



Written by [Bruce Walker](#) on May 9, 2011

## Brits Reject Change in Voting System

Opinions differ widely among nations as to which voting system is best: the American arrangement wherein two-parties are dominant or the multi-party system in Europe and so many other countries. If a country has a multi-party system, it must choose whether it will be a "first-past-the-post" method, in which the candidate with a plurality of the votes wins, or a system by which seats are apportioned according to political party slates.



The prevalent "first-past-the-post" method in American elections has been used in Canada and Great Britain. The victory last year of the Conservative Party in the United Kingdom, which allowed David Cameron (left) to become Prime Minister in a coalition government, was dependent upon this sort of "winner-take-all" election in British electoral districts. When Cameron formed his government with Nick Clegg, however, one concession he made to the Liberal Democrat Party was to allow British voters to cast ballots on a referendum to change the voting system from this sort of Anglo-American electoral style to a continental form of proportional representation.

The elites, celebrities, state-sponsored "religious leaders," and many other nabobs enthusiastically supported the referendum. The wiser ordinary folk of Great Britain, however, overwhelmingly rejected this "reform." The Liberal Democrats, principal political sponsor of the reform, also took a major shellacking in the regional elections of Scotland and Wales.

In America, the questions as to which voting system is best are the province of state government, not the federal government. In fact, prior to the ratification of the 17th Amendment requiring the direct election of U.S. Senators, the only directly-elected offices provided for in the Constitution were members of the U.S. House of Representatives. Senators were chosen by the state legislatures and presidential electors were (and still are, nominally) chosen in a manner prescribed by each state's legislature. A state's members in the U.S. House of Representatives do not even need to be elected from congressional districts, and those districts may intentionally overlap, so that it is possible for two House members from a particular state to share voters.

As the election of federal officers in states varies, so too does the election of state officers. In some states there is no Lieutenant Governor (Secretary of State Jan Brewer in Arizona became Governor



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because her previous office was designated as that of de facto Lieutenant Governor). Supreme Court jurists are elected in competitive elections in some states, while in others they either face voters in retention elections or are appointed for life. Some states have many statewide elective officers — such as Commissioner of Labor, State Auditor, or Superintendent of Public Education — and some have none but the Governor. One state, Nebraska, has a unicameral legislature. South Carolina's Governor cannot veto legislation. So there is rich variety in the structure of state governments across America.

The method of election chosen by states also varies. Most Americans, dumbed-down drones of the public education system that they are, assume that the Australian secret ballot system is somehow in the Constitution. It is not. No states originally had the secret ballot, and it was adopted, not by federal jurists "interpreting" the Constitution, but by each state approving that method of voting. As with nearly everything in government, there are tradeoffs. Voter fraud, for instance, is much more likely with a secret ballot, and the easiest way to end it would be to require public voting.

The selection of party candidates also varies in the United States. While party organizations may choose their candidates in some states, most states have a primary system. Some state primaries have a runoff, in which the two candidates with the most votes in the primary face each other; others do not.

There is another aspect of elections that nearly every state has adopted: The plurality candidate — the one with the most votes — wins the election. Thus, in 2010, successful senatorial candidates in Colorado, Illinois, and Florida received less than half the votes cast. Similarly, successful gubernatorial candidates in Oregon, Illinois, Minnesota, Ohio, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Florida, Vermont, Maine, and Rhode Island all received less than half the votes cast. In 2002 in Louisiana, which notably requires a general election runoff to determine who becomes Governor, Mary Landrieu received less than half the votes in the November general election — and so had to win the runoff in order to be elected Governor.

As long as the sovereign rights of state governments are respected by the federal government, these systems all seem to work.

The Anglo-American electoral system has a very different approach to the purpose of democratic government from the continental Europeans, who have many political parties — each representing an "interest group" and each promising rewards for party supporters if victorious. Such an "interest group" approach to government is precisely the opposite of what America's Founders intended. The way the European system works in elections varies. It may involve voting for one's "first choice," then "second choice" and so on, with votes weighted, or it may be characterized by "party lists" which give seats in the legislature based upon the proportion of votes that each party receives.

The very idea of permanent political parties was viewed with horror by the men who wrote the U.S. Constitution. Loyalty to a party or an interest group, rather than to America and the foundational principles of its government, was rightly seen as corrosive of noble civic spirit and limited government. The reason for using democratic processes to effect limited constitutional government had nothing to do with the "will of the people" or the clout of a strong political party or movement. Instead the democratic process in elections was rather like the jury in the legal system. The goal was to have voters who were disinterested — not disinterested in truth or in the rule of law, but in factions and parties (or in these days, race, gender, or class).

The Founders intended for voters to place trustworthy and noble men into public offices. George Washington, widely respected for his honor and integrity — rather than any political positions — was a



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prime example of such a man, as is Congressman Ron Paul today. The Founders' intentions were not just to place good men in office, but also to keep scoundrels from positions of public power. The crucial aspect of personal honor and integrity, in this case, was serious devotion to the oath of office, which requires federal office holders to protect and defend the Constitution. The Constitution limits what government can do, so that government, in ordinary life, was meant to be so pedestrian and mild that voters would find few causes for wanting to vote, and when they did, it would be a judgment on the character of the candidate more than anything else. Most Americans want the depoliticization of life, not the hyper-politicization reflected in the need for secondary and tertiary votes in elections.

Party voting, list voting, and other European systems of fine calibration in determining the "will of the people" frustrate the vital, but narrow, function of a republican form of government. When votes are for partisan reasons — not for individuals — then nations tend to elect cads (a result far too common to list in any detail) or even to choose tyrants such as Hitler, whose utterly democratic rise to power was largely because of proportional representation in Weimar Germany.

For now, at least, voters in the United Kingdom have rejected this step down the path of interest politics.



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