

ESCE

Electoral System Change in Europe since 1945



Electoral System Change in Europe since 1945: UK

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Section 1: Overview of UK Electoral System Changes since 1945

The system used to elect the lower house of the UK Parliament (the House of Commons) in 1945 was very largely one of single-member plurality (SMP). There were, however, in addition, a small number of seats filled in two-member districts using the block vote and a still smaller number of two- and three-member districts filled using the single transferable vote (STV). These deviations from SMP were abolished in 1948, since when the system has been a case of pure SMP.

This document sets out the system in operation in 1945 and then the 1948 amendments. The only dimension of the electoral system included in this project that has been changed since 1948 is the assembly size, but none of the changes have met the 20 per cent threshold of significance. This document ends with an appendix giving brief notes on all legislation relating to elections since 1945.

Section 2: Relevant Electoral System changes in the UK since 1945

Table 1. Summary of UK Electoral Laws and Amendments since 1945

Law	Amendment	Date of enactment	Location	Relevant for the research
Representation of the People Act, 1918				Yes
	Representation of the People Act, 1944			No
	Postponement of Polling Day Act, 1945			No
	Elections and Jurors Act, 1945			No
	House of Commons (Redistribution of Seats) Act, 1947			No
	Representation of the People			Yes



	Act, 1948	
	House of Commons (Redistribution of Seats) Act, 1949	No
	Representation of the People Act, 1949	No
Electoral Registers Act, 1949		No
Election Commissioners Act, 1949		No
Electoral Registers Act, 1953		No
	Representation of the People (Amendment) Act, 1957	No
House of Commons (Redistribution of Seats) Act, 1958		No
	Representation of the People (Amendment) Act, 1958	No
Elections (Welsh Forms) Act, 1964		No
	Representation of the People Act, 1969	No
	Representation of the People	No



	Act, 1974		
	Representation of the People (No. 2) Act, 1974		No
Referendum Act, 1975			No
Representation of the People (Armed Forces) Act, 1976			No
	Representation of the People Act, 1977		No
	Representation of the People Act, 1978		No
Scotland Act, 1978			No
Wales Act, 1978			No
European Assembly Elections Act, 1978		http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1978/10/contents/enacted	No
House of Commons (Redistribution of Seats) Act, 1979			No
	Representation of the People Act, 1979		No
	Representation of the People Act, 1980		No
	Representation of the People	http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukp	No



	Act, 1981	ga/1981/34/contents/enacted	
	Representation of the People Act, 1983	http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1983/2/enacted	No
Elections (Northern Ireland) Act, 1985		http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1985/2/contents/enacted	No
	Representation of the People Act, 1985	http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1985/50/enacted	No
Parliamentary Constituencies Act, 1986		http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1986/56/contents/enacted	No
Elected Authorities (Northern Ireland) Act, 1989		http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/3/contents/enacted	No
	Representation of the People Act, 1989	http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/28/contents/enacted	No
	Representation of the People Act, 1990	http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1990/32/contents/enacted	No
	Representation of the People Act, 1991	http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1991/11/contents/enacted	No
Boundary Commissions Act, 1992		http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1992/55/pdfs/ukpga_19920055	No



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	Representation of the People Act, 1993	http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1993/29/contents	No
	European Parliamentary Elections Act, 1993	http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1993/41/contents/enacted	No
	Referendums (Scotland and Wales) Act, 1997	http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1997/61/contents/enacted	No
	Registration of Political Parties Act, 1998	http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/48/introduction/enacted	No
	European Parliamentary Elections Act, 1999	http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1999/1/contents/enacted	No
	Representation of the People Act, 2000	http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2000/2/contents/enacted	No
	Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act, 2000	http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2000/41/contents/enacted	No
	Election Publications Act, 2001	http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2001/5/contents/enacted	No
	Elections Act, 2001	http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2001/7/contents/enacted	No
	European	http://www.legisl	No



	Parliamentary Elections Act, 2002	ation.gov.uk/ukp ga/2002/24/cont ents/enacted	
Electoral Fraud (Northern Ireland) Act, 2002		http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2002/13/contents/enacted	No
Northern Ireland Assembly Elections Act, 2003		http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2003/3/contents/enacted	No
European Parliament (Representation) Act, 2003		http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2003/7/contents/enacted	No
Northern Ireland Assembly (Elections and Periods of Suspension) Act, 2003		http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2003/12/contents	No
European Parliamentary and Local Elections (Pilots) Act, 2004		http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/2/contents/enacted	No
Scottish Parliament (Constituencies) Act, 2004		http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/13/contents/enacted	No
Electoral Registration (Northern Ireland) Act, 2005		http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2005/1/contents/enacted	No
Electoral Administration		http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/22/cont	No



Act, 2006	ents/enacted	
Political Parties and Elections Act, 2009	http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2009/12/contents/enacted	No
Fixed-Term Parliaments Act, 2011	http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2011/14/contents/enacted	No
Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act, 2011	http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2011/1/contents/enacted	No

Section 3: Details of previous electoral systems and electoral system changes.

3.1 The 1945 Electoral System

The vast majority of seats in the House of Commons have always been elected by plurality. Before 1885, most districts elected two members. Since then, single-member districts have been the norm. But some multi-member districts remained until 1948. The electoral system used in 1945 was largely laid down in the Representation of the People Act of 1918 (7 & 8 Geo. 5., vol. 55, ch. 64), though some parts of earlier laws remained in force and there were some amendments between 1918 and 1945. The most significant such amendment – the Equal Franchise Act of 1928 – equalized the franchise between men and women. This is not, however, covered by the current project.

Assembly size. There were 640 seats following the 1945 election. This was an increase of 25 compared with the previous election in 1935: in order to eliminate the very largest constituencies, the House of Commons (Redistribution of Seats) Act, 1944 (7 & 8 Geo. 6. c. 41 pp383-395) had, as an interim measure prior to comprehensive redistribution, divided the 20 largest constituencies into a total of 45 new constituencies (see the Appendix for further details).



Districts and district magnitude. 607 seats were filled in single-member districts: 604 of these were geographical districts and three were university districts (the University of London, the University of Wales, and Queen's University Belfast). There were also fifteen two-member districts, twelve of which were geographical (the City of London, Blackburn, Bolton, Brighton, Derby, Norwich, Oldham, Preston, Southampton, Stockport, Sunderland, and Dundee) and three of which were university districts (the University of Oxford, the University of Cambridge, and the Combined English Universities). There was one three-member district (the Combined Scottish Universities).

Nature of votes that can be cast. Elections in all the single-member districts (both geographical and university) were by simple plurality: voters could cast a single vote for a single candidate by placing an X next to that candidate's name on the ballot paper; the candidate with most votes won.

Elections in the geographical two-member districts were by block vote: voters could vote for two candidates by placing Xs next to their names; the two candidates with most votes won.

Elections in university districts electing more than one member were held using the single transferable vote (STV).

Party threshold. Not applicable.

Allocation of seats to parties at the lower tier. In the one-member districts, the candidate with most of the votes was elected. In the multi-member districts, the appropriate number of candidates was either elected through block voting or through STV.

Allocation of seats to parties at the upper tier. Not applicable.

Allocation of seats to candidates. See 'Allocation of seats to parties'.

3.2 The 1948 Electoral Reform

The Representation of the People Act of 1948 (11 & 12 Geo. 6., vol. 2, c. 65) removed the last of the two-member geographical districts and eliminated the university districts. It therefore created, for the first time, a system of single-member plurality (SMP) across the whole country. It also made many other changes: it eliminated the business franchise (under which owners of business premises outside their constituency of residence could cast a second vote) and substantially amended many provisions relating to campaigning.



The only aspect of the electoral system covered by this project that has changed since 1948 is the assembly size. This is altered following periodic boundary reviews (the legislation for which has been changed a number of times and is summarized in the Appendix). Table 1 shows the size of the House of Commons at each election since 1945.

Assembly size. From 1950, hovering between 625 and 659 (see appendix for an overview).

Nature of votes that can be cast. Elections in all the districts were by simple plurality: voters could cast a single vote for a single candidate by placing an X next to that candidate's name on the ballot paper; the candidate with most votes won. From 1948 on, any multi-member districts were abolished.

Districts and district magnitude. All districts became single-member districts.

Allocation of seats to parties at the lower tier. In all districts, the candidate with most of the votes was elected.

No other change.

Appendix

Table 2. Assembly Size (House of Commons), since 1945

Election	Assembly Size	Election	Assembly Size
1945	640	1974 (October)	635
1950	625	1979	635
1951	625	1983	650
1955	630	1987	650
1959	630	1992	651
1964	630	1997	659
1966	630	2001	659
1970	630	2005	646
1974 (February)	635	2010	650

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