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Voters and Systems
Nicholas Whyte

In the science-fiction book *So Long, And Thanks For All The Fish* by Douglas Adams, one of the characters meets "some horrible green scaly reptilian creature ranting and raving about the Single Transferable Vote system. It was hard to tell whether he was for it or against it, but he clearly felt very strongly about it."

Anyone following the debate of recent days about which voting system should be used for the coming elections to a "peace forum" may well wonder what planet some commentators are on. I hope that this article will help to bring the argument a little more down to Earth.

The simplest way of electing representatives is the method we use for Westminster elections. Every voter gets one vote; they mark an 'X' beside the name of their chosen candidate, and the candidate with the most Xs beside his or her name wins.

There are two big problems with the X-vote system. First, if there are several strong candidates in the election, the winner may be elected in spite of the wishes of the majority of the voters. For instance, the DUP won North Belfast in 1979 with only 27% of the vote, and scraped home in Mid-Ulster in 1983 with 30%. In both cases more than twice as many people voted against them as for them, but they were able to triumph over a split opposition.

The French and the Australians have both tried to get around this problem in different ways, the French by holding a second round of elections to decide between the front-runners in constituencies where nobody gets the support of a majority of the voters the first time, and the Australians (who went to the polls last Saturday) by using the Single Transferable Vote (STV) in single-seat constituencies.

But neither of these refinements solves the biggest problem with the 'X'-vote, which is that if there is only one member per seat, the number of people elected from each party bears little resemblance to the amount of support the parties have from the public. At present, the Ulster Unionists hold 9 of the 17 Westminster seats in Northern Ireland with little more than a third of the votes cast in 1992, while a quarter of those who voted then were denied representation because they supported parties which won no seats at all (Sinn Fein, Alliance, Conservatives, Workers Party, etc).

Proportional Representation (PR) was introduced in most Western European countries around the start of this century in order to protect minorities from being completely over-ridden by the larger parties. PR using the Single Transferable Vote (STV) was first used in Ireland for the local council elections of 1920. It was abolished by the Unionists in Northern Ireland in the 1920s but was brought back in the 1970s for local, European and parliamentary elections here.

STV allows voters to number the candidates in order of preference, so that if their first choice either does very well or very badly their votes are not wasted but can help to elect other candidates. Although the mechanics of the count are complex, the method of voting is not - it really is as

easy as "1, 2, 3...".

This is the main difference between STV and 'list' systems, where voters choose between lists of candidates drawn up by each party and there is practically no chance of transferring. Some list systems allow voters to favour candidates within each list, but the votes still count more for the party than for the candidate - so a left-wing Labour voter in England who voted for Dennis Skinner or Tony Benn might find that their vote had instead helped to elect a candidate more favoured by their party headquarters, say Tony Blair or Peter Mandelson.

Under a list system, each party should get seats in proportion to its votes. But this is not as simple as it sounds. There are at least three mathematical methods of relating the votes cast to the seats a party then gets: they are the d'Hondt system, used in the Benelux countries, Spain and Portugal, which benefits larger parties; the Saint-Laguë method, used in Scandinavia; and the Hare-Niemeyer method, used in Germany.

It is not difficult to come up with examples of differences between the systems. For instance, if there are 10 seats in a constituency and five parties get 42%, 37%, 12%, 8% and 1% of the votes cast, the seats are allocated quite differently:

Party	A	B	C	D	E		
percentage vote	42%	37%	12%	8%	1%		
d'Hondt:	5	4	1	-	-		
Hare-Niemeyer:	4	4	1	1	-		
Saint-Laguë:	5	3	1	1	-		

If STV is used then it is the preferences of voters, not the mathematics of the system, that decide which candidates get elected; even the 1% who voted for party E in this example would have an effect on the final result after their votes were transferred.

The two systems that are at present being proposed for the coming elections here are on the one hand, STV electing five members from each of the 18 new Westminster seats - the system that is currently on the statute books - and on the other, some form of list system or 'index' system treating the whole of Northern Ireland as a single constituency. What effect might an entire new voting system have on the results? We can perhaps judge from the only previous elections treating Northern Ireland as a single constituency - the European elections.

The only parties that have so far come out in support of a list-type system are the SDLP and DUP, which have both had their best results by a long way in the European elections. Mavericks without a mainstream party base, such as the late Sir James Kilfedder, have also been able to tap into support across Northern Ireland rather than be restricted to one area, while the Ulster Unionists and the smaller parties have performed relatively poorly. Those parties whose support is mainly restricted to certain geographical areas have found it especially difficult to pull out support in a province-wide election - for example the Workers Party's best result in a European election was still much worse than their worst result under any other system before their 1992 split.

It has been suggested that an 'index' system could be designed where voters vote for parties rather than personalities, but it is difficult to believe that this is practical. Are the DUP likely to run a campaign without referring to Ian Paisley? In any case, the most important fact about the coming elections is not what electoral system is to be used, but how quickly we move into useful and meaningful all-party talks. Inventing a new electoral system from scratch, and educating voters and parties in how to use it, is hardly likely to accelerate this process.