



DEM OCR ACY

Voting
Systems

Electoral Systems

Electoral, or voting systems are the methods used to elect representatives to local councils and the Scottish and UK parliaments.

There are three main systems used in the UK:

| | |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Single Transferable Vote (STV) | <i>Scottish Councils</i> |
| Additional Member System (AMS) | <i>Scottish Parliament</i> |
| First Past the Post (FPTP) | <i>UK Parliament</i> |



First Past the Post (FPTP)

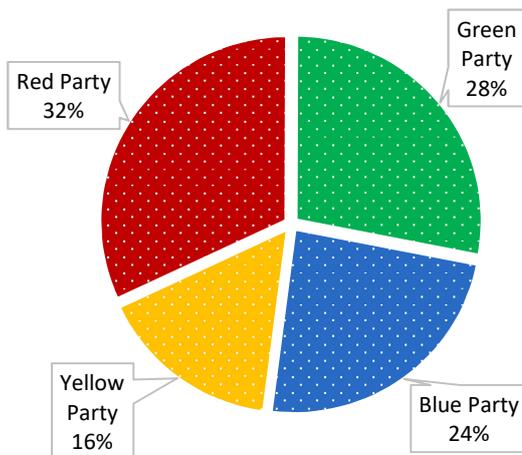
Constituency Seats

First Past the Post is a simple majority system used to elect MPs to the UK Parliament during General Elections. The UK is divided into 650 constituencies each with around 75,000 constituents. Each constituency is represented by 1 representative. In order to become the winning candidate in a constituency, the candidate must win the most votes, or more votes than any other candidate.

Key Word

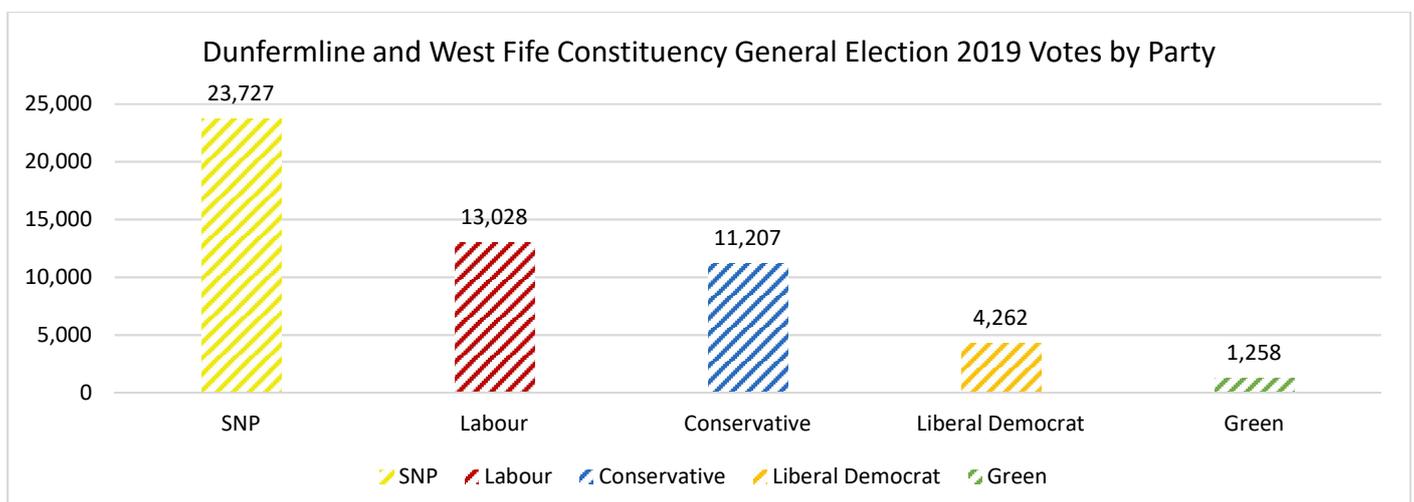
Constituent: a person who lives in a constituency.

Bridgebrook Constituency Votes



In this example, the candidate for the red party wins because they gain a higher number of votes than any of the other parties. However, it's important to note, that 68% (a majority) of people did **not** vote red.

To decide the winner of the General Election, it's not the party with the most votes or highest percentage of votes that wins. Rather, *it is the party that wins the most constituency seats (MPs) that wins.*

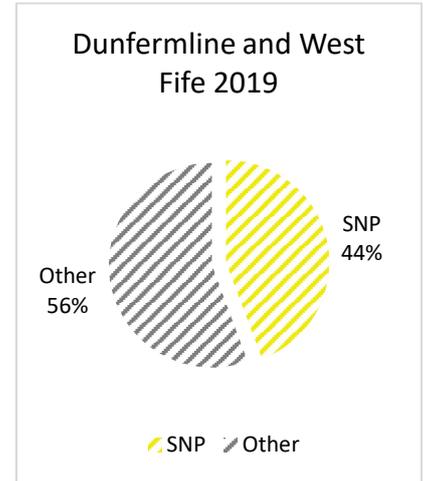




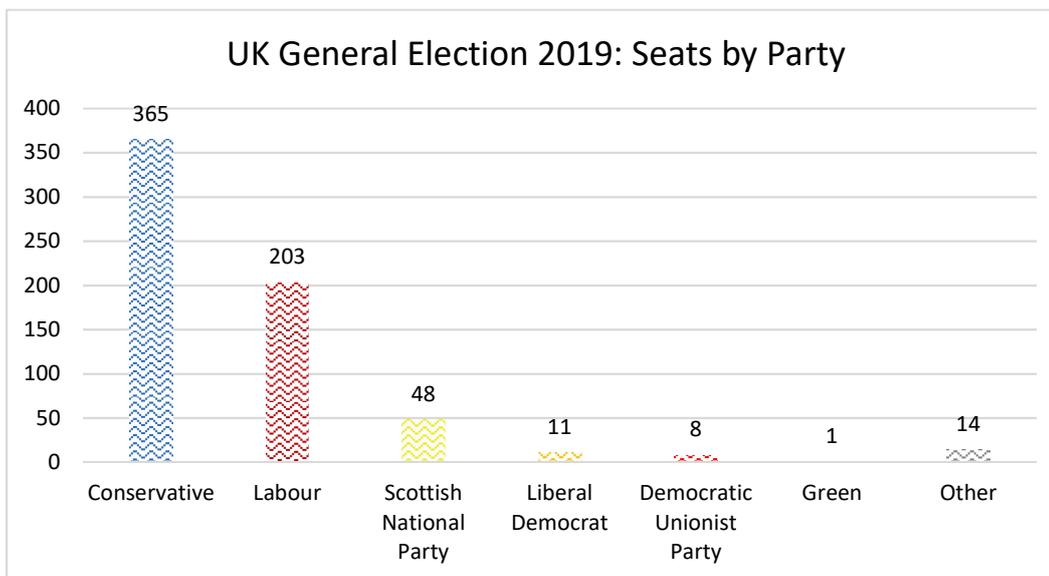
In the 2019 General Election, the Scottish National Party's Douglas Chapman won the more votes than any other candidate (10,699 more votes than the next biggest party, Labour) and so therefore won the constituency seat.

Whilst he did secure a large percentage of votes, overall, he only secured 44.4% of the total votes cast – meaning that 55.6% (more than half, a majority of people) voted for another party and candidate.

This is one of the first flaws of the FPTP system: a party or candidate can win a constituency seat with less than half the votes which means that a majority of constituents are unhappy with the result.



Overall Result



The overall winner of the General Election is the party that gains the most constituency seats. In the 2019 General Election, the conservatives won 365 of the total 650 seats. As they won more seats than anyone else (162 more than Labour, the second biggest party), they were declared the winners. As they also won more than half (325), they formed a majority government.

Majority v. Minority Governments

In order to pass legislation through parliament, a party must gain the support of at least half the MPs in the house. Half of 650 MPs is 325, so when a party wins more than half the seats in the house, they are said to have a **majority**. This is important as it makes it much easier for a party to pass their policies during their time in power.

If a party fails to win half the seats, it is said that they are a **minority**. Although they are the biggest party in the house, they actually have less seats than all the other parties combined which means that the other parties could work together to vote down the government in important votes.

The Conservatives won a majority in 2019, as they won more than half the seats (a majority of 40.) In 2017, they did not win a majority, so formed a minority government and made an agreement with the DUP's 10 MPs to work together to pass legislation, because their MPs together totalled 326, one more than the majority threshold.

In 2010, the Conservatives did not secure an overall majority and so formed a coalition government with the Liberal Democrat party. A coalition government is when two parties, who both do not have enough seats to make a majority, join together to work as one government.



Advantages and Disadvantages of FPTP



Advantages

1. Each of the 650 constituencies elect one MP each.

Because each constituency elects 1 MP each, this creates a *strong bond* between the representative and constituents. If there are any issues that constituents want to discuss, there is no confusion about who to approach. Constituents know their MP by name.

In the Dunfermline and West Fife constituency, constituents can approach Douglas Chapman as their sole, named representative at the UK Parliament.

2. The winning party usually commands a majority

Nationally, it is more likely that a party will command a majority in the House of Commons. This provides stability and certainty as the winning party can enact their party policies with the support of the majority of the house.

In both 2019 and 2015, the Conservatives won an overall majority. Similarly, every election between 1974 to 2005 resulted in either a Labour or Conservative majority government.

However, in 2010 and 2017, the Conservatives failed to command a majority and instead formed a coalition (formal working agreement) with the Liberal Democrats in 2010 and an informal agreement with the Democratic Unionist Party in 2017.

Disadvantages

1. 'Hung Parliaments'

In an election where no party commands a majority and relies on smaller parties for support, this is called a hung parliament. In this case, there is no clear winner and other parties can use their votes to vote down the government. This makes enacting policies difficult for the government. For example, the Lib Dems prevented the Conservatives from passing any legislation on holding an EU referendum during the coalition years. They had to wait until 2015 when they won a majority government.

2. Disproportional - The number of votes cast does not match the number of seats won by a party.

In 2019, 4% of people voted for the Scottish National Party, and they won 48 seats. 12% of people voted for Liberal Democrat, but they only won 11 seats. Similarly, the Greens won 3% of votes and got 1 seat. Looking at the 2019 results, if these parties were to be allocated seats based solely on vote percentage, the SNP party would have done much worse; and Lib Dem and Green would have done much better, winning 64 and 17 seats more respectively.

Crucially, the Conservatives did not win a majority of votes, but they secured a majority of seats in the House of Commons.

2019 General Election Results

| Party | Vote Share | Expected Seats | Actual Seats | Seat Share |
|---|------------|----------------|--------------|------------|
|  Conservative | 43.6 % | 283 | 365 | 56 % |
|  Labour | 32.2 % | 209 | 203 | 31 % |
|  Scottish National Party | 3.9 % | 25 | 48 | 7 % |
|  Liberal Democrat | 11.5 % | 75 | 11 | 2 % |
|  Democratic Unionist Party | 0.8 % | 5 | 8 | 1 % |
|  Green Party | 2.7 % | 18 | 1 | 0.2 % |
|  Brexit Party | 2.0 % | 13 | 0 | 0 % |

3. Safe Seats

An estimated 322 seats were 'safe' in 2017 – this means that the support for a particular party was so high in the constituency that it was unlikely that any other party would have stood a chance of winning. This can lead to voters not turning out to vote because they don't think their party will win.

4. The Winner Takes It All'

Not just a great ABBA song, but also relevant when discussing FPTP. There are no prizes for second place in constituencies in FPTP elections. This can lead to parties winning with only a very small margin. Take the North East Fife Constituency for example:

North East Fife 2017

| Party | Candidate | Votes |
|--|--------------------|--------|
| SNP | Stephen Gethins | 13,743 |
| Liberal Democrat | Elizabeth Riches | 13,741 |
| Conservative | Tony Malinski | 10,088 |
| Labour | Rosalind Garton | 4,026 |
| Independent Sovereign Democratic Britain | Mike Scott-Hayward | 224 |

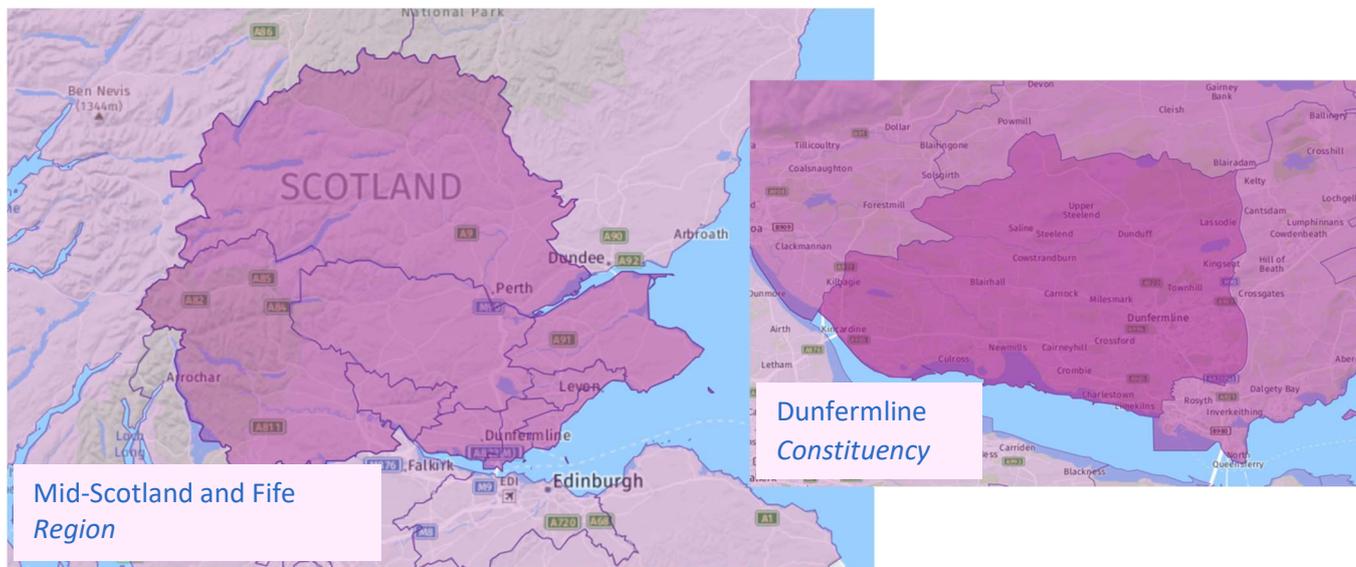
Stephen Gethins of the SNP won the seat in 2017 but by a margin of only 2 votes! Because 'the winner takes it all' it means that the Liberal Democrats walk away with no representation in the constituency whatsoever.

The Additional Member System

The Additional Member System (AMS) is used to elect the 129 Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) in Scottish Parliamentary Elections. AMS is a hybrid electoral system, meaning that it incorporates elements of proportional representation and FPTP. Under AMS, voters are given two votes instead of one:

- One for a constituency MSP, and;
- One for the regional list.

Scotland is divided into eight regions, which are further divided into a number of constituencies. Regions each return seven MSPs and constituencies each return one. The region of Mid-Scotland and Fife is further divided into nine constituencies. Constituents who live in the Dunfermline constituency also live in the Mid-Scotland and Fife Region.



Voters are given two ballot papers, one for their region and one for their constituency. The constituency result is decided using First Past the Post (meaning that the person with the most votes wins, just like the UK General Election.) The second vote is where the big difference is. This result is decided using a form of proportional representation which aims to more closely match the percentage of votes to the percentage of seats. A mathematical formula is used to make this possible.

Parties submit a list of candidates in order of preference for each region before an election. If the mathematical formula awards a party a seat in a region, the first MSP on the list is awarded a seat. The formula is re-run over and over until seven seats are awarded. If a party is awarded more than one seat, MSPs are awarded seats in the order the party has listed them.

Dunfermline Constituency and Mid-Scotland and Fife Region MSPs

| | | | |
|--|--|---|---|
|  Shirley-Anne Somerville Scottish National Party |  Claire Baker Labour |  Murdo Fraser Conservative |  Dean Lockhart Conservative |
|  Alex Rowley Labour |  Mark Ruskell Green |  Liz Smith Conservative |  Alexander Stewart Conservative |



Advantages and Disadvantages of AMS

Advantages

1. The number of MSPs elected more closely matches the percentage of votes.

Although the ‘% seats’ ≠ ‘% votes,’ the percentages are more closely linked. For example, the Conservatives won 24% of the seats with 22% of the regional vote.

Scottish Parliament Election Results 2016

| Party | Seats | Seat Share | Regional Vote Share |
|-------------------------|-------|------------|---------------------|
| Scottish National Party | 63 | 48.8% | 41.7% |
| Conservative | 31 | 24.0% | 22.9% |
| Labour | 24 | 18.6% | 19.1% |
| Green | 6 | 4.7% | 6.6% |
| Liberal Democrat | 5 | 3.9% | 5.2% |

2. More representation

Constituents can contact any of their eight MSPs. There is more likely to be a broader range of experience and expertise within these eight so it is more likely that they will be able to resolve any issues. For example, Alexander Stewart was a businessperson and councillor before becoming an MSP, and Liz Smith a schoolteacher.

It is also the case that more constituents are likely to be represented by a representative of the party they support. Residents in Dunfermline are not only represented by the Scottish National Party, but also Labour, Conservative and Green. This means that constituents who might not agree with the SNP could approach one of their other MSPs.

All (most) parties are included, meaning that there are no ‘wasted votes’ in the regional list. Under FPTP, voting for the third, fourth, fifth... party in a constituency is a ‘waste’ as they have little chance of winning. Under AMS, each party is in with a chance of winning and so every vote counts.

3. Coalition/Minority Government

The AMS is set up in such a way that a coalition or minority government is far more likely. This encourages parties to work together and compromise in order to achieve their policies. In all but the 2011 elections, the winning party had to work with smaller parties to achieve their goals.

However, in 2011 the SNP ‘broke the system’ because they managed to command such widespread and strong support, meaning that they formed the first majority government. This has not happened since.

4. Fairer for smaller parties

Smaller parties are much more likely to do well under AMS. Parties like Green (6 seats) and Liberal Democrat (5 seats) are a genuine political force in parliament, meaning that more people’s opinions are represented.

Disadvantages

1. Minority or Coalition Governments

Whilst this was stated as an advantage of AMS, it can also lead to instability and uncertainty. The leading party can find it difficult to pass laws due to resistance from other parties.

This may lead to manifesto commitments not being met because other parties do not agree with the leading party's policies. For example, the SNP faced significant challenge when they attempted to pass the Alcohol Minimum Unit Pricing Bill in 2010. As a minority government, the other parties out voted them. It was only in 2012, with a majority government, that they were able to pass the bill into law.

This can also lead to smaller parties holding significant power. At the moment, it could be argued that the Green Party (6 MSPs) hold more power than the Conservatives (31 seats) because the SNP often rely on Green votes to pass laws through parliament. This means that the Greens can manipulate government policy as a small party in a way that the Conservatives, the second largest party, cannot.

2. Regional List MSPs

Constituents only vote for a party in the regional vote meaning that they do not have as close a link with representatives.

In the case of an MSP stepping down from their position, the party simply chooses the next candidate from the list. Under FPTP, a new by-election would be held and people would have the opportunity to choose another representative. For example, in 2017, Douglas Ross and Ross Thompson left Holyrood – the Conservatives simply chose the next candidates on the list to fill their spots. In this way, it could be argued that the 'party machine' is more powerful than the voters.

Single Transferable Vote

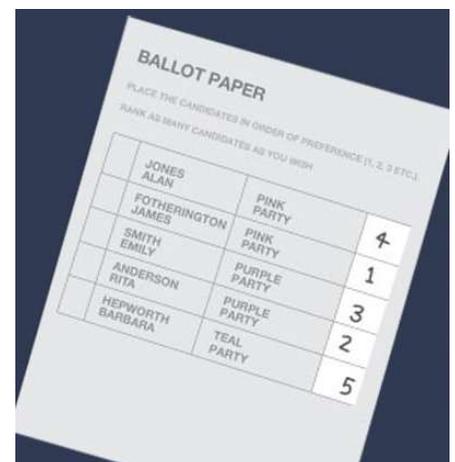
The Single Transferable Vote (STV) System is used to elect councillors to local councils in Scotland.

Under this system, the voter is given a single ballot paper where they rank candidates in order of preference using numbers, 1 being their 1st choice.

The first important aspect of determining the winner is setting a threshold of which candidates must get more votes in order to get a seat. This is called quota. This is worked out by dividing the number of votes cast by the number of available seats.

Then, all the 1st choice votes are counted. If any candidate reaches 'quota' then they are awarded a seat. The candidate scoring the lowest is eliminated and their 2nd choice votes redistributed to the remaining candidates. This is recalculated over and over until all seats are filled.

(View this [infogram](#) to show how STV works in practice.)



Dunfermline Central Councillors



Allan Craig
Conservative



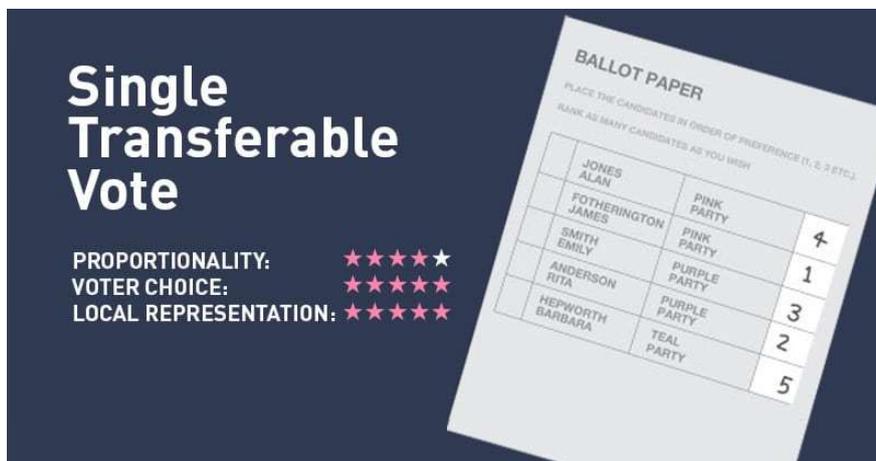
Garry Haldane
Labour



Jim Leishman
Labour



Jean Hall Muir
Scottish National Party



Advantages and Disadvantages of STV

Advantages

1. Highly Proportional

STV allows smaller parties the opportunity to gain representation. In 2017, the Liberal Democrats got 67 seats with 6.9% of the votes.

| Party | Votes Share | Seats | Seat Share |
|-------------------------|-------------|-------|------------|
| Scottish National Party | 32.3% | 431 | 35.1% |
| Conservative | 25.3% | 276 | 22.5% |
| Labour | 20.2% | 262 | 21.4% |
| Liberal Democrats | 6.9% | 67 | 5.5% |

2. No wasted votes

All votes are counted at least once but could be counted multiple times. People have the opportunity to vote for their 2nd, 3rd ... choice.

3. Voter Choice

Voters select best party candidates and not simply for the party as under AMS. In STV, you can choose from candidates from the same party if the party wishes to put forward more than one candidate. You can even use all of your preferences for candidates from the same party if you wish.

4. Minority Governance

STV has ended one party control of some councils. Most councils are now classed as No Overall Control (NOC), meaning that no single party has a majority of councillors. For example, 24 local councils were classed as NOC in 2017.

Disadvantages

1. Minority governance

Most councils are now governed by a minority or coalition. No one voted for this (this option was not on a ballot paper).

2. Calculating the winner

It is very complicated to count votes and the final results can take several days to calculate. Filling vacancies in between elections is problematic because of the multi-member nature of constituencies.

3. STV is not as proportional as AMS.

In a ward with 4 councillors, a successful candidate requires around 25% of voter preferences to win. This makes it more difficult for candidates from smaller parties to win seats. Indeed, in 2017, there were 28 fewer Independent councillors than in 2012.