

# Notes accompanying Speaker Presentation

## Introduction

### What are elections for?

Elections are used in every democracy to select politicians to run an area, from the smallest local parish, to an entire country.

Elections are held for several reasons:

- Elections offer every citizen a choice about how the world around them should be run.
- They are, with the right system, a fair way of choosing who takes power – the person who has the most support for their plans for how to use that power is chosen to carry those plans out. The fact that they have won an election is a mandate for them to carry out their plans once elected.
- If elections are held at regular intervals, then they are a good way for people to keep a grip on the politicians in power. No government wants to lose office, so politicians in government are always mindful of needing to perform well enough to be able to continue winning elections.

One of the questions I get asked frequently nowadays is “why are you talking about constitutional reform during an economic downturn, when people have financial and other ‘survival’ issues to worry about?” My response is that democracy and electoral reform are bread-and-butter issues. They are about power (who makes the decisions, who has access, how can things change) and accountability (who is responsible and how can I hold them responsible); and ensuring people have faith and are engaged in the system, rather than turning to scapegoats and extremism. In a recent [interview](#), Jack Straw said “a time like now, when people feel buffeted by events beyond their control, is precisely the time to improve the way our constitution operates, so that people feel better connected with their government – and it is their government – and clearer about their rights in relation to their government in a democracy.” So we should not be scared to stand up and campaign on electoral reform. In the past months as tax-payers we have each been forced to take on an unprecedented financial stake in banks and their debts, but as citizens our democratic rights and powers have not increased accordingly. That needs to be rectified

## **Why Vote?**

Voting is about choice. We get to choose who represents us in Westminster, in Europe, in local councils and more. And with elected mayors and local assemblies becoming increasingly common, we now have ever more opportunities to exercise our right to vote.

Yet fewer people are making that choice. Two out of five stayed at home at the last general election. Many don't believe that elections are a good way to have a say in how the country is run. If voting is going to be a powerful way of taking part in our democracy, we need to know that our vote really counts.

There are many ways of voting and counting these votes to work out who is elected. In the UK alone, there are six different kinds of election.

These electoral systems are building blocks of our democracy. If we don't get the system right for choosing our decision-makers, it's unlikely we'll get the right decisions. It's common sense that if we want fair results, we need to have a fair system. All systems, however, have their strengths and weaknesses.

In 1997, the government promised people a choice on the voting system to elect the House of Commons. That choice never came.

In 2008 the government did a review of how elections work, but it was quite limited. The Electoral Reform Society published its own review of electoral systems which went into much greater detail.

The idea is to look at each area of the UK and how voting works there, so that you can make up your own mind.

## **Who can vote?**

- Every UK citizen over 18 years of age can vote in elections. If you are a citizen of a Commonwealth or European country you can vote in local and European elections in the UK. British citizens who live overseas can vote in general elections for up to 15 years.
- You must be registered to vote. Each household gets a form to fill in and return every year. [www.aboutmyvote.co.uk](http://www.aboutmyvote.co.uk) .
- Women could first vote in general elections in 1918.
- Some people feel that the voting age should be lowered to 16, as this is the age at which citizenship education finishes, as well as the age when young people are able to get married, join the army and start to pay tax if they work. [www.votesat16.org.uk](http://www.votesat16.org.uk) .

## **Who can be a candidate?**

Since 2006, anyone over 18 who is eligible to vote can be a candidate in any election, although some people are unable to stand if they have certain jobs in the civil service or in local government. In local elections, candidates also have to have some kind of local link. Before 2006, candidates had to be 21 years of age.

## **How are votes cast?**

At polling stations, or by post.

There have been experiments with electronic voting and text message voting, but these have not been widespread. In some elections, votes have been cast on the internet. Internet voting is a tricky issue, with a need to strike a balance between making the ballot secure, and making it easy for people to do.

## **What do the people who are elected do?**

Elected officials represent people who live in their constituency. They raise issues relevant to their constituents in their parliament, council or assembly and can speak out on any issue which they feel is important.

If the government or an elected official wants to introduce new laws, they need to get the support of a majority of their colleagues, so much of an elected official's day-to-day job involves looking at proposed laws, looking into what their effects would be (intentional and unintentional), and suggesting changes.

They are also expected to spend a lot of time in their constituency. They take on casework for local constituents often who are having difficulty with grey areas of the law. MPs need the help of staff to do all this, so running an MP's office is very much like running a small business. Elected officials in devolved and local government often have less support and may rely more on volunteers.

## **Why are there different ways of electing people?**

There is no easy answer to this. Different elections are governed by laws passed at different times, and so different governments have introduced different systems. Which system is the 'fairest' is a controversial topic.

### **Who decides what voting system is used?**

Any new voting system needs to be passed as a law in parliament, with the support of a majority of MPs. The Scottish Parliament can choose the system for local elections in Scotland.

### **Are there any alternatives to elections to choose decision-makers?**

Members of the House of Lords are not elected – instead, the majority of them are appointed by a committee, with the prime minister and by party leaders nominating candidates. The House of Lords is one of the few appointed legislative chambers in any democracy in the world.

Not electing members of the House of Commons has never been seriously considered, because MPs need to be seen to be accountable, and can only remain accountable through having stood for election.

### **Weighing up Electoral Systems:**

#### **Is it fair?**

We look at whether voters' views are fairly reflected by the election results or whether they see their votes wasted. Do all votes count equally? Do all election candidates have the same chance of winning a seat?

#### **Who gets elected?**

Some voting systems can make it harder for women, ethnic minorities, younger or older people to be elected. Do the people elected really represent the people who voted for them?

#### **Do I have a real choice?**

Does the system give power to the people? Do voters have an effective say at the ballot box? How sure can they be that their views will be taken into account?

#### **How does it work in practice?**

Different voting systems can affect the way politicians work together. Does it make it hard for them to do their jobs or work cooperatively? Do politicians make decisions themselves, or are they expected to do everything their constituents or their party tells them to? Does it encourage negative campaigning and squabbling between parties?

#### **What do people think of the voting system?**

Ultimately in a democracy, what the people think is crucial. Do people like the voting system? Is voting easy to understand? Do people even take part in elections under this system?

**Talking points:** What is the most important feature of a voting system? Which system should we have for elections in the UK?

## GENERAL ELECTION 2005 QUIZ

Q1) What percentage of the electorate voted Labour in 2005?

- A. 21.6%
- B. 24.2%**
- C. 30.9%

- low turnout
- questions of mandate and legitimacy
- “worst election ever”
- what if situation had been reversed, how would Labour have felt / behaved

→ Democratic Deficit

Q2) How small a swing to Conservatives would it take for Labour to lose its overall majority?

- A. 1.5%**
- B. 3%
- C. 5%

- marginals and rise of super marginals
- Conservative 92 seat majority in England
- Labour losing votes to parties of protest, allowing Conservatives through middle

→ Fragility of Victory / Mandate

Q3) According to The Times at the start of the election campaign, how many voters were the two main parties concentrating their efforts on?

- A. 40,000 (0.1% of the electorate)
- B. 800,000 (2% of the electorate)**
- C. 1.6 million (4% of the electorate)

- targeting of key votes in swing seats, getting ever more sophisticated
- effect on policy, messages and priorities by concentration on swing voters / seats (shifting centre rightwards, not what Labour is traditionally about) and marginalisation of traditional supporters / concerns.
- Jon Cruddas’ question: “what type of Labour government do we want?”

→ Swing Voters vs Core Voters

Q4) What was the difference in turnout in this election between the 10 most marginal seats (after 2001 election) and the 10 safest seats?

- A. 5.4%
- B. 10.4%
- C. 17.4%**

- rational decision by those in safe seats not to vote - will only ever get one Labour MP.
- rational decision by those in marginal seats to vote – efficiency and feeling empowered.
- negative effect on local campaigning effort and party's general activities when constituency not 'in play'.
- negative effect on our democracy by people's disengagement and lack of voting.

→ Democratic Deficit