LSIS LEARNING AND SKILLS IMPROVEMENT SERVICE

Winner takes all?

Exploring 'first past the post' and 'alternative vote' voting systems

Winner takes all? examines the strengths and weaknesses of two different voting systems – 'first past the post' and 'alternative vote'. This is a topical issue since it is likely that the nation will soon be asked to vote in a referendum on changing our current system. Young people need to understand the differences between the two different forms of voting. The two systems are explained in the following voting activity. 'First past the post' and 'alternative vote' both involve the election of a single candidate, but require voters to vote in different ways. There is also an opportunity for learners to research the 'single transferable vote' as another system of voting.

This activity can be used to supplement the suggestions in Unit 1 of *Citizenship through tutorial: a staff manual with activities for personal and social learning,* which examines issues relating to democracy and freedom, including the role of a representative and accountable government.

The staff manual contains information, guidance and resources for citizenship activities on six topics:

- democracy and freedom
- global issues
- economy and employment
- education, learner voice and community participation
- rights, responsibilities and justice
- healthy, safe and cohesive communities.

All units in the manual make links to the outcomes of Every Child/Learner Matters. This activity is particularly relevant to the outcome 'Make a Positive Contribution', especially the first aim of that outcome: 'Engage in decision-making and support the community and environment'.

Citizenship through tutorial: a staff manual with activities for personal and social learning is available to order or download from https://crm.lsnlearning.org.uk/user/order.aspx?code=090113

Winner takes all?

Aims of the activity

The activity enables young people to:

- learn about some of the advantages and disadvantages of 'first past the post' and 'alternative vote'

- examine and better understand the arguments surrounding the value of individual votes, and therefore be encouraged to use their own vote in future elections.

Resources required

- Copies of the ballot papers on page 4, enough for one for each participant

- Copies of the information sheets on pages 5–7.

Running the activity

- Introduce the activity by explaining that, following the last general election which led to a hung parliament, there has been considerable debate about changing the voting system. The Liberal Democrats, who are in coalition government with the Conservatives, have always argued for a more proportional system of voting which they regard as fairer. Following a compromise within the coalition government, it looks likely a referendum will be held on the introduction of the 'alternative vote' to replace the 'first past the post' system. Some young people may be eligible to vote in the referendum and will need to understand what they are voting about if they are to use their vote wisely.

Stage 1

- Give out the 'first past the post' ballot papers and ask each participant to choose **one** of the colours to vote for. Don't tell them what the colours refer to. If they choose to relate the colours to political parties, that's fine, but the activity is not about political differences, it is about voting systems.

- When everyone has voted (individually, anonymously and confidentially), count the votes and declare a winner. If there is a tie, ask what should be done about this, but offer no solution. If there were any spoilt papers, discuss this.

- Note how quick it was to get a result and discuss the results using the following questions:

  – *Did the winner get more than 50 per cent of votes?*

  – *If not, how many people voted for candidates other than the winner?*

  – *Did all voters feel their votes had some effect on the outcome of the election?*

Stage 2

- Give out the 'alternative vote' ballot papers and ask participants to put a 1 against their favourite candidate, and a 2 against their next favourite. Again voting should be individual, anonymous and confidential.

- Count the first preferences. If one candidate has more than half of the first preference votes, that candidate wins (i.e. more people put that candidate as number 1 than all the rest combined).

- If no candidate wins an overall majority of first preference votes, the candidate with the least first preference votes is eliminated. Then the second preference votes on the ballot papers of the eliminated candidate are redistributed among the other candidates.

- The process is repeated until one candidate gets more than 50 per cent and is the winner.

- Discuss this method of voting, noting how long the count took, and using the following questions:

  – *Was the final winner also the candidate that got most first choices?*

  – *If not, is the final result fairer as compared with 'first past the post' or not?*

  – *Did all voters feel their votes had some effect on the outcome of the election?*

Stage 3

- Give out the information sheets '1. First past the post' and '2. Alternative vote' and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the two systems.

- The 'alternative vote' is already used in the UK to elect some city mayors and to select the leaders of the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats. It is also used to elect the President of Ireland, in the Australian House of Representatives and in some states of the USA. However, many people argue that the system is not suitable for general elections in Britain where there are several major parties and many small ones because it is not genuinely proportional. They would prefer a system called the 'single transferable vote', which is already used in elections to the European Parliament.

  Give out the information sheet '3. Single transferable vote' and ask learners to research in more detail how this works by visiting the website of the Electoral Reform Society, www.electoral-reform.org.uk, or Suite 101, http://british-house-of-commons.suite101.com/article.cfm/how-a-single-transferable-vote-system-of-pr-works-in-practice

- Find out which system of voting is used for learner representatives within your own organisation and discuss whether the system works fairly. Should the voting system be changed?

- Hold a debate on the motion: 'This House believes that there is no need for reform of the voting system in British general elections'.

Ballot paper for 'first past the post' FOR THE ELECTION OF A SINGLE CANDIDATE	Place a cross against ONE candidate only
BLUE	
GREEN	
GREY	
RED	
YELLOW	

Ballot paper for 'alternative vote' FOR THE ELECTION OF A SINGLE CANDIDATE	First choice (1)	Second choice (2)
BLUE		
GREEN		
GREY		
RED		
YELLOW		

1. First past the post

Our voting system in Britain for general elections has always been 'first past the post'. The candidate with the most votes takes the prize of a seat in Parliament. The political party with the majority of seats in Parliament forms the government of the country. In this system, many people may vote for a candidate who only just misses getting the seat.

For example, in the 2010 election in the constituency of Hampstead and Kilburn the winner polled 17,332 votes and had a majority of only 42 votes (or 0.1 % of the electorate). However, 35,490 people voted for other candidates.

Name	Party	Votes	%	+/-
Glenda Jackson	Labour	17,332	32.8	-3.5
Chris Philp	Conservative	17,290	32.7	+9.8
Edward Fordham	Liberal Democrat	16,491	31.2	-4.0
Bea Campbell	Green	759	1.4	-3.2
Magnus Nielsen	UK Independence Party	408	0.8	+0.1
Victoria Moore	British National Party	328	0.6	+0.6
Tamsin Omond	Tamsin Omond To The Commons	123	0.2	+0.2
Gene Alcantara	Independent	91	0.2	+0.2
Majority		42	0.1	–
Turnout		52,822	66.3	+10.4

Source: BBC Election 2010 website, where you can see all of the results

Some of the arguments for and against 'first past the post'

For

• It is simple to understand

• It is quick and cheap to count

• There is a close geographical link between the voters and the person elected – a single MP represents one area of the country (constituency)

• It usually produces clear election results and majority governments.

Against

• The elected person may win by a handful of votes

• People can feel their votes are wasted or worthless

• It encourages tactical voting

• Choice is restricted in 'safe seats'.

Find more arguments from the Electoral Reform Society at www.electoral-reform.org.uk

2. Alternative vote

The 'alternative vote' is a system which is used to elect a single candidate, but it allows voters to make first, second and sometimes third and fourth choices.

If a candidate receives a majority of first place votes, he or she would be elected just as under 'first past the post'. However if no single candidate gets more than 50 per cent of the vote, the second choices for the candidate with the least number of first preference votes are redistributed to the other candidates. The process is repeated until one candidate gets an absolute majority.

It has been suggested that this system could replace 'first past the post' and that a referendum might be held in Britain to decide whether or not it should.

Some of the arguments for and against the 'alternative vote'

For

• It prevents MPs being elected on a minority of the vote

• It increases the feeling that every vote counts

• It keeps a link between the MP and his or her constituency.

Against

• The system does not give proportional representation within parliament to a wide range of opinions in the electorate

• It does not give voters much more power than 'first past the post'

• It is a more complicated system and therefore takes longer to count.

Find more arguments from the Electoral Reform Society at www.electoral-reform.org.uk

3. Single transferable vote

This system is based upon larger, multi-member constituencies, with up to five MPs. Voters can give their preferences on different candidates and know that second and third choices will have a value. The candidates with the required number of first choices win at the first stage. But votes are not wasted because, once the candidate has passed the threshold and been elected, surplus votes are transferred to other candidates. Voters can choose between candidates who do not belong to their usual party of choice.

> **The single transferable vote system of proportional representation works as follows:**
>
> • *The country is divided into a number of larger, multi-member constituencies, with the number of members for each reflecting the size of the population.*
>
> • *Each elector votes for as many candidates as he or she wishes to, placing them in a numerical order of preference.*
>
> • *A quota of votes is set for election. If any candidate achieves this number of first preference votes he or she is elected, and their remaining votes are redistributed among the other candidates.*
>
> • *This continues until all seats in the constituency have been filled.*
>
> • *Under a variation of this system voters vote for parties, and candidates are elected in the order that they are placed on their party lists.*

Read more at Suite101: How a Single Transferable Vote System of PR Works in Practice
http://british-house-of-commons.suite101.com/article.cfm/how-a-single-transferable-vote-system-of-pr-works-in-practice

Some of the arguments for and against the 'single transferable vote'

For

• It puts more power in the hands of the voters

• Voters can choose between different individuals and different parties

• There is no need for tactical voting and votes are not wasted

• Governments are supported by the majority of voters.

Against

• The system needs larger constituencies

• The count takes longer and is more complicated for people to understand

• There are more likely to be coalition governments, which some people see as less stable than single party governments

• It breaks the link between the individual MP and his or her constituency.

Find more arguments from the Electoral Reform Society at www.electoral-reform.org.uk