

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

5th Meeting, 2022 (Session 6), Wednesday
23 March 2022

PE1901: Replace the voting system for the
Scottish Parliament with a more proportional
alternative

Note by the Clerk

Lodged on	12 October 2021
Petitioner	Richard Wood
Petition summary	Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to replace the broadly proportional Additional Member System used for electing MSPs with a more proportional alternative.
Webpage	https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE1901

Introduction

1. The Committee last considered this petition at its meeting on [17 November 2021](#). At that meeting, the Committee agreed to write to the Electoral Reform Society Scotland and the Electoral Commission.
2. The petition summary is included in **Annexe A** and the Official Report of the Committee's last consideration of this petition is at **Annexe B**.
3. The Committee received a further response from the Electoral Commission which is set out in **Annexe C**.
4. Written submissions received prior to the Committee's last consideration can be found on the [petition's webpage](#).
5. Further background information about this petition can be found in the [SPICe briefing](#) for this petition.

6. The Scottish Government's initial position on this petition can be found on the [petition's webpage](#).

Action

The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take.

Clerk to the Committee

Annexe A

PE1901: Replace the voting system for the Scottish Parliament with a more proportional alternative

Petitioner

Richard Wood

Date lodged

12/10/2022

Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to replace the broadly proportional Additional Member System used for electing MSPs with a more proportional alternative.

Previous action

I have raised the issue with my Lothian MSPs when I previously lived in Scotland and have since contacted new Lothian MSPs in Session 6 upon return to Scotland.

On contacting MSPs in session five, I received mixed responses although not everyone replied. Labour MSPs seemed potentially open to the idea. One Conservative MSP seemed open to some sort of reform while the other disagreed with any change at all. Green MSPs supported reform. I have also written about the issue in the media notably for Politics.co.uk in the run up to the 2021 election.

Background information

The Additional Member System results in more representative parliaments than First Past The Post used in Westminster but it is not fully proportional. In my view, it is flawed as it doesn't guarantee proportionality, hands power to parties and creates two classes of MSPs. It also limits voter choice through closed lists and can be exploited by decoy parties.

Alternatives such as the Single Transferable Vote (STV) or Open List PR with levelling seats, would empower voters and lead to more representative parliaments

Link about the Additional Member System:

<https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/voting-systems/types-of-voting-system/additional-member-system/>

Link about the Single Transferable Vote:

<https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/voting-systems/types-of-voting-system/single-transferable-vote/>

Link about Open List PR:

<https://ballotbox.scot/ballot-box-briefing-2-scandinavian-style-proportional-representation>

Annexe B

Extract from Official Report of last consideration of PE1909 on 17th December 2021

The Convener: The next petition is PE1901, on replacing the voting system for the Scottish Parliament with a more proportional alternative. It was submitted by Richard Wood, who invites us to consider the issue from a different perspective yet again. It is always open to discussion. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to replace the broadly proportional additional member system that is used for electing MSPs with a more proportional alternative.

The Scottish Parliament information centre briefing sets out two examples of proportional voting systems. The first is the single transferable vote, which uses multiple-member electoral districts or regions with each voter ranking preferred candidates on a single ballot. Scottish local elections take place by STV. The second is open-list proportional representation. It is a variant of party-list proportional representation in which voters have influence over the preference order of party candidates. With regard to STV, the briefing notes a concern “that candidates nearer the top of the list” on the ballot paper “are more likely to be selected.”

The Scottish Government submission advises that the Government “does not currently have any plans to propose changes to the voting system by which MSPs are elected to the Scottish Parliament.”

David Torrance: I do not know whether there is any appetite from any of the political parties or the Government to change the voting system, but I think that we should write to the key stakeholders—the Electoral Reform Society Scotland and the Electoral Commission—to seek their views on what the petitioner is asking for.

The Convener: I think that we are content to do that. The Scottish Government’s position is quite clear, but it would be useful for us to have a current litmus test of the views of those other organisations in the current circumstances.

Paul Sweeney: I am sympathetic, because it is an on-going and worthwhile discussion. In the 1990s, the Scottish Constitutional Convention established the additional member system as the preferred electoral system, but perhaps there is an on-going need to consider alternatives. Obviously, the single transferable vote for local government elections was introduced in the mid-2000s. There have been observations of concerning practices in the most recent Scottish Parliament elections; most notably, the Greens were perhaps stymied in some instances by a decoy green party, which was higher up the list and seduced votes away from the Greens. I certainly noticed that at the Glasgow count, so there are flaws with the current list structure of two ballots, which are worth further investigation.

The Convener: Indeed. I am sure that my party has been subject to that discretion as well, but we prevailed.

Bill Kidd: I remember what Paul Sweeney was talking about. In order to avoid the mild embarrassment that might take place if Alasdair Aardvark gets elected in front of the rest of us, we should look at that.

The Convener: Splendid. The capacity of politicians for a bit of political self-flagellation never dims, so we will ask the various electoral authorities for their views on how we might suitably be re-elected under different methods. Notwithstanding the Scottish Government's lack of appetite, we will take the matter forward and consider it afresh, so we will keep the petition open on that basis.

Members indicated agreement.

Annexe C

The Electoral Commission submission of 2 December 2021

PE1901/B – Replace the voting system for the Scottish Parliament with a more proportional alternative

The Electoral Commission holds no view on which voting system is preferable for any election. These matters are rightly for elected representatives to decide. However, where a new voting system is introduced then we would provide advice to the relevant parliaments and governments on any implications for voters and electoral administrators to ensure that voters were able to cast their votes and have them counted in the way they intended. This would include details of any voter information campaigns which the Electoral Commission would run to raise awareness of the new voting system.

I note that in the Committee's meeting on 17 November members raised concerns about the 'list order effect' on STV ballot papers. It may be helpful to note that in 2019, at the request of the Scottish Government, the Electoral Commission carried out [research to assess the impact on voters of any changes to the ordering of candidates on ballot papers for Scottish council elections.](#)