is meant to lie in the chain of collective and individual accountability (Strom, 2000). The core claim is that representatives are accountable via elections if citizens can sanction those in office, retaining those that perform well and ousting those who do not (Przeworski *et al.*, 1999). Like a series of interlocking fail-safe mechanisms protecting the nuclear button, four primary channels can be identified in the Westminster system protecting citizens from the government. The first principle of parliamentary government is that the executive emerges from and is responsible to the legislature, so that the cabinet is collectively accountable on a day-to-day basis to parliament. The ultimate penalty of a legislative vote of no confidence is that the cabinet can be removed from office. Moreover at general elections, the party in government can be held collectively accountable for their actions and punished or rewarded accordingly by the electorate. Thirdly, given single member districts, strong party discipline, and mass-branch party organizations, members of parliament are seen as accountable for their actions on a regular basis to party members in their local constituency, as well as to party leaders and whips in the House. Members who fail to support party policies, or who are seen to fail in their personal conduct, may not be re-nominated for their local seat.

All these forms of accountability may or may not operate, but the specific claim examined here is the argument that even if all these mechanisms simultaneously fail, in the final stage, general elections in single member territorial districts allow constituents to hold individual MPs to account for their actions (or inactions). Voters in Britain cannot directly select the Prime Minister, the Cabinet, nor even (directly) the overall balance of parties in the Commons, but they are empowered to pick their local member of parliament. The territorial basis of the British House

of Commons reflects the traditional conception of representation ever since its origins in the thirteenth Century, and it is believed to be an important mechanism providing an incentive for constituency service, as a way to maintain members' independence from parties, and as a means to ensure that members remain concerned about the needs and concerns of all their constituents, not just party stalwarts.

The essential aspect of the electoral system promoting accountability is the *district magnitude* – the number of representatives elected to a constituency – in the case of Westminster based on single member geographically based seats. Average district magnitude is calculated very simply by dividing the total number of seats in the legislature by the number of districts. Other classic dimensions of electoral systems are less relevant to voter-member linkages, such as the electoral formulas, threshold, and ballot structure. The use of all single member districts produces a district magnitude of one in Britain and the USA, whereas at the other extreme the use of the whole country as one constituency, as in Israel and the Netherlands, produces district magnitudes of 120 and 150 respectively. In multimember districts with closed party lists electors are powerless to reward or punish individual candidates, they can only signify their displeasure with particular politicians by casting a ballot against the whole party. PR systems with open party lists allow electors to prioritize candidates within a list, but it is more difficult for voters to evaluate all the candidates on such a list than to become familiar with a local representative in a single seat. The choice of district magnitude has many significant consequences, as Reynolds and Reilly (1997, p. 92) observe: 'To sum up, when designing an electoral system, the district magnitude is in many ways the key factor in determining how the system will operate in practice, the extent of the link between voters and elected members, and the overall proportionality of the results'.

This claim of electoral accountability represents an important issue that has framed and limited much of the debate about alternative systems in Britain, for example the Jenkins report (1998) was given a wide-ranging brief but the terms specified that '*a link* between MPs and geographic constituencies' should be maintained (my italics). While systems with a small district magnitude, like the Single Transferable Vote (STV), and mixed systems like the Additional Member System (AMS), could be and were considered for the Commons, this effectively ruled out any consideration of the system which is most common throughout the rest of Europe: regional party lists with large multimember districts. The report concluded that the vast majority of MPs (80–85 per cent) should continue to be elected on an individual constituency basis by the Alternative Vote, with the remainder elected on a corrective top-up basis based on open party lists in small multimember constituencies formed from county or city boundaries.

But is there good evidence supporting the core claim that electors living in single member districts generally know more about local parliamentary candidates and have more contact with elected representatives – and can therefore hold them to account more effectively – than those living in multimember constituencies? The evidence remains inconclusive.

Some of the most plausible cross-national evidence in favor of the claim for strong voter-member linkages is provided by Bernhard Wessels (1999) who compared

the role orientations of national MPs in Europe and Members of the European Parliament in the 15 EU member states. He found that district magnitude was significantly related to role orientations: the smaller the district magnitude – and therefore the more personalized the electoral competition – the more members chose to represent their constituency. Another important indicator in favor of this proposition is a study where Curtice and Shively (2000) examined the evidence that voters were contacted more often and had better knowledge of candidates under single member district systems rather than under PR multimember districts, and concluded that in both cases there was a positive and significant effect.

In addition, evidence within particular countries confirms that legislators in majoritarian systems like the USA, Britain and Australia dedicate a large proportion of their time to constituency service (Cain *et al.*, 1987; McAllister, 1997). British Members of Parliament face a series of conflicting demands on their time and energies but in recent years they are devoting an increasing amount of time to ‘service responsiveness’: dealing with government departments on behalf of individual constituents and local groups. MPs help shortcut the bureaucratic maze of housing regulations, police complaint procedures, or social security claims for individuals, or local groups, mediating on behalf of constituents to ensure government officials uphold their rights. The growth of such activities in the post-war period has been documented (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995). What is less clear is whether elected members elsewhere also provide similar services. Studies in Ireland and Italy, for example, have shown that deputies work hard for their constituents, and they may actually undertake more constituency business than their British equivalents (Gallagher *et al.*, 1995). Small multimember districts may actually promote *greater* incentives for constituency service than single member districts, since members need to distinguish themselves from other contestants within their own party (Carey and Shugart, 1992). In Britain it has also commonly been found that the ‘personal vote’ for MPs is normally limited in scope, and there is little evidence that the amount of constituency service is tied to the electoral incentive of seat marginality (Norris, 1997; Norris *et al.*, 1992).

Moreover previous studies suggest a complex relationship between the type of electoral system, the degree of constituency casework, and knowledge of candidates, mediated by political culture, the traditional role of legislators, and the structure of government services. For example few members of the German Bundestag engage in constituency service, irrespective of whether members are elected via the party lists or single member districts, in large part because services like housing, education and welfare are the responsibility of the Lander level (Wessels, 1997). Voter-legislator linkages may be determined by the size of the constituency combined with the provision of legislative staff more than by the use of single member districts. Consider, for example, the amount of mail that can be generated in a populous Senate seat like California compared with a small UK constituency like the Western Isles. Based on a comparison of twelve west European democracies, Vernon Bogdanor (1985) was skeptical about any simple and direct relationships among the type of electoral system, voters’ awareness of candidates, and levels of constituency service, and the study concluded that cultural and historical traditions play a far more important role in determining parliamentary-constituent relationships than the electoral system *per se*.

Claims about Public Satisfaction with the Political System

The second claim examined here concerns the broader consequences of the choice of electoral system upon political support. Claims about the perceived fairness of different electoral systems are commonly invoked on all sides of the reform debate. One of the commonest arguments by those favoring electoral reform is that the British public has become dissatisfied with the fairness of the outcome, a claim that has become increasingly popular with the rise of electoral support for minor parties since the early 1970s and the continued barriers they face in entry to the House of Commons. In turn, it is argued, this has fuelled wider public disaffection with the political system, undermining faith and confidence in British representative democracy. Yet proponents favoring the status quo have made counter claims. It can be argued that first-past-the-post represents a simple and transparent method of translating votes into seats, and the decisiveness of the outcome means that voters may regard the results as fairer, more satisfactory, and more democratic than a coalition government produced by post-hoc behind-the-scenes negotiations between unexpected political bedfellows (such as in New Zealand or the Netherlands). Previous comparative studies suggest that greater institutional confidence and system support is associated with majoritarian rather than proportional electoral systems (Norris, 1998; Listhaug *et al.*, 2000).

Yet again evidence for and against these claims remains inconclusive and mixed. Curtice and Jowell (1997) examined trends in public support for the British political system and reported a decline in trust in government and political institutions from 1987 to 1996. Yet at the same time they detected no apparent trend towards increased support for electoral reform in Britain from 1983 to 1996; during this period in a steady pattern over one half of the public say they favor keeping the current system and one third support reform. Yet there are many reasons why it is difficult to interpret declining institutional confidence as a direct response towards the workings of the British electoral system *per se* since the demand for constitutional change is only weakly tied in voters' minds to levels of trust in the political system; moreover similar patterns of declining institutional trust are evident in many post-industrial societies, including those like Sweden with PR electoral systems (Dalton, 1998). Studies have also looked directly at a broader range of attitudes towards constitutional and electoral reform but public opinion on these issues tends to be soft and incoherent. The best demonstration of this tendency is the way public opinion is open to framing effects: even in the same survey, the same people offer responses both supportive and critical of the current electoral system and potential alternatives, depending upon the way the questions are worded and ordered (Curtice and Jowell, 1998; Dunleavy and Margetts, 1997). These results suggest that on these issues public attitudes monitored in surveys are similar to Zaller's (1992) 'top of the head' responses, akin to asking the public about, say, the truth or falsity of Fermat's theorem or Einstein's theories of relativity. Surveys may generate an answer but it may not necessarily be meaningful. Electoral reform is a technical and abstract issue, involving considerable uncertainty about hypothetical choices, so not surprisingly qualitative studies conclude that the public typically displays little understanding of how alternative electoral system would work, and indeed a fairly muddled view even of how the current system operates (Hedges and White, 1999).

Research Design, Comparative Framework and Data

These considerations suggest that we need to reexamine whether voter-member linkages, and general satisfaction with the political system, are actually higher in single member than multimember districts, as claimed by proponents of maintaining the Westminster status quo.

The psychological effects of majoritarian and proportional electoral systems on public opinion and the evidence for these claims can be investigated in many ways. One approach is through the comparison of the workings of different electoral systems within the UK, with appropriate controls, which allow ideal 'natural experiments' for testing these propositions. Hence voter's awareness of candidates can now be compared under different electoral systems within one country, including elections to the Scottish Parliament, European Parliament, and House of Commons. To compare like with like, however, this strategy can only attribute any differences to the type of electoral system *per se* after the new regional bodies have been in existence for at least one term, and even then any differences in the public's awareness of candidates, in the provision of constituency service or even levels of turnout could be due to the functions and visibility of members of these bodies rather than to the electoral systems as such.² Moreover this approach is only appropriate for post-hoc evaluations of public reactions, after the reforms are introduced, when it may be too late to serve the policy process well.

Alternatively these claims can be examined from a cross-national perspective, as they are here based on the third release of survey data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems covering 19 nations (CSES).³ The CSES uses a common module incorporated into cross-sectional post-election national surveys within each country, (total N = 32022), including the BES. Full details of the CSES dataset and questionnaire are available online (www.umich.edu/~nes/cses). The electoral studies in this dataset were for contests from 1996 to 1999.

The 19 countries under comparison vary significantly along multiple dimensions, including levels of democratic and socioeconomic development, as well as cultural and geographic regions of the world. The comparison includes four Anglo-American democracies (Australia, the USA, Britain and New Zealand), five West European nations ranging from the Scandinavian north to the southern Mediterranean (Spain, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway), six post-communist nations in Central and Eastern Europe (Ukraine, Czech Republic, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Hungary), two Latin American societies (Mexico and Argentina), one in the Middle East (Israel), and two Asian countries (Japan and Taiwan). In comparing the pattern of constituent-representative linkages in different nations we need to control for intervening factors that can be expected to influence this process, including at aggregate level the length of time which a country has been a continuous democracy and levels of democratization, as well as standard social background factors at individual-level including age, education, gender and income that previous studies have found to be commonly associated with levels of political knowledge and voter-initiated contact activity (Verba *et al.*, 1995).

Classifying Electoral Systems

Most importantly, the comparison includes a wide variety of electoral systems exemplifying most of the major types around the globe, ranging from single member districts in the USA, Australia and Britain, through to the Netherlands and Israel where the whole country represents one geographic constituency. The proportionality of the system and its electoral formulae are less important for this study than the district magnitude. Three nations under comparison used *single member* districts including first-past-the-post systems (the USA and the UK) and the Alternative Vote (Australia). Eight nations used *multimember* districts with proportional representation party lists including Spain, Israel, Poland, Romania, Argentina, the Netherlands, Norway and the Czech Republic. Eight used *combined* districts that mixed both single member and multi member seats, including New Zealand,⁴ Germany, Hungary, Japan, Mexico, Ukraine, Lithuania, and Taiwan. There are many other important differences in electoral systems within each category, summarized in Table 2, for example in the ballot structure of first-past-the-post in the UK and the Alternative Vote in Australia, in the proportion of single member districts and party list members elected in mixed systems, as well as in levels of electoral thresholds facing minor parties. In this study we can start by describing the differences in knowledge, contact and political support among citizens living in single member, combined and multi member district systems, then use multivariate analysis with controls to explore this further.

The Impact of Electoral Systems

The electoral system can have multiple influences upon the electorate and here we focus on just two: how far the system affects voter awareness of candidates and their contacts with MPs.

Voter Knowledge of Parliamentary Candidates

To examine the claims that single member districts increase voters' awareness about parliamentary candidates, we need to establish what citizens knew about those seeking their vote. The CSES asked respondents whether they recalled any candidates in their district in the last parliamentary election and, if so, they were asked to identify their name. Up to three candidate names were recorded and these were verified as correct against constituency data. It can be argued that voters may still know much about the elected member or members from their district and they may be familiar with opposing candidates standing for election, even if they remain unable to recall their names. Voters may also be able to use heuristic shortcuts if they support 'the Labour man' or 'the Liberal Democrat woman'. Nevertheless name-recognition is a significant indirect indicator of broader awareness of electoral choices, it has long been used in surveys to test political knowledge, and it is important in order to be able to evaluate the general record of elected members, to hold individual politicians accountable for their actions.

The descriptive results in Table 3 list how far people could correctly identify candidates and the pattern shows considerable variation among countries. The Japanese electorate emerges with the highest awareness of those standing for the Diet: only 6 per cent failed correctly to identify any candidate. In contrast at

Table 2: Electoral Systems for the Lower House in the Selected Countries Under Comparison

Types of Districts	Year of Election	Electoral System	Party List	Formula	Thresh- hold %	No of members			Total number of Districts for Lists	Voting Age Population (VAP)	Average VAP per member	Mean District Mag.	Prop. ENPP	Max. Years between Elections	
						All MPs	SMD MPs	List MPs							
Single member															
USA	1996	FPTP		Plurality	None	435	435			196,511,000	436,700	1	6	2.0	2
UK	1997	FPTP		Plurality	None	659	659			45,094,000	68,400	1	20	2.1	5
Australia	1996	AV		Majority	None	148	148			13,548,000	91,500	1	16	2.6	3
Combined															
Japan	1996	Parallel-FPTP				500	200	300	11	96,673,000	193,300	27			4
Germany	1998	FPTP+PR	Closed			656	328	328		65,942,000	100,000				4
Mexico	1997	FPTP+PR	Closed			500	300	200	1	55,407,000	110,800	200			3
Ukraine	1998	FPTP+PR		LR-Hare	4	450	225	225	1	38,939,000	86,500	225	14	6.0	5
Taiwan	1996	SNTV+PR	Closed		5	334	234/58	100	2	14,341,000	42,900	50	5	2.5	4
Hungary	1998	FPTP+PR	Closed			386	176	110	1	7,743,000	20,100	110			4
Lithuania	1998	2nd Ballot+PR		LR-Hare	5	141	71	70	1	2,751,000	19,500	70	24	3.3	4
New Zealand	1996	FPTP+PR		St Laguë	5	120	65	55	1	2,572,000	21,400	55	4	3.8	

Table 2: Continued

Types of Districts	Year of Election	Electoral System	Party List	Formula	Thresh- hold %	No of members			Total number of Districts for Lists	Voting Age Population (VAP)	Average VAP per member	Mean District Mag.	Prop. ENPP	Max. Years between Elections
						All MPs	SMD MPs	List MPs						
Multimember														
Spain	1996	PR Lists	Closed	D' Hondt	3	350	350	50	31,013,000	88,600	7	7	2.7	4
Poland	1997	PR Lists	Open	D' Hondt	7	460	460	52	27,902,000	60,700	8	18	2.9	4
Argentina	1999	PR Lists	Closed	D' Hondt	3	257	257	24	23,230,000	90,400	10			2
Romania	1996	PR Lists	Closed	D' Hondt	3	343	343	42	16,737,000	48,800	8	18	3.4	4
Netherlands	1998	PR Lists	Closed	D' Hondt	0.67	150	150	1	11,996,000	80,000	150	5	4.8	4
Czech Rep	1996	PR Lists	Closed	LR-Droop	5	200	200	8	7,859,000	39,300	25	11	4.2	4
Israel	1996	PR Lists	Closed	D' Hondt	1.5	120	120	1	3,685,000	30,700	120	4	5.6	5
Norway	1997	PR Lists	Closed	St Laguë		165	165	19	3,360,000	20,000	8	5	2.4	4

Notes: PR Proportional Representation; FPTP First Past the Post; AV Alternative Vote; SMD Single Member Districts; List Party List; SMD Single Member Districts; List Party List. Note this classification distinguishes between NZ MMP where the outcome depends upon the proportion of votes cast in the party lists and mixed systems used in Taiwan, Ukraine and Lithuania where the single member districts and party lists operate independently and in parallel.

Voting Age Population: IDEA Voter Turnout from 1945 to 1997. www.idea.int

Source: Successive volumes of Electoral Studies; Richard Rose, Neil Munro and Tom Mackie (1998) *Elections in Central and Eastern Europe Since 1990*. Strathclyde: Center for the Study of Public Policy. <http://www.aceproject.org/>; Lawrence LeDuc, Richard G. Niemi and Pippa Norris (eds) (1996) *Comparing Democracies: Elections and Voting in Global Perspective*. London: Sage. Table 1.2.

the other extreme, one fifth of all Mexicans could not correctly name a single candidate, and the same was true of one quarter of all Spaniards. But the other important pattern shown in the comparison is that the three single member electoral systems – Britain, Australia and the USA – emerged as about average, above some of the newer democracies, it is true, but also all below Norway, Hungary, Germany and New Zealand. In Britain, 40 per cent failed to name a single parliamentary candidate, while one third could recall the name of one candidate, and one third could correctly identify at least two. There is little persuasive evidence from the rank order or the mean averages, without any controls, that electors necessarily know more about the contestants seeking their support in pure single member district systems than under combined systems, although both these systems tend to show stronger member-voter linkages than under pure multimember PR districts.

Voter Contact with MPs

We asked people whether they had had any contact with an MP during the previous twelve months. It should be noted that this need not necessarily have

Table 3: Knowledge of Candidates

	% of respondents getting			Type of district
	None correct	One correct	Two correct	
Japan	6	14	80	Combined
New Zealand	17	20	63	Combined
Germany	24	43	33	Combined
Norway	31	18	51	Multimember
Hungary	37	24	40	Combined
Britain	40	32	29	Single member
Czech Republic	42	21	37	Multimember
Australia	43	58		Single member
USA	48	24	28	Single member
Ukraine	61	18	21	Combined
Poland	62	22	16	Multimember
Taiwan	63	13	24	Combined
Romania	71	19	10	Multimember
Spain	74	16	11	Multimember
Mexico	82	11	7	Combined
<i>All</i>	<i>48</i>	<i>22</i>	<i>30</i>	
<i>Single member</i>	<i>43</i>	<i>37</i>	<i>20</i>	
<i>Combined</i>	<i>43</i>	<i>18</i>	<i>39</i>	
<i>Multimember</i>	<i>60</i>	<i>17</i>	<i>24</i>	

Note: Q: 'Do you happen to remember the name of any candidates who ran/stood in your [lower house primary electoral district] in the last [parliamentary/congressional] election? [If YES] What were their names?'

Source: *Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, 1996-99.*

involved constituency service *per se*, since this could have been generated by the form of election campaign like telephone or household canvassing, or party rallies, as well as by constituency surgeries. Nor does this specify the direction of who originated the contact activity, whether voters or members. Nevertheless proponents of single member districts suggest that in general voters should have more contact with members through all these channels.

The results show that on average about 12 per cent of the public reported contact with an MP during the previous year, with the highest levels in New Zealand and minimal contact activity in Poland, Netherlands and Spain. Britain proved close to the average, with 13 per cent of citizens contacting an MP during this period. Without any controls, the initial pattern shows that compared with pure multi-member PR systems, the overall amount of contact is marginally greater in both single member and in combined systems. This provides some support to the claims that retaining the links between an individual member and a particular

Table 4: Contact with Elected Representatives

	% with contact	Type of districts
New Zealand	26	Combined
Australia	16	Single member
Israel	16	Multimember
Lithuania	15	Combined
Norway	15	Multimember
USA	14	Single member
Britain	13	Single member
Germany	11	Combined
Mexico	10	Combined
Argentina	10	Multimember
Japan	8	Combined
Taiwan	8	Combined
Ukraine	8	Combined
Hungary	7	Combined
Czech Republic	7	Multimember
Romania	7	Multimember
Poland	6	Multimember
Netherlands	5	Multimember
Spain	3	Multimember
<i>All</i>	<i>12</i>	
<i>Single member</i>	<i>14</i>	
<i>Combined</i>	<i>14</i>	
<i>Multimember</i>	<i>8</i>	

Note: Q12: 'During the last twelve months, have you had any contact with a [Member of Parliament/a Member of Congress] in any way?'

Source: *Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, 1996-99.*

constituency maintains member-voter linkages, although at the same time there are no significant virtues in this regard for first-past-the-post over mixed systems like MMP. The pattern by nation shows that Australia is ranked second in this list, and the USA and Britain are just slightly above average. A closer look at the rankings, however, shows that some multimember districts like Israel and Norway are also above average in contact activity, as are some combined systems like New Zealand and Lithuania. Multiple factors may also be contributing towards variations in the overall pattern – such as the size of the country, the average voting age population per district, or even the type of pre-modern or post-modern electoral campaign – as much as district magnitude *per se*. Despite the current debate that the Israeli nation-wide constituency needs to introduce local districting to promote constituency service and individual accountability, it turns out that members of the Knesset are about as active in maintaining contact with the electorate as Westminster representatives.

Multivariate analysis is required to examine all these relationships in more depth. As a first step in this direction, logistic regression models can be used to examine the impact of single member, combined and multimember districts upon the two core measures of contact activity and knowledge of candidates. The models first entered controls for the level of democratization in each country (measured by the Freedom House Gastil Index), that might be expected to shape political traditions and democratic cultures, and individual-level background factors which are commonly found to influence contact activity and political knowledge, namely age, sex, education and income (the latter as a proxy for socioeconomic status). The second step then entered the electoral system variables, using dummies for whether the system had single member or combined districts, with the multimember PR system as the default. Details of the coding used for all items are listed in Table 5.

The results predicting contact activity in Table 5 show that the Gastil index and the demographic variables behaved in the expected way: there was more contact between voters and elected members in more democratic countries. Education and male gender also proved significant predictors of the amount of contact activity (although, interestingly, age and income proved weak predictors). After controlling for these factors, compared with multimember districts, single member districts proved to be significantly associated with the amount of contact activity but at the same time, as already observed, combined districts (such as those with first-past-the-post plus party lists) actually displayed the highest level of contact activity. Table 6 repeats this exercise for knowledge of candidates, and finds a similar pattern for the level of democratization and the role of education and gender. After introducing these controls, in this case the use of single member districts proves an insignificant predictor of knowledge of candidates, whereas the use of combined districts proves strongly related.

Extrapolating from these results, this suggests, as observed earlier, that although proponents of maintaining the status quo for Westminster commonly claim that retaining the geographic link between individual MPs and a particular local constituency under FPTP is essential for strong voter-member linkages, in fact combined

Table 5: Models Predicting Contact with Elected Members

	Model I			Model II		
	B	SE	Sig	B	SE	Sig
Level of Democratization	0.220	0.024	0.000	0.290	0.025	0.000
<i>Social controls</i>						
Age	0.006	0.001	0.000	0.004	0.001	0.000
Gender (male)	0.284	0.036	0.000	0.291	0.036	0.000
Education	0.251	0.011	0.000	0.237	0.011	0.000
Income	0.002	0.011	0.000	0.035	0.011	0.000
<i>Electoral districts</i>						
Single member				0.274	0.053	0.000
Combined				0.691	0.044	0.000
Constant	4.54			5.29		
% Correctly predicted	87.8			87.8		
Nagelkerke R2	0.053			0.069		

Notes: Model I: Binary logistic regression models without the electoral variables. Model II: Complete model where electoral systems with only multimember party list districts are the default.

Level of democratization is measured by the Freedom House Gastil Index of Political Rights and Civil Liberties (reversed scale).

Age: Years. Education: 8-point scale from none (1) to completed university graduate (8). Income: Household income on a standardized 5 point scale. Type of district: Multimember (1) Combined (2) Single member (3).

Source: Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, 1996-98.

Table 6: Models Predicting Knowledge of Candidates

	Model I			Model II		
	B	SE	Sig	B	SE	Sig
Level of democratization	0.631	0.016	0.000	0.650	0.018	0.000
<i>Social controls</i>						
Age	0.016	0.001	0.000	0.015	0.001	0.000
Gender (male)	0.171	0.026	0.000	0.177	0.026	0.000
Education	0.180	0.008	0.000	0.165	0.008	0.000
Income	0.059	0.119	0.000	0.110	0.037	0.000
<i>Electoral districts</i>						
Single member				0.017	0.032	Ns
Combined				0.470	0.134	0.000
Constant	-5.36			-6.93		
% Correctly predicted	64.5			68.3		
Nagelkerke R2	15.5			20.4		

Notes: Model I: Binary logistic regression models without the electoral variables. Model II: Complete model where electoral systems with only multimember party list districts are the default.

See Table 5 for details of all data and coding. Ns = not significant.

Source: Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, 1996-8.

systems display similar levels of contact activity and stronger levels of awareness of candidates. It remains to be seen whether many other characteristics of the electoral and political system are affecting the results, and plausibly many other factors may be important such as the average voter population in each district, the size of the assembly, the length of the campaign, the regulations of campaign advertising, and the role and functions of national parliaments. Once more nations are eventually added to the CSES dataset, providing a wider variety of political systems, then these would all be fruitful avenues for further research and more sophisticated modeling.

Political Support and Electoral Systems

Beyond these indicators of specific knowledge and contact, do voters display more general satisfaction with the political system under different systems? In this regard we need to consider the best way to measure the concept of 'support for the political system'. Elsewhere, building on the Eastonian framework, I have argued that this is essentially a multidimensional concept and so cannot be tapped reliably using single measures, for example of political trust (Norris, 1998). Instead we can distinguish between five levels of support ranging from the most abstract and diffuse level, measured by support for the political community like the nation-state, down through support for democratic values, for the political regime, for political institutions, and for political actors. In this view, citizens can logically distinguish between levels, for example trusting their local representative and yet having little confidence in parliament as an institution, or approving of democratic ideals but still criticizing the performance of their government, and so on. Following this logic, four alternative indicators of political support were used for the analysis in this study, with the specific items listed under Table 5.

Specific support was measured by perceptions of the *fairness of the electoral system*; the most direct evaluation of how well the system was seen to work. Yet responses to this item could easily be colored by the outcome of the specific campaign under analysis, for example by the party that won office. Diffuse support, understood to indicate more general approval of the political system as a whole, was measured by general *satisfaction with the democratic process*. It would be consistent to approve of how the last election worked and yet to remain dissatisfied with how democracy performed in general, or vice versa. The diffuse sense that citizens could influence the political process was tapped by measures of *political efficacy*. Lastly, *voting turnout* was compared as a critical indicator of involvement in the specific election. Factor analysis (not reported here) revealed that these items fell into two principal dimensions: the 'approval' dimension meant that perceptions of the fairness of the electoral system were closely related to general satisfaction with democracy, while the 'participation' dimension meant that political efficacy was closely related to electoral turnout (Norris, 2000).

The results of the comparison in Table 7 show that on average the public living under the majoritarian systems was slightly more likely to display positive attitudes in terms of the fairness of elections, levels of efficacy and overall satisfaction with democracy than the average response for those living under PR or combined systems. This lends further confirmation to my earlier models comparing the impact

Table 7: Indicators of Public Satisfaction with the Electoral and Political Systems

	% Fairness of election	% High efficacy	% Turnout	Satisfaction with democracy	Type of districts	
USA	75	78	77	81	Single member	
Australia		69	95	78		
Britain	81	76	83	75		
Mean	78	74	85	78		
New Zealand	77	76	95	68	Combined	
Japan	42	65	84	64		
Germany	91	69	93	63		
Taiwan	62	53	92	47		
Hungary	82	73	73	42		
Mexico	56	10	76	42		
Lithuania	55	66		35		
Ukraine	37	71	77	9		
Mean	63	60	84	46		
Czech Rep	80	86	90	61	Multimember	
Argentina	59	56		42		
Norway	93	86	86	90		
Netherlands	92	30	78	88		
Poland	72	74	57	63		
Spain	80	70	90	63		
Israel	20	17	83	53		
Romania	82	71	88	44		
Mean	72	61	82	63		
All	73	64	80	63		

Fairness of Election: Q2. '(PLEASE SEE CARD 1) In some countries, people believe their elections are conducted fairly. In other countries, people believe that their elections are conducted unfairly. Thinking of the last election in [country], where would you place it on this scale of one to five where ONE means that the last election was conducted fairly and FIVE means that the last election was conducted unfairly? Percentage who believed election was fair (defined as categories 1 and 2).

Satisfaction with Democracy: Q1. 'On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied, or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in [country]?' The figures represent the percentage 'very' or 'fairly' satisfied.

Political Efficacy: The 15-point political efficacy scale was constructed from the following items that were highly inter-correlated. 'High' efficacy was categorized as a total score of 8 or above.

Q11. (PLEASE SEE CARD 5) 'Some people say that members of [Congress/Parliament] know what ordinary people think. Others say that members of [Congress/Parliament] don't know much about what ordinary people think. Using the scale on this card, (where ONE means that the members of [Congress/Parliament] know what ordinary people think, and FIVE means that the members of [Congress/Parliament] don't know much about what ordinary people think), where would you place yourself?'

Q13. (PLEASE SEE CARD 6) 'Some people say it makes a difference who is in power. Others say that it doesn't make a difference who is in power. Using the scale on this card, (where ONE means that it makes a difference who is in power and FIVE means that it doesn't make a difference who is in power), where would you place yourself?'

Q14. (PLEASE SEE CARD 7) 'Some people say that no matter who people vote for, it won't make any difference to what happens. Others say that who people vote for can make a difference to what happens. Using the scale on this card, (where ONE means that voting won't make a difference to what happens and FIVE means that voting can make a difference), where would you place yourself?'

Turnout: The question measured whether the respondent cast a ballot in the election. Functionally equivalent but not identical items were used in each national election survey.

Source: Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, 1996-98.

of electoral systems on institutional confidence using the World Values survey data, as well as other recent work by Listhaug *et al.*, (2000).

Nevertheless a closer examination of the distribution in the CSES data shows considerable variations within each category. For example evaluations of the fairness of the election was among the strongest in the Netherlands, where 92 per cent thought that the election was fair. Yet in contrast in Israel, using a similar PR system with a low threshold and a nation-wide constituency, only one fifth of the public felt that the election was fair. The variations among the combined systems ranged from 91 per cent believing that the election was fair in Germany down to 37 per cent in the Ukraine. These substantial contrasts can plausibly be attributable to the many factors commonly used to explain levels of political support, including the role of political culture, the performance of the regime, and the broader workings of political institutions beyond the electoral system (Norris, 1998). The fact that the three majoritarian systems (the USA, Australia and Britain) are all long-established democracies and affluent post-industrial societies hinders any direct comparison across nations, in contrast to consolidating regimes such as in the Ukraine, Mexico and Taiwan. The final release of the CSES dataset is planned to expand the number and range of nations under comparison and this would allow these propositions to be tested more systematically, along with comparison of the relative differences among sub-groups of the population within each country (Norris, 2000). Defenders of majoritarian systems commonly argue that the electoral rules of the game generate greater public trust and satisfaction, producing a more decisive outcome that more accurately reflects the choice of the plurality of voters, rather than back-room wheelings and dealings to produce coalitional partners, and the limited evidence reviewed here lends some support to these claims.

Conclusions: the Implications for Westminster Government

The process of constitutional reform in Britain is a complex process with multiple developments at different levels of government. With constitutional reform, like Johnston's dog singing in a bar, the amazement is not due to the grace of the voice but to the fact that it is happening at all. Nevertheless despite the sweeping nature of the reforms in the federal-unitary dimension, so far the status quo in elections to the House of Commons means that less has altered in the executive-parties dimension. Westminster remains still, recognizably, Westminster despite all the multiple reforms implemented or in the process of being introduced under the Blair administration. Yet, like Bagehot's old man wearing the clothes of his youth, underneath profound shifts are altering the centralized nature of British government. We are just starting to evaluate the full consequences of the rise of multilayered governance for matters like the complexity and transparency of the policymaking process, as well as for how the public has responded to these developments in terms of their national identities, trust in the political system, and levels of civic engagement.

The keystone to further substantial change in the political system lies in electoral reform for the House of Commons. Are the arguments favoring preserving first-past-the-post for Westminster justified? We remain open to persuasion, but the

evidence reviewed here suggests considerable grounds for skepticism about many claims about its virtues. Theoretically rational choice models offer many plausible reasons why single member districts should strengthen the linkage between electors and elected members, promoting interactive contact, constituency service, and voter awareness of the electoral choices of candidates (Carey and Shugart, 1992). In practice, however, the evidence examined here suggests that messy reality gets in the way of simple relationships. The study arrives at two major conclusions:

First, compared with pure multimember PR systems, single member districts were found to generate more voter-member contact, but combined districts showed equal or stronger levels of voter-member contact activity as well as far greater knowledge of the candidates. We can conclude that the evidence supports the claim that having *some* members of parliament elected from single member districts promotes voter-member linkages, but this argument does not preclude the introduction of mixed or combined systems with some multimember districts, as in Germany or New Zealand, which are widely believed to have other virtues for matters like proportionality and social diversity.

Second, the study lends further confirmation to the claims that the public displays greater satisfaction with the political system in countries employing majoritarian electoral systems, as indicated by evaluations of the fairness of elections, feelings of political efficacy and overall satisfaction with democracy. This supports the argument that majoritarian systems produce a clear and decisive outcome, expressing the wishes of the plurality of voters, whereas proportional systems are more likely to lead to a process of bargaining and compromises in government coalition building that may produce less overall satisfaction with the system. Nevertheless the evidence examined here remains limited, mainly by the fact that the three majoritarian systems are all among the most affluent and long-established democracies, and this finding needs testing more widely with more sophisticated models once the range of countries included in the current release of the CSES dataset is extended.

Moreover as soon as we look at particular countries, it is clear that the relationship between the type of electoral system and the type of voter-member linkages is contingent upon many other factors, and the deviations from the overall pattern become clear. For example, electors in multimember Israel reported as much contact with members of the Knesset as did British voters with MPs in the House of Commons. It can be argued that this is not surprising since, after all, Israel is a small, compact and above-all intensely political society, where everyone seems to know everyone in public life. In the same way, knowledge of the candidates may be particularly strong in New Zealand because of the intense battle that had been waged for the MMP system, while Germans or Norwegians may score highly on this indicator because these are affluent, well-educated societies sharing certain North European democratic traditions. Along similar lines, people in the Ukraine probably feel pessimistic about the way that democracy is working in their country for the very good reason that democracy isn't working particularly well there. Yet as soon as particular cultural or historical factors are taken into account then this erodes claims for a direct relationship between the simple mechanics of the electoral rules and the complex relationship between elected members and citizens.

Clearly more work is needed to plumb the full psychological effects of electoral systems, and the expansion of the CSES dataset once more countries become available can facilitate this process. Comparisons across all the different electoral systems in Britain also promise all sorts of delights for the psephologically inclined. But the initial picture that emerges from this evidence suggests that while defenders of first-past-the-post for Westminster want to cloak themselves in the assumed virtues of this system, in practice the reality is more complex and the introduction of mixed systems could preserve the old benefits while adding multiple advantages.

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About the Author

Pippa Norris, Shorenstein Center, John F Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Cambridge MA 02138, USA; email: pippa_norris@harvard.edu

Notes

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- 1 At the time of writing (April 2001) the Jenkins Commission has recommended the Alternative Vote Plus system for the House of Commons. The Labour government remains committed to holding a referendum on electoral reform, promised in the 1997 manifesto, but the timing for this remains undecided. The Liberal Democrat spokesperson, Simon Hughes, has indicated that the party will not back the non-proportional Alternative Vote Plus system proposed by the Jenkins report to replace first-past-the-post. In addition, the Kerley Working Party has recommended the use of STV for local elections in Scotland. Details of recent developments are regularly monitored by the Electoral Reform Society: www.electoral-reform.org.uk. The full text of the Jenkins report is available at: www.official-documents.co.uk/document/cm40/4090/4090.htm.
- 2 The wrong lessons can easily be drawn, as shown by conclusions about the European elections where low turnout was commonly blamed on the introduction of the regional party list systems rather than the nature of the campaign and levels of public interest in the outcome.
- 3 More details of the research design and collaborators are available at www.umich.edu/~nes/cses.
- 4 It should be noted that Curtice and Shively classify New Zealand according to their old electoral system, as single member majoritarian, which may account for differences between this study and their results since it turns out that New Zealand is on the high end for both candidate knowledge and contact activity.

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