

**Electoral System Change in Europe since 1945: UK**

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With thanks to:

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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 documents 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 Act, 1948 |  |  | Yes |
|  | 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 Act, 1974 |  |  | No |
|  | 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 Act, 1981 |  | http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1981/34/contents/enacted | No |
|  | 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\_en.pdf | No |
|  | 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 Parliamentary Elections Act, 2002 |  | http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2002/24/contents/enacted | No |
| **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 Act, 2006** |  |  | http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/22/contents/enacted | No |
| **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 appropiate 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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**Project funding provisions**

The ESCE project team wishes to acknowledge that this research was made possible due to the financial support that the project has received from: the FRS-FNRS, the McDougall Trust and the Nuffield Foundation.