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(This article appears in: [Electoral Studies](#), 30:1 (2011), pp184-200.)

**ATTITUDES TO VOTING RULES AND ELECTORAL SYSTEM PREFERENCES:  
EVIDENCE FROM THE 1999 AND 2003 SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS**

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*Abstract*

Researchers have paid little attention to the way citizens evaluate different electoral systems. This reflects the limited knowledge citizens are presumed to have about alternative electoral arrangements. However, the establishment of a legislature under new electoral rules creates conditions in which citizens can make more informed judgements. Such a situation occurred with the establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999, elected under the Additional Member system. Using data collected in 1999 and 2003, we consider Scottish voters' reactions to the new electoral rules. We examine how voters evaluated various features and outcomes of the rules, the structure of voters' attitudes, and which features and outcomes of the rules were decisive in shaping overall support for plurality and proportional voting systems.

*Keywords:* Electoral systems; Electoral reform; Voter attitudes.

In a representative democracy, elections are the basic mechanism by which citizens select and control those holding government office. However, the character of that mechanism depends on the electoral rules in force, and these vary considerably. There are significant differences between electoral systems in, for example, the number and type of preferences that citizens can express, the way these preferences are translated into social outcomes (in terms of legislative seats and governments) and the nature of local representation. These variations have been the subject of copious, and impressive, research. Much attention has been paid to the impact of different electoral rules on the proportionality of election outcomes, on the nature of party systems, on government formation and on patterns of representation (overviews of research on these themes appear in Colomer, 2004; Farrell, 2001; Grofman and Reynolds, 2001; Shugart, 2005). The implications of different electoral systems for citizens' attitudes and behaviour have been studied too, in particular the impact of different rules on electoral turnout (Blais and Carty, 1990; Fisher et al., 2008; Franklin, 2004: chs4-5; Norris, 2004: ch7) and levels of system support (Anderson, 1998; Farrell and McAllister, 2006; Miller and Listhaug, 1990; Norris, 1999, 2001). But relatively little attention has been paid to voters' attitudes towards these rules in the first place. Having surveyed the existing research on electoral systems, David Farrell (2001: 187-8) notes that:

‘For all its strengths, the research to date tends to focus predominantly on macro-level questions, relating to such themes as levels of support for the system, levels of satisfaction with democracy, or the age-old issue of proportionality. In all this research, no effort has been made to glean voter attitudes towards more micro-level questions surrounding the different electoral systems ....’

In short, existing research tells us relatively little about voters' attitudes towards different electoral rules, their properties and their outcomes. Where popular attitudes have been explored, this has tended to focus on the impact of a respondent's party 'winning' or 'losing' under different electoral arrangements (Anderson et al., 2005; Bowler and Donovan, 2007; Lamare and Vowles, 1996), an approach that does not take us much further in understanding how far attitudes towards any particular electoral system reflect the perceived features and qualities of that system. One important exception to this generalization is research conducted in New Zealand in the wake of the change to that country's electoral system, in 1996, from Single Member Plurality to Mixed Member Proportional (MMP). That research suggested that while support for MMP reflected attitudes towards multi-party government and people's views about intra-party preference voting, it was less affected by views about proportionality (Karp and Bowler, 2001; Lamare and Vowles, 1996; Vowles et al., 2000; Vowles et al., 2002).

In this paper, we exploit a similar opportunity to conduct research into popular attitudes to electoral rules at the time a new electoral system is introduced by looking at evidence from Scotland. Here, prior to 1999, all elections were conducted using Single Member Plurality, but in that year another variant of MMP (referred to as the Additional Member System) was introduced for elections to a newly established devolved parliament. Drawing on survey data collected at the time of the first two elections to the new parliament, we address two key issues. First, how do citizens think about different electoral rules and their various properties and outcomes? Do popular attitudes to the

specific features of different electoral systems show some internal structure and consistency? If so, does that structure reflect the arguments usually marshalled in elite level debates on the relative merits of plurality rule versus some form of proportional representation? Or, alternatively, do we find no such structure, with citizens showing little consistency when asked to adjudicate between the various features of a plurality and a proportional electoral system?

Second, how do we account for people's preference for a plurality or a proportional rule? Does that preference have much to do with the specific micro-level features of the systems at all? As we have already noted, support for a particular electoral system might depend upon which parties apparently benefit or lose out from one system as compared with the other. Or it might reflect broader perceptions of the perceived efficacy and responsiveness of the political system. If, however, citizens' preferences are not simply swayed by such exogenous considerations, but instead do take account of the specific features of electoral systems, which particular arguments about those features appear to have most sway in voters' minds?

We pursue these two questions for one simple reason. Electoral systems often form part of a country's constitutional rules that can only be changed following approval in a referendum. Even if that is not the case, it may become an accepted norm that changes to the fundamental rules of a country's democratic arrangements are only made once the people have been consulted in a referendum. This was the position adopted in New Zealand and now appears to hold, too, in the United Kingdom following a decision to hold a referendum on whether to switch elections to the House of Commons from Single Member Plurality to the Alternative Vote. The consequence of such a referendum requirement has varied. Sometimes, as in New Zealand and also Italy, referendums have ensured that change did occur. On other occasions, as in a number of recent attempts to change the electoral systems of Canadian provincial legislatures, referendums have proved to be a roadblock to change. But either way, it has become clear that if we are to understand fully the dynamics of electoral reform, we can no longer afford to ignore citizens' views about alternative electoral systems and, in particular the issue of how far, and in what way, those views are capable of providing a independent judgement on the merits of any proposed change.

### **1: Citizens and electoral rules**

It is not surprising that, hitherto, few studies have examined citizens' attitudes towards different electoral rules. After all, until recently in most advanced democracies, these rules were relatively stable. What benefit could be gained from probing mass views on alternative institutional rules when the existing rules appeared durable? However, this stability was disturbed in the 1990s, when several advanced democracies – Israel, Italy and Japan as well as New Zealand – undertook major reforms of their electoral system (Lijphart, 1994: 52; Norris, 2004: 22-25). As we have already noted in the case of New Zealand, these institutional reforms did stimulate some attempts to examine what citizens made of their new electoral arrangements, and in particular whether the properties,

qualities and outcomes of these systems commanded greater popular support than those of the previous institutional regime.<sup>1</sup>

In Britain, too, public attitudes towards different electoral rules only began to be explored once the popular legitimacy of existing political arrangements first became an issue of concern after the two general elections in 1974. However, even then, little attempt was made to analyse public attitudes in any depth. Instead, such research as was conducted typically limited itself to gauging levels of popular support for different electoral systems, often by simply asking survey respondents to choose between the existing Single Member Plurality system and a generic 'proportional representation' alternative.

One reason for this cautious approach was that few citizens in Britain had experience of voting in a public election using any system other than a plurality one. As a result, any attempt to measure and analyse attitudes to the micro-level features and properties of alternative electoral systems would have risked gathering 'non-attitudes' towards a subject that, in normal circumstances, few have the motivation or cause to consider. Recently, attempts have been made to overcome this difficulty by conducting experimental and qualitative studies, in which participants are provided with information about different electoral systems before being asked for their reactions. One such exercise involved 're-running' Westminster elections by giving respondents a simple explanation of how to complete the ballot paper used in various proportional systems and then asking them to complete a mock ballot paper for each of these systems. Respondents were then asked follow up questions on how they felt about voting under these alternative electoral arrangements (Dunleavy et al., 1997, and references therein). However, the limited information that this sort of exercise could impart to participants constrained the range of issues about alternative electoral systems that could be examined.

A second such exercise adopted a qualitative research design, involving detailed deliberation among small groups (Farrell and Gallagher, 1999).<sup>2</sup> This approach made it possible to impart far more information about alternative systems to participants, and thus to probe a wider range of issues, including constituency representation and the desirability of intra-party preference voting. However, the artificial conditions created by small group deliberations, plus their restricted sample sizes, inevitably raise questions about the generalisability of the results.

However, analysts in Britain need no longer be constrained by the limitations of experimental and qualitative research designs. We can now examine attitudes to alternative electoral systems among a population that has real experience of these arrangements. In 1999, the Single Member Plurality model lost its monopoly of public elections in Britain.<sup>3</sup> In that year, the new Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly were

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<sup>1</sup> Studies of citizen responses to new electoral rules have also been undertaken in transitional democracies, such as South Africa (Mattes and Southall, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Small focus groups were also used by the polling company NOP to explore popular attitudes to 'open' versus 'closed' list systems prior to the introduction in Britain in 1999 of the new list system for European Parliament elections.

<sup>3</sup> Voters in Northern Ireland, of course, have plenty of experience of the Single Transferable Vote (STV), which nowadays is used in all elections in the province apart from those to the UK House of

both elected using a variant of the Additional Member System (AMS).<sup>4</sup> In that year too, all British members of the European Parliament were elected for the first time using a (closed) regional list system instead of Single Member Plurality. The following year, representatives to the newly established Greater London Assembly were elected using yet another variant of AMS.

As of the last ten years, then, citizens across Britain have been introduced to, and have had some experience of, alternatives to the Single Member Plurality model. This makes it possible to explore attitudes towards different electoral rules among a representative sample of the general public in some detail, without undue fear of tapping non-attitudes. In this paper, we exploit this opportunity by examining attitudes among people in Scotland, where AMS has been introduced to elect a relatively powerful devolved legislature for which turnout has been only ten points or so below that in statewide general elections. We use data from the 1999 and 2003 *Scottish Social Attitudes* surveys, both of which were conducted shortly after devolved elections held under AMS, and incorporated a dedicated module of questions tapping attitudes towards the properties, qualities and outcomes of the new electoral rules.<sup>5</sup>

## 2: Research questions

As already indicated, we pursue two main research questions. The first is to uncover the structure of voters' attitudes to electoral systems. In particular, we examine whether voters who take a particular position on one feature of an electoral system take a related position on a second feature. As we discuss in the next section, the arguments deployed in the academic and policy literatures for either plurality or proportional electoral arrangements tend to link together multiple features and outcomes of these arrangements. Thus, advocates of proportional representation stress the 'fairness' of allocating legislative seats proportionately, claim that there is more incentive to vote because fewer votes are 'wasted', and emphasise the supposed benefits of both coalition government and multi-member constituencies. In contrast, those who favour Single Member Plurality argue that single party governments are more accountable and more stable, while single member districts ensure a close 'link' between elected representatives and their constituents. Our first quest is to establish whether this structure in the elite level debate is reflected in

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Commons. In 2007, STV also replaced Single Member Plurality in local government elections in Scotland.

<sup>4</sup> In Scotland, 73 members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) are elected in single seat constituencies using the plurality formula, while a further 56 MSPs are elected from closed party lists in eight separate regions. The list seats are allocated such that the total number of constituency and list MSPs secured by each party within each region is as proportional as possible according to the D'Hondt formula. Voters can cast both a constituency and a list vote, with the latter determining the allocation of the additional seats. In Wales, the system is the same except that there are 40 members of the National Assembly elected by plurality rule in single member constituencies, with a further 20 members elected from closed party lists in five separate regions.

<sup>5</sup> A similar exercise was also conducted in Wales in 1999 and 2003 (Curtice et al., 2000; Independent Commission on Proportional Representation, 2003). However, in 1999, the questions were only answered by 440 people, which restricts the depth with which the data for that year can be examined, while turnout (and thus engagement with the new electoral system) has been much lower in Wales than in Scotland. We thus limit our analysis to people in Scotland.

popular opinion. For example, do voters who favour proportionality also prefer coalition government? Or are voters who prefer one of these no more likely than anyone else to prefer the other?

One reason why the structure of citizens' attitudes might matter is that the less consistent these attitudes, the more equivocal we might expect the public to be about the relative merits of plurality and proportional systems. But this depends on which factors in practice influence those attitudes. This is the object of our second research question, which is to examine more directly what accounts for people's preference between Single Member Plurality and AMS. In particular, we compare the role of attitudes towards specific features of these systems ('endogenous' factors), with the role of a wider set of attitudes ('exogenous' factors). The next section sets out the various endogenous factors we consider; here, we identify what we consider to be the relevant set of exogenous attitudes.

We have already made reference to the suggestion that attitudes to particular electoral systems might reflect calculations of whether a preferred political party 'wins' or 'loses' under these rules. Not surprisingly, previous studies have found that support for existing electoral arrangements tends to be lower among those who 'lose' under those arrangements – either at one election or consistently over time – than it is among those who 'win' (Anderson et al., 2005; Bowler and Donovan, 2007; Lamare and Vowles, 1996). In this instance, however, such an approach to ascertaining the possible impact of partisanship on attitudes towards electoral systems appears inadequate.

The 1999 and 2003 Scottish elections were dominated by four main parties: Labour, a social democratic party, the Scottish National Party (SNP), which campaigns in favour of Scotland becoming independent, the Liberal Democrats, a social liberal party, and the Conservatives, a secular party of the centre right. Labour emerged as the largest party on both occasions; in 1999, it won 34 per cent of the list vote and 43 per cent of the seats, although in 2003 it performed less well, securing 29 per cent of the list vote and 39 per cent of the seats. After both elections, Labour formed a coalition government with the Liberal Democrats, who secured 12 per cent of the list vote and 13 per cent of the seats in both 1999 and 2003. These two parties might thus be thought of as the 'winners' from the new electoral system. In contrast, the SNP, who came second at both elections, with 27 per cent of both the list vote and of seats in 1999, and 21 per cent of both the list vote and of seats in 2003, would appear to have been 'losers'. The same is true of the Conservatives, who tallied 15 per cent of the list vote and 14 per cent of the seats in 1999, and 16 per cent of the vote and 14 per cent of the seats in 2003.

However, just because a party gains a place in the executive under a particular system does not necessarily mean that this system works to its advantage as compared with an alternative system. This caveat is particularly relevant to the possible outlook of Labour voters in Scotland. Their party might have come first under AMS, but Labour would have won an overall legislative majority if Single Member Plurality had been used, as demonstrated by the outcome in the constituency contests alone in 1999 and 2003. Meanwhile, most of the seats won by the two 'losers', the SNP and the Conservatives, consisted of 'additional' regional list members whose presence made the outcome far more proportional than it otherwise would have been. As for the Liberal Democrats, while the use of AMS provided an opportunity to enter government as a coalition partner (a position

it had not enjoyed in the UK since 1945), the party actually secured most of its seats via the constituency section of the ballot. In short, if instead of asking who found themselves in and out of power after the 1999 and 2003 elections, we consider who benefited from the decision to employ AMS rather than Single Member Plurality, we identify a rather different set of ‘winners’ and ‘losers’. From this alternative perspective, Labour was arguably an electoral loser, both the SNP and the Conservatives were apparently winners, while the position of the Liberal Democrats is ambiguous.

Meanwhile, the parties’ policy positions on the appropriate electoral system for Scottish Parliament elections were not always aligned with their immediate electoral interests. The Liberal Democrats have long favoured proportional representation for elections to the House of Commons, and they simply extended this policy to the Scottish Parliament, even though it was debatable whether in this instance their party benefited from it. Although the Labour Party has long exhibited a preference for Single Member Plurality, it had – as part of the negotiations on devolution with the Liberal Democrats in the early 1990s – been persuaded to include AMS in its proposals for a new Scottish Parliament (Curtice, 2006) even though this arguably was far from being in the party’s interests. Meanwhile, although the Conservative Party’s representation in the Scottish Parliament consisted almost entirely of list members rather than constituency members, the party was ideologically committed to Single Member Plurality. Of the four main parties, only the SNP, who had long favoured proportional representation in general, if not AMS in particular, had a policy stance that was not potentially at odds with its immediate electoral interests.

So not only is it unclear who might be regarded as a ‘winner’ or a ‘loser’ from the Scottish Parliament elections, but the policy stances adopted by the parties did not necessarily match their apparent strategic interests. Against this backdrop we approach the question of whether voters are influenced by their partisanship not by simply asking whether voters’ views reflected the strategic interests of the party they supported. Instead, we are also alive to the possibility that voters’ views were aligned with the (short-term and long-term) policy pronouncements of the party they support, thereby suggesting that they relied on those pronouncements as a cue.

A second potential exogenous influence on attitudes to different electoral arrangements comes from people’s views of the wider political system. Those who believe the system to be responsive to their demands may well, all other things being equal, tend to favour the existing electoral arrangements. Those who take a more negative view can be expected to favour alternative electoral arrangements.<sup>6</sup> As the use of AMS in devolved Scottish elections represented a change from the previous ‘norm’ of Single Member Plurality, we anticipate that support for the new electoral rules will be higher amongst those sceptical of the responsiveness of the wider political system.

Thirdly, in the particular case of Scotland, public reactions to the voting system used for the new devolved legislature might be affected by attitudes to the wider principle of devolution. Our final potential exogenous factor influencing support for electoral rules is

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<sup>6</sup> For such evidence in Britain, see Wenzel et al., 2000; for New Zealand, see Banducci and Karp, 1999; Lamare and Vowles, 1996; for the United States, see Donovan et al., 2005.



thus whether people favoured the very creation of the Scottish Parliament whose establishment was accompanied by the introduction of the new AMS system.

However, attitudes towards AMS may not simply reflect these possible exogenous influences. They may also be influenced by their perceptions of the merits of the various micro-features of different electoral rules. But are all facets of the elite level debate about the relative merits of plurality and proportional systems of equal importance to ordinary citizens? Perhaps, as was evident in New Zealand, some carry more weight in voters' minds than others. Clearly if we are to address this question we need first of all to lay out what we consider to be the terms of that elite level debate. That is the task to which we turn next.

### **3: Debates about electoral systems**

We would identify four key arguments in the elite level debate about the relative merits of plurality rule and a more proportional system, such as the version of AMS used in elections to the Scottish Parliament.

The first concerns the way in which citizen preferences are translated into seats. Systems of proportional representation provide for a close relationship between the distribution of votes and the allocation of legislative seats between parties (Powell, 2000: 3-16). Proponents of proportional representation argue that this ensures 'fairness' on the grounds that all votes are treated equally (Blau, 2004). Allied to this is the claim that proportional systems increase the marginal utility of voting because a large proportion of ballots are cast for candidates and parties that secure election. As a result, and in sharp contrast to Single Member Plurality, it is claimed that proportional representation tends to minimise the number of 'wasted' votes (Amy, 1993: 21-41).

The second argument concerns how governments are formed and terminated. Both sides in the debate largely agree that plurality electoral systems tend to produce single party governments, while proportional systems increase the probability of coalition governments.<sup>7</sup> Where the protagonists disagree is over the merits of these different outcomes. Advocates of plurality systems argue that single party governments promote executive accountability. With a single party in power it is clear who is responsible for policy outcomes, with voters able to use elections to 'sanction' poorly performing administrations (Powell and Whitten, 1993; Whitten and Palmer, 1999). With multi-party executives, it is more difficult for voters to allocate responsibility for policy decisions, and thus to impose sanctions. In addition, since coalition governments often arise through inter-party bargaining, rather than directly from the election, the ability of the electorate to determine who holds office is severely attenuated. One reason for this is that the coalition bargaining power of small parties may be significantly greater than their strength among the electorate (Norton, 1982:236-7; Pinto-Duschinsky, 1999; Taylor,

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<sup>7</sup> Thus, Katz (1997: 162-3) finds that, across 44 countries between 1946 and 1985, over 90 per cent of cabinets formed under single member plurality arrangements comprised a single party, while over 70 per cent of cabinets formed under proportional arrangements were coalitions.

1984).<sup>8</sup> Moreover, there is always the danger that a multi-party government will fall from office and be replaced by another long before the electorate has a chance to cast its verdict at an election (Norton, 1982: 239).<sup>9</sup> In short, proponents of plurality rule suggest that only single party government – facilitated by plurality electoral systems – provides the conditions under which both ‘mandate’ and ‘sanction’ forms of accountability can work effectively (McLean, 1991; Norton, 1997; Powell, 2000; Schumpeter, 1987: 269-83).

In contrast, supporters of proportional systems argue that the role of elections lies less in holding governments to account than in providing for a representative legislature (Lijphart, 1999: 90; McLean, 1991; Powell, 2000). They argue, too, that any government commanding a majority in the legislature should also have secured the support of at least half of those who voted. This outcome is more likely in the case of a multi-party executive, elected by proportional representation, than for a single party executive whose majority often rests on the tendency of plurality systems to over-allocate seats to the largest party (Lijphart, 1994: 96; Taagepera and Shugart, 1989).

The third point of debate in the argument about electoral systems is the nature of the electoral choice offered to voters. Should elections simply present voters with the ability to choose between parties, or should they be allowed a more extensive choice between individual candidates? This debate does not, however, neatly divide the advocates of plurality and proportional systems. Some proportional systems – ‘closed’ party lists – only allow voters to choose between parties, while others allow voters to select between individual candidates. Single member plurality stands ambiguously in this regard. Nominally, all votes are cast for individual candidates. But as each party only nominates one candidate in each district, voters who wish to back a particular party are forced to pick that candidate. However, for those who favour maximising voters’ ability to choose between candidates, closed list systems are particularly deficient because they enable parties to ‘smuggle’ potentially unpopular candidates into the legislature by placing them high on their list (Bogdanor, 1984: 134-9; see also Shugart and Wattenberg, 2001: 593). By contrast, others argue that closed lists are perfectly consistent with democratic values, since they help maintain collective responsibility within parties who thus provide voters with clear choices between coherent party platforms (Katz, 1997: 213-5; Shugart, 1999).<sup>10</sup>

The fourth and final aspect of the debate we identify concerns the nature of local representation.<sup>11</sup> Single member districts are sometimes held to provide a stronger relationship between voters and their elected representatives than multi-member

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<sup>8</sup> One measure of this is the relative numerical allocation of ministries between parties. See Laver and Schofield (1998: 171-81).

<sup>9</sup> On the stability of coalitions, see Budge and Keman (1990: 165-72).

<sup>10</sup> In the British context, the controversy over the introduction of a closed list system for European Parliament elections in 1999 focused on the restricted choice supposedly available to voters. Surveys conducted at the time suggested, however, that there was no clear majority against closed lists, whose unpopularity was concentrated among the higher socio-economic groups (Dunleavy et al., 1998).

<sup>11</sup> A particularly salient issue in the British context. An example of this are the terms of reference given to Britain’s Independent Commission on the Voting System, chaired by Lord Jenkins, one of whose specified criteria was ‘the maintenance of a link between MPs and geographical constituencies’ (Jenkins, 1998).

districts. In single member districts, it is claimed, an elected representative has an incentive to pursue the votes of all constituents and, once in office, to retain a ‘personal’ vote; this encourages the representative to pay close attention to the grievances of individual constituents and to act as an advocate of their collective interests. Moreover, the fact that every voter has just one representative means they know who to hold to account for their actions (Crewe, 1985; Curtice and Shively, 2009). However, others claim that multi-member electoral systems provide stronger incentives for elected representatives to cultivate a personal vote than do single member plurality systems, especially where, in the case of the latter, electoral success depends primarily on the popularity of the parties (Carey and Shugart, 1995). This is particularly true of open list systems or STV, where candidates cannot secure election on the basis of party popularity alone, but also need a degree of personal popularity. In addition, proportional electoral systems are sometimes held to provide superior local representation; because voters typically are represented by more than one representative, they can seek the help of an elected politician whose ideological position they find most congenial, or the one they feel is most inclined to pursue their particular grievance (Amy, 1993: 177-80; Lakeman, 1984).

We can see from this summary that if the structure of public attitudes towards electoral systems reflects the structure of the elite level debate, then we should find some consistency of attitudes between different features and outcomes of electoral rules. For example, someone believing that elections should primarily provide for a representative legislature should also believe that proportional electoral systems are fairer and increase the utility of voting, while rejecting the notion that single member constituencies provide superior local representation. The only point on which the structure of attitudes might be uncertain concerns intra-party preference voting. It may be, of course, that there is little such structure underpinning popular attitudes; people in Scotland may not necessarily see the connections between these arguments because, despite exposure to different electoral arrangements, they have not developed firm or coherent attitudes towards these rules.

#### **4: Data and measures**

Our data come from the 1999 and 2003 *Scottish Social Attitudes* surveys (details of which are provided in Paterson et al., 2001 and Bromley et al., 2006).<sup>12</sup> The two surveys interviewed a random sample of the adult population immediately after the first two elections to the Scottish Parliament in those years. A dedicated module of questions probing attitudes to the new electoral rules – fielded as part of a self-completion booklet appended to the main face to face survey – was designed for the 1999 survey and repeated

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<sup>12</sup> The 1999 survey, including the module on attitudes towards electoral systems, was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. The 2003 survey was funded from a variety of sources; finance for the module on attitudes towards electoral systems was provided by the Independent Commission on Proportional Representation, whose work was funded by the Nuffield Foundation and the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust. Both surveys were conducted by the Scottish Centre for Social Research (ScotGen), part of the National Centre for Social Research (NatGen). The data from both surveys are deposited at the UK Data Archive, University of Essex (study numbers 4346 and 5076).

in full in 2003.<sup>13</sup> Altogether in 1999, 1,169 respondents completed this booklet, while in 2003 1,343 did so.<sup>14</sup>

These respondents included both those who reported having voted in the devolved elections immediately preceding the surveys and those who reported having not voted. We have indicated our interest in the attitudes of those with some experience of different electoral systems, since people in this group are the most likely to possess the information necessary to compare alternative electoral rules meaningfully. Given that the 1999 and 2003 elections provided the first opportunity for people in Scotland to vote under a different system, experience of alternative systems was, in effect, confined to those who participated in those two elections. Our analyses are thus restricted to those reporting having voted at the most recent devolved election, of whom there were 889 in 1999 and 814 in 2003. The survey data reinforce our presumption that people who voted were more knowledgeable than people who did not vote, and more likely to have developed an opinion on different electoral systems. Voters were more likely than non-voters to correctly answer a six item factual knowledge quiz, while they were also less likely to give a ‘don’t know’ or ‘can’t choose’ response to our attitudinal questions.<sup>15</sup>

However, a possible risk with this strategy is that, because it reduces the sizes of the samples on which our analyses are based, we understate the range of variables that are associated with overall support for, or opposition to, proportional representation. In part, that risk is reduced because many of our analyses are conducted on the pooled data for both years, thereby increasing the sample size. Nonetheless, we have replicated all our analyses to include non-voters, to check that doing so would not discernibly alter our findings.

Support for different electoral arrangements was obtained via two questions, one focusing specifically on the AMS system used in Scottish Parliament elections, and one addressing proportional representation in general. The wording of these two questions was:

‘Some people prefer the new [in 2003: the current] way of voting for the Scottish Parliament as they say it means all parties are fairly represented. Others say that the old way [in 2003: the way] of voting used in elections to the UK House of Commons is better as it produces effective government.

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<sup>13</sup> Apart from one question on attitudes towards proportional representation in general and one on attitudes towards coalition versus single party government, the module was not administered at the third Scottish Parliament election in 2007 on either that year’s *Scottish Social Attitudes* survey (also conducted by ScotCen) or the entirely separate 2007 *Scottish Election Study* (an internet survey conducted by YouGov).

<sup>14</sup> These figures represent the people who completed the self-completion module of questions on the electoral system. However, the marginal distributions of responses to some survey questions, as reported in Table 1, below, are based on a larger number of respondents. This is because a few questions were fielded in the main (face to face) part of the survey – completed by more respondents – rather than in the self-completion part.

<sup>15</sup> On average, in 1999, voters provided correct answers to 3.1 items in the knowledge quiz, while non-voters answered correctly only 2.5 items. Three times as many non-voters (19 per cent) as voters (6 per cent) were unable to give an opinion in response to the first question on the Scottish Parliament voting system detailed in the next but one paragraph.

Which view comes closer to your own? Should elections to the Scottish Parliament keep to the new [in 2003: the current] way of voting, or should elections to the Scottish Parliament use the old [in 2003: the same] way of voting [in 2003: as in elections to the House of Commons]?’

and:

‘How much do you agree or disagree that the Scottish Parliament should be elected using proportional representation?’ (Five point response scale: Strongly agree; Agree, Neither agree nor disagree; Disagree; Strongly disagree.)

It is well known that, in Britain at least, levels of support for different electoral arrangements are highly sensitive to the wording of survey questions (Curtice and Jowell, 1998; Dunleavy and Margetts, 1999). Our two questions illustrate this point. In response to the first question, in 1999 63 per cent of those who voted in the Scottish Parliament election favoured the ‘new way of voting’ (ie. AMS), while 31 per cent said they preferred the ‘old way’ (ie. Single Member Plurality); the remainder were unsure which system they favoured. In contrast, as many as 71 per cent of voters in 1999 agreed or strongly agreed with the proposition in favour of proportional representation in the second question, while only 10 per cent disagreed. The picture was much the same in 2003, when 67 per cent favoured the ‘current way of voting’ (ie. AMS) and 26 per cent preferred the method used for elections to the House of Commons (ie. Single Member Plurality). Although only 64 per cent said in 2003 that they favoured the use of proportional representation, still just 14 per cent opposed it.<sup>16</sup>

The two differently worded survey questions thus elicit somewhat different response patterns. Indeed, the correlations between them are relatively modest: 0.40 in 1999 and even less, 0.26, in 2003. This discrepancy is, perhaps, hardly surprising given that the first question refers to AMS in particular, while the second asks about proportional representation in general. However, it raises the possibility that the results of analysing attitudes to the micro-features of electoral systems might be contingent on which of the two measures is employed as the dependent variable. When we analyse the correlates of support for alternative electoral arrangements, we therefore consider whether our findings are consistent across the two questions.

Our surveys contained a number of measures tapping attitudes to the various features and consequences of electoral systems outlined above (all question wordings and variable codings are set out in Appendix 1). Two questions addressed the issue of how votes are

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<sup>16</sup> One might wonder whether all voters necessarily understand the term ‘proportional representation’ employed in the question. However, in both 1999 and 2003, the survey question on the desirability of the Scottish Parliament being elected by proportional representation immediately followed a similar question about the House of Commons and that question explicitly defined proportional representation, as follows: “so that the number of MPs each party gets in the House of Commons matches more closely the number of votes each party gets” (emphases in original). For further discussion of the relative merits of the two alternative wordings see p27 below.

translated into seats, one that sought views on the fairness of AMS and another that asked whether votes were felt to ‘count’ more under the new electoral arrangements. Several questions addressed the debate about government formation. These measures tapped attitudes to the principle of single party versus coalition government and to two specific criticisms of multi-party executives: their supposed instability and the disproportionate bargaining power alleged to accrue to small parties. The surveys contained three questions that sought views on the nature of voter choice offered by different systems, and in particular how far voters were allowed to express a preference for candidates as well as for parties. Finally, attitudes to local representation were tapped via a question that asked about the relative merits of single-member versus multi-member districts.

What of our measures of possible exogenous influences? As already noted, one such influence that appears prominently in the literature is whether the party a respondent supports is, or is perceived to be, an electoral ‘winner’ or ‘loser’ from a particular system. This status is conventionally measured by identifying those whose reported vote at the last election was for a party that is now in government, and comparing their views with those who voted for a party in opposition (Anderson et al., 2005: 32-5). However, we have indicated that this approach is dubious in the context of the 1999 and 2003 Scottish elections. So instead of identifying whether a respondent voted for a party that supposedly won or lost, we simply identify the party they supported on the list vote. Such an approach still enables us to identify any evidence that supporters of parties that might be thought to have been winners from the new system were more likely to back it, but it equally enables us to assess whether instead parties influence voters’ views through the cues provided by their policy pronouncements.

Aside from such partisan considerations, our earlier discussion identified two other potential exogenous factors that might shape attitudes to the electoral system in Scotland, namely perceptions of how well the existing political system is working and support for the principle of devolution. Views on the working of the political system are measured through responses to two statements that tapped aspects of ‘system efficacy’, namely that MPs lose touch with voters and that parties only care about votes, not about people’s opinions. The responses to these questions have been combined to create a nine point scale, coded so that a high score indicates low efficacy. We label this term ‘efficacy deficit’. Support for devolution is measured by a question that asked respondents whether they voted for or against the creation of the Scottish Parliament in 1997.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, it is not clear theoretically why socio-economic background should affect attitudes to electoral rules. Indeed, prior studies do not show any such pattern (Wenzel et al., 2000), except in respect of education, where analysis of British data has found support for electoral reform concentrated among those educated to degree level (Curtice and Jowell, 1998). We thus include in our models a term that distinguishes those holding a degree level qualification from the remainder of the population

## 5: Results

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<sup>17</sup> The distribution of recalled referendum vote was almost identical in 2003 to that in 1999, suggesting that voters’ recall of referendum voting in 2003 was at least as reliable as their recall in 1999.

How did those who participated in the first two elections to the Scottish Parliament react to the use of AMS? In Table 1, we show for 1999 (as the main cell entries) and 2003 (in brackets) the pattern of responses given by voters to each of our survey questions on the micro-features of electoral systems and the role of elections. We note that, for the most part, voters were able to express some view; typically, only around one in ten said that they could not choose between the response options provided to them.<sup>18</sup> This helps validate our expectation that exposure to different electoral systems allows us to pose detailed questions about these rules to a general population. Interestingly, however, there is no evidence that a second acquaintance with the new system made it any easier for our respondents to choose one of the response options. In general, the proportions answering ‘can’t choose’ were no lower in 2003 than they had been in 1999.

TABLE 1

As to the substance of voters’ responses, two aspects of the new system appear to have been regarded relatively favourably. The first was the way that the system allocated seats. Far more voters agreed than disagreed that AMS was fairer than single member plurality, and that its use increased the marginal utility of voting.<sup>19</sup> The second concerned government outcomes, where the merits of multi-party executives were preferred to those of single party executives. Asked in 1999 to respond to the statement that ‘Having a government made up of two parties rather than one is better as it means more people are represented’, a majority (54 per cent) concurred while less than a quarter (22 per cent) demurred. Asked specifically what would be the best kind of administration for Scotland, more favoured a coalition (53 per cent) than a single party executive (41 per cent). Voters also tended to feel that it was more important for elections to deliver representative outcomes than to ensure clear lines of accountability. Well over half (57 per cent) said it was better to have two parties in government so that more views are represented, while only one third (35 per cent) believed it better to have a single party in power to make it clear whom to blame if things go wrong. True, the position was rather less clear cut when voters were asked to choose between a ‘fair result’ and a ‘clear winner’, but nevertheless supporters of the former (48 per cent) still outnumbered those prioritising the latter (41 per cent). Voters also gave short shrift to the suggestion that multi-party governments would be unstable or give undue bargaining power to small parties, with less than one in five agreeing with either claim.

However, in two other respects, the AMS model for the Scottish Parliament was regarded less favourably in 1999. First, voters were not entirely happy with the restricted choice offered by the closed nature of the list ballot, where they could select only between

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<sup>18</sup> Lest it be thought that electoral systems are a particularly esoteric subject, 10 per cent of respondents in 1999 failed to give a response on what Britain’s long term policy should be in relation to the European Union, hardly an arcane issue!

<sup>19</sup> We should note that, in both cases, the proposition was worded in a direction favourable to AMS, and thus responses might be affected by acquiescence bias (Schuman and Presser, 1981). It should also be noted that, in both cases, far more respondents indicated they simply ‘agreed’ than ‘strongly agreed’ with the statement; in 1999, just 13 per cent strongly agreed that the new voting system was much fairer, while just 12 per cent strongly agreed that it made it more worthwhile voting.

parties and not between candidates. Thus, faced with the statement 'I would prefer to have been able to vote for individual candidates on the regional vote rather than for a party list', 44 per cent of our sample agreed, while only 21 per cent disagreed (though note that 28 per cent neither agreed nor disagreed suggesting, perhaps, that this was not a particularly salient issue for many voters). No less than half our sample explicitly rejected the proposition that parties should determine which individual candidates get elected from their party lists. Second, on the issue of local representation, the arrangements associated with single member plurality appeared more popular than those associated with proportional representation. Thus, in 1999, almost three times as many respondents (66 per cent) said they would prefer to have one member of parliament for their area than said they would like several members (23 per cent).

We had anticipated that, by the time of the second Scottish Parliament election in 2003, attitudes would have hardened in one direction or another, as voters became more familiar with the new electoral system and its effects. In fact, the opposite seems to have happened. Typically, there was some decline in support for the various features associated with AMS, a decline that was most marked in respect of two items on which attitudes had been most positive in 1999, viz., the fairness of the new system and its propensity to make more votes count. However, this was not accompanied by greater opposition to these features; instead, more people appear to have become unsure about their merits (as measured by the proportions indicating they 'neither agreed nor disagreed' with the various propositions). Only on the issue of intra-party preference voting – an aspect of the new electoral system already unpopular in 1999 – did opposition to the system clearly grow. Thus, while in 1999 33 per cent of respondents believed party list MSPs would suffer from undue party control, by 2003 this proportion had risen to 43 per cent. And, while in 1999 50 per cent disagreed that parties should control the ordering of list candidates, by 2003 this figure had increased to 55 per cent. Overall, however, the distribution of attitudes to the various features of the new system was much the same in 2003 as in 1999.

So it appears that voters in Scotland had a somewhat mixed reaction to the various micro-features of their new electoral system. They liked the 'fairer' allocation of seats, and were inclined to back multi-party government. But they were doubtful about the use of closed lists, and were clearly wedded to the idea of single member constituencies. Thus, while voters in Scotland were able to express an opinion about the issues at the heart of the debate over electoral arrangements, they did not consistently back the arguments for either proportional or plurality arrangements. This suggests we cannot assume that the structure of voters' attitudes to electoral systems followed the lines of the elite level debate.

As we outlined above, if voters' attitudes did follow the lines of that debate, we would expect those who believed that the new electoral system was fairer also to prefer multi-party government and multi-member constituencies. It is, however, less clear that those who favour proportional representation in general would necessarily support a closed list variant such as the AMS system used in Scotland. Thus, it would be quite consistent for a respondent to support the arguments associated with proportional representation in relation to seat allocation, government formation and constituency representation, while objecting to closed party lists. So we might anticipate two possible structuring points or



‘dimensions’ to public attitudes to the micro-features of electoral systems, but no more. The first would cover the issues of seat allocation, government formation and constituency representation, while the second dimension would encompass attitudes to preference voting.<sup>20</sup>

To uncover the structure of voters’ attitudes, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis on our data for 1999. The results, displayed in Table 2, show that, instead of scaling on just two dimensions, the views of voters were structured around four dimensions (as determined by Kaiser’s criterion). Most of the survey questions tapping views on single party versus multi-party executives loaded strongly onto the first dimension, which we accordingly label ‘Single party-coalition’. The second dimension comprises attitudes towards the fairness and utility of voting under AMS, as well as towards the stability of coalition governments and the role of small parties within multi-party executives. This we label the ‘Fairness-stability’ dimension.<sup>21</sup> The third dimension, by contrast, lacks much conceptual clarity at all. It is dominated by those who express doubts that parties should have control over list candidates, who feel that governments should have the backing of at least half the electorate, but who, at the same time, believe it is more important for an election to produce a clear winner rather than a fair result, stances that would usually be regarded as being at odds with one another. Meanwhile, as anticipated, questions tapping attitudes to the desirability of being able to vote for individual candidates rather than simply for party lists do load onto a separate – though as it happens, fourth – dimension, which we label ‘Preference voting’.

TABLE 2

Our analysis thus suggests that voters’ views on the micro-features of electoral systems did not necessarily conform to the structure of elite level debates. Those who indicated a preference for multi-party government did not necessarily prioritise fair election outcomes. Nor were they necessarily of the view that coalition governments are stable or do not unduly reward smaller parties. In addition, there was a third dimension in which support for arguments usually associated with favouring proportional representation (that electoral winners should command majority support among the electorate) was combined with support for claims usually indicative of opposition to it (preferring elections to deliver a ‘clear winner’ rather than a ‘fair result’). Only in identifying a dimension that clearly taps attitudes towards preference voting do we have a multi-dimensional structure for reasons that might be anticipated from the elite level debate.

Thus, even among a population with experience of alternative electoral arrangements, attitudes towards the micro-features and outcomes of different voting rules did not

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<sup>20</sup> In their analysis of the views of electoral systems experts, Bowler et al. (2005: fn4) find that views on the individual features and outcomes of different electoral models scale along a single dimension. Their results are not, however, directly comparable with our analysis of the public’s response, since the features and outcomes that Bowler et al. include in their analysis differ somewhat from those examined here.

<sup>21</sup> It may be that the details of question wording are affecting the results here. There are strong similarities in the wording of three of the questions on this dimension, all of which invite responses to statements beginning ‘The new voting system ....’ (see Appendix 1 for full wordings).

demonstrate a wholly consistent structure. Nor did further exposure to a new electoral system prove a stimulant to greater consistency. A factor analysis of the equivalent data collected after the 2003 Scottish Parliament election yielded very similar results (these appear in Appendix 2). Again, attitudes clustered into four dimensions. Two of these were similar to the 'Single party-coalition' and 'Fairness-stability' dimensions identified in the 1999 data, while the third again combined items that might be thought to belong to both sides of the argument. However, whereas in 1999, the fourth dimension clearly tapped views on the desirability of candidate versus party list voting, in 2003 this dimension was weak and lacked conceptual clarity.<sup>22</sup>

If voters' attitudes to electoral systems do not always follow the structure of the elite level debate, this raises the question of how the apparent inconsistencies in public attitudes are resolved? The most likely answer is either that these attitudes are not related to voters' overall preference for one system rather than another, or else that some features of an electoral system matter more than others in determining voters' overall support for its use. So we now turn to consider which of the attitudes we have examined were most strongly related to overall support for a proportional electoral system and how far attitudes towards AMS were instead shaped by various exogenous considerations, such as voters' partisanship, their view on the responsiveness of the political system and their attitude towards the principle of devolution.

Our analysis involves multivariate regression analysis. As indicated earlier, we have available two measures of overall preference, one specifically on the relative merits of AMS and Single Member Plurality, the other on support for proportional representation in general. In some respects, the former is the preferable measure. It invites people to choose between two alternatives ('Should elections to the Scottish Parliament keep to the new way of voting, or use the old way of voting?') rather than asking them to state whether they support or oppose one option, a procedure more likely to induce acquiescence bias (Schuman and Presser, 1981). On the other hand, the question asks about AMS in particular rather than proportional representation in general. Views on the use of a generic proportional electoral system may not be shaped by the same considerations as views on a specific proportional model. In particular, the issue of closed lists may matter more when people are asked about their experience of AMS in Scotland than when they are asked about proportional representation in general. Thus, we also model answers to our more general, but single sided, question 'How much do you agree or disagree that the Scottish Parliament should be elected using proportional representation?'

In the case of the question about AMS, the dependent variable consists of a dichotomous response option, and we thus estimate parameters using binary logistic regression.<sup>23</sup> The question about proportional representation in general, uses a five point response scale, ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. In principle, the results should be analysed using an ordinal logistic regression procedure. However, the responses to this

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<sup>22</sup> Our results do not differ if we expand our sample to include non-voters as well as voters; the results from factor analyses based on non-voters and voters in 1999 and 2003 were much the same as those shown in Table 2 and Appendix 2, respectively.

<sup>23</sup> The coding for which is: Favour the old way of voting=0, favour the new way of voting=1.

question are heavily skewed, thereby potentially violating the assumptions of ordinal analysis.<sup>24</sup> To ensure that our findings are robust we therefore also analysed this variable using a binary procedure, contrasting those people who ‘strongly agree’ or ‘agree’ with the use of proportional representation, with those who ‘strongly disagree’, ‘disagree’ and ‘neither agree nor disagree’ with its use. In fact, the results of the binary model proved to be much the same<sup>25</sup> as those for the ordinal analysis, and thus we report the results of the latter.

In both cases, we undertook our analysis on data pooled for 1999 and 2003, which gives us the advantage of an increased sample size. Pooling the data seems reasonable given that, as we have seen, both the marginal distribution of attitudes (Table 1) and their structure (Table 2 and Appendix 2) were similar in 1999 and 2003. However, we control for the possibility that the level of support for AMS or proportional representation differs between the two years independently of the other terms in our models by including a 2003 term.

Our independent variables are all of the attitudinal items detailed in Table 1, together with our measures of various potential exogenous influences, a variable measuring educational attainment and the year of the survey. However, we are mindful of a possible objection to the inclusion in the modelling of two of the attitudinal variables in particular, viz. attitudes to the fairness of AMS and to the role of elections in producing either a ‘clear winner’ or a ‘fair result’. The wording of the question forming one of our dependent variables – attitudes to AMS versus single member plurality – explicitly mentions the fairness of AMS as a reason for favouring it. Thus it might be thought little more than tautological if we were to discover that these items were significantly associated with an overall preference for AMS. To avoid this, we report what happens both when these two measures are included in the model of support for AMS and when they are not. Although there is less concern over the role of these two variables when it comes to our measure of support for proportional representation in general, to maximise comparability between our two sets of analyses we adopt the same practice in analysing this dependent variable, too.

However, including all (or nearly all) the attitudinal items did throw up another potential problem. Although, as we remarked earlier, only around one in ten voters was unable to choose a response option when answering any of the individual questions listed in Table 1, these respondents were not necessarily the same people in each case. As a result, if we include all of those questions as independent variables in our model, and adopt a listwise deletion procedure for missing cases, we rapidly lose cases.<sup>26</sup> This could potentially cause two difficulties. First, the loss of cases could yield an under-estimate of the variables significantly associated with the dependent variable. Second, our analysis would risk

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<sup>24</sup> Just 12 per cent of voters across the two samples indicated that they ‘disagreed’ or ‘strongly disagreed’ with the use of proportional representation in Scotland.

<sup>25</sup> Details are available on request from the corresponding author.

<sup>26</sup> One way of avoiding this loss would be to include those who said ‘can’t choose’ or ‘don’t know’, by recoding them to the middle value of the relevant variable. However, this approach tends to reduce the model ‘fit’, as measured by the number of variables achieving significance and the overall explanatory power of the model.

being based on an atypical sub-sample of voters, namely those who were able to answer all of our questions, a group likely to be unusually well informed about electoral systems. To guard against these dangers, we have eliminated irrelevant terms from models. We initially ran a model that included all of our potential predictor variables. From this model we eliminated those endogenous variables that were statistically insignificant at the 10 per cent level, and re-ran our model. From this second model we then eliminated variables that were insignificant at the 5 per cent level, and our final model is one based on that selection. Those variables measuring possible exogenous influences, along with a 2003 term, were retained throughout.<sup>27</sup> It is the results of these reduced models that are shown below, although in fact the results of these models do not substantially differ from those of the equivalent full models.<sup>28</sup>

TABLE 3

Table 3 shows the results of our modelling of voters' preference for AMS over single member plurality. First we show the outcome when our two specific measures of fairness are included in the model and then the results when they are not. In the first instance, both measures of fairness did secure a place in the final model. Those who thought that the new system of voting was fairer, together with those who thought it was more important than an election should produce a fair result rather than a clear winner were more likely to prefer AMS. At the same time, those who thought that the new voting system gave too much power to small parties were less likely to prefer it, while support for coalition government was associated with support for AMS, though in this case the relationship was only just statistically significant.

In contrast, many other issues that play a prominent role in the elite debate about electoral reform were apparently not linked to voters' overall attitudes to AMS. One notable absentee, despite the importance often attached to the issue at elite level, is single versus multi-member districts. Of course, it may be that AMS – which incorporates both single member constituencies and multi-member 'top up' regions – represents the 'best of both worlds' (Shugart and Wattenberg, 2001a), and was thus regarded as consistent with a desire for single member districts. The other issue that was not associated with attitudes to AMS was voters' ability to choose between candidates rather than simply between parties. However, perhaps this reflects the fact that such choice is offered neither by AMS in Scotland nor by single member plurality.

Do we obtain a radically different picture if we exclude our two measures of fairness from the model? The answer appears to be not. First of all, concern about the influence the new system gives to small parties is still associated with opposition to AMS. Two new variables do now enter the model, namely whether there is more point voting under the new system because more votes count and whether or not it leads to unstable government. However, a glance back at Table 2 indicates that these two measures (along with the

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<sup>27</sup> Extensive comparisons undertaken by the authors indicated that the inclusion of these additional terms had only had a limited impact on the number of cases included in the models, and did not materially reduce the number of micro-features achieving a significant relationship with the dependent variable. We have thus opted to retain them throughout.

<sup>28</sup> Details of these are available on request from the corresponding author.

influence of small parties) are on the same dimension as perceptions of whether or not the new system is fairer. Their appearance thus suggests that this fairness and stability dimension we uncovered in the structure of voters' attitudes does indeed play a key role in determining voters' overall preferences. Indeed, this is now even more clearly the case as the item on attitudes towards coalition government that was only just significant in the first model (and which does not belong to the fairness and stability dimension) now fails to make an appearance at all. In addition, attitudes towards single member districts and intra-party preference voting are still notable by their absence.<sup>29</sup>

However, preference for AMS over Single Member Plurality does not just reflect people's views on the fairness and stability of the two systems. Even when these views are taken into account, attitudes were also influenced by voters' partisanship. Both Labour and Conservative supporters were less likely to support AMS than Liberal Democrat supporters (whose views were largely shared by SNP supporters). As anticipated, however, this result does not fit with either of the conceptions of 'winning' or 'losing' outlined earlier. Rather, given that the Liberal Democrats and the SNP are the two parties with the most consistent record of support for proportional representation, it suggests that voters were influenced by the long-term cues provided by the parties.

On the other hand, neither beliefs in the responsiveness of the political system nor attitudes to devolution to Scotland were consistently associated with support for AMS. Support for the principle of devolution was significantly associated with support for AMS in our first model, but this relationship is not significant in the second one. Feelings towards the existing political system did not seem to make much difference at all. So although partisanship seems to have had some direct effect on attitudes, overall it seems that voters' preferences were not formed independently of their perceptions of the micro-features of electoral systems, and that amongst those perceptions views of the fairness and stability afforded by the new system were particularly important.<sup>30</sup>

Many of these findings about the correlates of support for AMS in Scotland are strikingly confirmed when we analyse attitudes towards the use of proportional representation in general (see Table 4). Even though our question about proportional representation did not make any specific reference to fairness, the perception that the new AMS system was fairer is clearly associated with a greater willingness to support proportionality.<sup>31</sup> More strikingly, perhaps, if the two items that explicitly mention fairness are excluded from the analysis, the same three items from the fairness and stability dimension (see Table 2) are present in this model as appeared in the model of support for AMS. The only difference

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<sup>29</sup> Although the variable measuring beliefs that representatives elected through the regional party list will be unduly controlled by their party only just failed to reach statistical significance at the 5 per cent level in this model.

<sup>30</sup> The results reported in Table 3 do not differ substantially from those obtained if non-voters are included in the sample.

<sup>31</sup> Note that the variable measuring attitudes to the role of elections in producing a fair result or a clear winner appears in our first model, although it is not quite significant at the 5 per cent. It appears in our model because, in a model based on all variables that were significant at the 10 per cent level, this variable was significant at the 5 per cent level, although it subsequently fell slightly below that threshold in a final model based on just those variables that previously had been significant at the 5 per cent level (see the discussion on model selection at p29 above.)

between the two models, as far as the endogenous variables are concerned, is that support for proportional representation is also engendered by a preference for multi-party government over single party government.

TABLE 4

Again there are some notable absentees from our model. In particular, attitudes towards single member versus multi-member districts were not significantly related to attitudes towards proportional representation, even though, unlike AMS, such systems do not necessarily possess any single member districts. Nor were attitudes to proportional representation shaped by views on the desirability of being able to select individual list candidates, even though, unlike AMS, intra-party preference voting is possible under some proportional systems. It seems that the relative unimportance of these two considerations in shaping attitudes is not particular to the choice between AMS and Single Member Plurality. It seems that some of the issues that often generate particular heat in the elite level debates about electoral reform do not necessarily play a similar role in the attitudes formed by ordinary voters.

Here, too, there is evidence that views do covary somewhat with partisan support, over and above people's views about the micro-features of particular systems. But, as in the case of AMS, those least keen on proportional representation were Labour and Conservative voters, who thus appeared to be following the traditional policy cue of their party.<sup>32</sup> But there is little sign that feelings of discontent with the political system or favouring the principle of devolution translated into support for proportional representation, though support is relatively high amongst those with a degree.<sup>33</sup>

## 6: Conclusion

We have demonstrated, as has previous research in New Zealand, that when a country introduces a major change in its electoral arrangements this provides a valuable, indeed rare, opportunity to undertake in-depth research into citizen attitudes to alternative electoral arrangements. We found that most voters in Scotland felt able to answer fairly detailed questions about features of the electoral system they used for the first time in 1999 to elect members of the Scottish Parliament.

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<sup>32</sup> We have further evidence here that winning or losing an election under AMS does not have any apparent impact on attitudes to electoral rules. As noted earlier, our question on using proportional representation in Scottish Parliament elections was also included on the 2007 *Scottish Social Attitudes* survey. In 2007, the SNP came first in the election and proceeded to form a minority government, while Labour, together with their Liberal Democrat coalition partner, lost office. Yet support for proportional representation amongst those who had voted for these three parties was almost exactly the same immediately after the 2007 election as it had been in 2003. In 2003, 54 per cent of those who voted for Labour on the list vote agreed with the use of proportional representation, while in 2007 55 per cent did so. In the case of the Liberal Democrats, 73 per cent backed proportional representation in both years, as did 66 per cent of SNP supporters on both occasions.

<sup>33</sup> Note, too, that in this model our 2003 term is not significant, while further analysis of the 1999 and 2003 data separately does not suggest any material difference between the two years in the correlates of support for proportional representation. Nor does including non-voters in the analysis make much difference to our results, while it reduces the explanatory power of the model.

We uncovered, however, an electorate whose views do not easily match the contours of the elite level debate about proportional and plurality electoral arrangements. First, the balance of public opinion favoured the arguments of AMS's supporters in some respects, but its opponents in others. So, while voters in Scotland generally regarded the new system as 'fairer', and were generally favourably disposed to multi-party executives rather than single party governments, they disliked the use of closed lists and expressed a clear preference for single member districts. Second, the structure of public attitudes appeared different from the way arguments are typically couched at the elite level. In particular, we found that favouring multi-party governments was not necessarily associated with believing that the proportional electoral system used in Scotland is fairer or more effective at making votes count. It seems that even amongst a relatively knowledgeable population, attitudes towards electoral systems can exhibit some inconsistency and even contradictions.

However, when it came to support for proportional or plurality electoral arrangements, many of these attitudes apparently did not matter. Among our sample at least, many of the key arguments about the advantages and disadvantages of alternative electoral systems appear to have had little or no effect on voters' attitudes to different arrangements. This certainly appears true of views on single member versus multi-member districts, and of inter-party versus intra-party preference voting. What did seem to matter were questions of fairness and stability. The perception that a proportional system ensured that more votes counted inclined people towards backing AMS in particular and proportional representation in general. Against this, concerns about the degree of influence afforded to small parties together with fear of the consequences for government stability counted against the new voting rules. Intriguingly, these results are somewhat at odds with findings from New Zealand, where, as we noted earlier, attitudes towards preference voting did seem to matter while the perceived proportionality of the system was less important. The lesson may well be that the features of an electoral system that become linked in the public mind to support for, or opposition to, its use depend on domestic circumstance and debate.

Indeed our research indicates that one aspect of that debate, the policy stances taken by the parties, do serve to cue voters to support one system rather than another. Moreover party stances appeared to have mattered in a way that being a 'winner' or a 'loser' appears not to have done. Even so, this cueing only mattered alongside voters' perceptions of the fairness and stability offered by the system, rather than serving to replace them, while other possible exogenous influences on people's preferences appear not to have mattered at all. It seems that if voters are asked to approve or reject a proposed change in an electoral system, they will do more than simply echo the views, let alone the strategic interests, of the parties they support. Consequently, asking citizens to decide on the democratic rules of the game might be a worthwhile exercise after all.

### **Acknowledgements**

Funding for the module on electoral systems fielded on the 1999 Scottish Social Attitudes survey came from the Economic and Social Research Council. Funding for the 2003 fieldwork was provided by the Independent Commission on Proportional Representation

(Independent Commission on Proportional Representation, 2003). We are indebted to colleagues who worked on the 1999 and/or 2003 surveys, notably Catherine Bromley, Kerstin Hinds, David McCrone, Lindsay Paterson and Alison Park. A draft of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Elections, Public Opinion and Parties subgroup of the UK Political Studies Association, Cardiff, 12<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> September 2003. We are grateful to participants at the meeting for their comments.



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TABLE 1: Attitudes of Scottish voters to features and outcomes of electoral systems, 1999 and 2003

|  | Agree        |      | Disagree    |      | Neither agree/<br>disagree |      | Can't choose* |      | Weighted N |       |
|--|--------------|------|-------------|------|----------------------------|------|---------------|------|------------|-------|
| (First column are 1999 figures; column in brackets are 2003 figures.)  |              |      |             |      |                            |      |               |      |            |       |
| <i>Allocation of seats</i>   |              |      |             |      |                            |      |               |      |            |       |
| The new voting system is much fairer than the one usually used at elections  | 60           | (44) | 11          | (11) | 22                         | (34) | 7             | (11) | 873        | (798) |
| There is more point voting under the new system because every vote counts  | 68           | (56) | 6           | (9)  | 19                         | (25) | 7             | (10) | 866        | (800) |
| <i>Nature of voter choice</i>  |              |      |             |      |                            |      |               |      |            |       |
| I would prefer to have been able to vote for individual candidates on the regional vote rather than for a party list   | 44           | (46) | 21          | (17) | 28                         | (28) | 7             | (8)  | 874        | (802) |
| Parties not voters should decide which of the candidates on their regional list get the seats the party has won  | 25           | (18) | 50          | (55) | 19                         | (19) | 6             | (9)  | 873        | (800) |
| MSPs elected through the regional party list will be too much under the control of their party   | 33           | (43) | 18          | (10) | 36                         | (35) | 13            | (12) | 862        | (800) |
| <i>Government outcomes</i>   |              |      |             |      |                            |      |               |      |            |       |
| Governments should only be made up of parties that win at least half the votes in an election  | 48           | (40) | 26          | (28) | 20                         | (24) | 7             | (7)  | 821        | (803) |
| Having a government made up of two parties rather than one is better as it means more people are represented   | 54           | (51) | 22          | (24) | 18                         | (20) | 5             | (4)  | 843        | (796) |
| The new voting system will lead to unstable government   | 14           | (12) | 49          | (47) | 28                         | (29) | 9             | (12) | 867        | (796) |
| The new voting system gives too much power to small parties  | 16           | (18) | 50          | (47) | 27                         | (25) | 6             | (9)  | 872        | (801) |
|  | One party    |      | Coalition   |      |                            |      |               |      |            |       |
| It would be generally better to have a government in Edinburgh formed by one political party on its own, or two political parties in coalition                         | 41           | (44) | 53          | (51) | -                          | -    | 6             | (4)  | 1071       | (906) |
|  | Clear winner |      | Fair result |      |                            |      |               |      |            |       |
| It is more important that elections should produce a clear winner – so voters decide who forms a government - or a fair result.  | 41           | (42) | 48          | (48) | -                          | -    | 11            | (10) | 872        | (797) |
|  | One party    |      | Two parties |      |                            |      |               |      |            |       |
| It is better to have one party in government – to make it clear who to blame if things go wrong - or two or more parties in government – so more views are represented | 35           | (32) | 57          | (59) | -                          | -    | 8             | (9)  | 880        | (799) |
|  | One MP       |      | Several MPs |      |                            |      |               |      |            |       |
| <i>Local representation</i><br>I would rather have one member of parliament for the area I live in, or several members of parliament                                   | 66           | (67) | 23          | (22) | -                          | -    | 11            | (11) | 876        | (804) |

Figures are row percentages (may not sum to 100% due to rounding).

\* Excludes not answered.

Sample: Those reporting having voted in the Scottish Parliament election.

Source: *Scottish Social Attitudes Survey 1999/2003*

Table 2: Factor analysis of attitudes towards electoral systems, 1999

|  | Single party-<br>coalition | Fairness-<br>stability | Other | Preference<br>voting |
|--|----------------------------|------------------------|-------|----------------------|
| Two party governments best for representation                            | 0.82                       |                        |       |                      |
| Coalition for Scotland   | 0.79                       |                        |       |                      |
| Two parties for representation   | 0.78                       |                        |       |                      |
| Prefer several MPs   | 0.38                       |                        |       |                      |
| Voting system fairer   |                            | 0.75                   |       |                      |
| Voting system leads to unstable government                               |                            | -0.74                  |       |                      |
| Voting system gives too much power to small parties                      |                            | -0.69                  | 0.35  |                      |
| More point voting as every vote counts                                   | 0.31                       | 0.68                   |       |                      |
| Governments should only comprise parties who win at least half the votes |                            |                        | 0.69  |                      |
| List MSPs will be controlled by their party                              |                            |                        | 0.62  | -0.31                |
| Elections should produce a fair result                                   | 0.47                       |                        | -0.52 |                      |
| Parties should decide which list candidates are elected                  |                            |                        |       | 0.89                 |
| Prefer to have voted for candidate not party                             |                            | -0.31                  | 0.30  | -0.59                |
| Eigenvalues  | 3.80                       | 1.68                   | 1.20  | 1.12                 |
| % of variance explained  | 29.3%                      | 12.9%                  | 9.2%  | 8.6%                 |
| Cumulative   | 29.3%                      | 42.1%                  | 51.4% | 60.0%                |

Principal Components Analysis, with varimax rotation.  
 Components with eigenvalues greater than 1.0 extracted.  
 Only coefficients greater than 0.3 reported.  
 Source: *Scottish Social Attitudes 1999*.

TABLE 3: Models of support for the Additional Member System in Scotland

|  | Model A<br>(incl fairness variables) |         | Model B<br>(excl fairness variables) |         |
|--|--------------------------------------|---------|--------------------------------------|---------|
|  | B                                    | se      | B                                    | se      |
| <i>Endogenous variables</i>  |                                      |         |                                      |         |
| Voting system is fairer  | 0.87                                 | (.10)** | -                                    | -       |
| More point voting as votes count   | xx                                   | xx      | 0.43                                 | (.10)** |
| Voting system leads to unstable government   | xx                                   | xx      | -0.34                                | (.09)** |
| Voting system gives too much power to small parties                                      | -0.41                                | (.09)** | -0.52                                | (.08)** |
| Elections should produce a fair result<br>(ref: Elections should produce a clear winner) | 0.64                                 | (.17)** | -                                    | -       |
| Coalition government best for Scotland<br>(ref: One party government best)               | 0.32                                 | (.16)*  | xx                                   | xx      |
| <i>Exogenous variables</i>   |                                      |         |                                      |         |
| Voted Labour   | -0.61                                | (.27)*  | -0.70                                | (.25)** |
| Conservative   | -0.81                                | (.30)** | -0.93                                | (.27)** |
| Scottish National Party  | -0.20                                | (.29)   | -0.25                                | (.26)   |
| Other party  | 0.07                                 | (.35)   | 0.01                                 | (.32)   |
| (ref: Voted Liberal Democrat)  |                                      |         |                                      |         |
| Supported Scottish Parliament  | 0.45                                 | (.21)*  | 0.31                                 | (.19)   |
| Did not vote in 1997 referendum<br>(ref: Opposed Scottish Parliament)                    | 0.21                                 | (.26)   | 0.13                                 | (.24)   |
| Efficacy deficit   | -0.09                                | (.05)   | -0.06                                | (.04)   |
| <i>Other variables</i>   |                                      |         |                                      |         |
| Education to degree level or above<br>(ref: Education to below degree level)             | 0.25                                 | (.24)   | 0.60                                 | (.22)** |
| 2003 term<br>(ref: 1999)   | 0.42                                 | (.16)** | 0.29                                 | (.15)*  |
| Constant   | -0.26                                | (.56)   | 2.31                                 | (.57)** |
| Likelihood ratio $\chi^2$ (df)   | 323.931 (13)**                       |         | 246.397 (12)**                       |         |
| Nagelkerke pseudo R <sup>2</sup>   | .36                                  |         | .26                                  |         |
| N  | 1111                                 |         | 1201                                 |         |

Model: Binary logistic regression

\* p<.05 \*\*p<.01

xx Variable excluded from model since not significant

Source: *Scottish Social Attitudes Study 1999/2003*.



TABLE 4: Model of support for proportional representation in Scotland

|  | Model A<br>(incl fairness variables) |         | Model B<br>(excl fairness variables) |         |
|--|--------------------------------------|---------|--------------------------------------|---------|
|  | B                                    | se      | B                                    | se      |
| <i>Endogenous variables</i>  |                                      |         |                                      |         |
| Voting system is fairer  | 0.77                                 | (.09)** | -                                    | -       |
| Voting system means every vote counts  | 0.51                                 | (.09)** | 0.77                                 | (.08)** |
| Voting system leads to unstable government   | xx                                   | xx      | -0.28                                | (.08)** |
| Voting system gives too much power to small parties                                      | -0.39                                | (.07)** | -0.40                                | (.07)** |
| Two party governments best for representation  | 0.41                                 | (.07)** | 0.44                                 | (.06)** |
| Elections should produce a fair result<br>(ref: Elections should produce a clear winner) | 0.25                                 | (.14)   | -                                    | -       |
| <i>Exogenous variables</i>   |                                      |         |                                      |         |
| Voted Labour   | -0.61                                | (.20)** | -0.55                                | (.19)** |
| Conservative   | -0.52                                | (.23)*  | -0.60                                | (.21)** |
| Scottish National Party  | -0.23                                | (.20)   | -0.24                                | (.19)   |
| Other party<br>(ref: Voted Liberal Democrat)   | 0.39                                 | (.23)   | 0.43                                 | (.22)*  |
| Supported Scottish Parliament  | 0.15                                 | (.17)   | 0.15                                 | (.16)   |
| Did not vote in 1997 referendum<br>(ref: Opposed Scottish Parliament)                    | -0.27                                | (.21)   | -0.11                                | (.20)   |
| Efficacy deficit   | -0.07                                | (.04)   | 0.05                                 | (.03)   |
| <i>Other variables</i>   |                                      |         |                                      |         |
| Education to degree level or above<br>(ref: Education to below degree level)             | 0.34                                 | (.17)*  | 0.56                                 | (.16)** |
| 2003 term<br>(ref: 1999)   | -0.02                                | (.13)   | -0.20                                | (.12)   |
| Likelihood ratio $X^2$ (df)  | 530.373 (14)**                       |         | 478.772 (13)**                       |         |
| Nagelkerke pseudo R <sup>2</sup>   | .42                                  |         | .36                                  |         |
| N  | 1084                                 |         | 1187                                 |         |

Model: Ordinal logistic regression; cut points not shown

\*p<.05 \*\*p<.01

xx Variable excluded from model since not significant

Source: *Scottish Social Attitudes Surveys 1999/2003*.

## APPENDIX 1

### Question wording and coding of Variables

#### *Dependent variables*

“Some people prefer the new [in 2003: the current] way of voting for the Scottish Parliament as they say it means all parties are fairly represented. Others say that the old way [in 2003: the way] of voting used in elections to the UK House of Commons is better as it produces effective government. Which view comes closer to your own? Should elections to the Scottish Parliament keep to the new [in 2003: the current] way of voting, or should elections to the Scottish Parliament use the old [in 2003: the same] way of voting [in 2003: as in elections to the House of Commons]?”

Prefer old way of voting/same way of voting as for House of Commons=0; Prefer new/current way of voting=1

“How much do you agree or disagree that the Scottish Parliament should be elected using proportional representation?”. Five point response scale, ranging from ‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’.

This variable was modelled in two forms: Ordinal form: strongly disagree=1; strongly agree=5; Binary form: strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree=0; agree, strongly agree=1

#### *Endogenous variables*

(In the 2003 survey, all references to ‘the new voting system’ were replaced with ‘the system used in Scottish Parliament elections’.)

#### *Allocation rule:*

“The new voting system is much fairer than the one usually used at elections.”

“There is more point voting under the new system because every vote counts.”

Recorded five point scale: strongly disagree=1; strongly agree=5.

#### *Government formation::*

"Governments should only be made up of parties that win at least half the votes in an election."

"Having a government made up of two parties rather than one is better as it means more people are represented."

“The new voting system will lead to unstable government.”

“The new voting system gives too much power to small parties.”

Recorded five point scale: strongly disagree=1; strongly agree=5

“Which do you think would be generally better for Scotland nowadays ... To have a government in Edinburgh formed by (a) one political party on its own, or (b) two political parties together, in coalition?”

One party=0, coalition=1.

“It is more important that elections should produce a clear winner so that it is voters who decide who forms the government”, *or*, “It is more important that elections should produce a fair result even if this means it is not clear who should form the government”.

Clear winner=0, fair result=1

“It is better to have just one party in government so that it is very clear who should be blamed if things go wrong”, *or*, “It is better to have two or more parties in government so that more people’s views are represented”

One party for blame=0, two parties for representation=1

*Voter choice:*

"I would prefer to have been able to vote for individual candidates on the regional vote rather than for a party list".

"MSPs elected through the regional party list will be too much under the control of their party".

"Parties not voters should decide which of the candidates on their regional list get the seats the party has won".

Recorded five point scale: strongly disagree=1; strongly agree=5.

*Local representation:*

"People have different views about how their area should best be represented in a parliament.

Which of these statements comes closest to your views? I would rather have one member of parliament for the area I live in, or I would rather have several members of parliament, possibly from different parties, but covering a larger area."

One MP=0; several MPs=1

***Exogenous variables***

*Efficacy deficit:*

Two item Likert scale based on the following questions:

"Generally speaking those we elect as MPs lose touch with people pretty quickly."

"Parties are only interested in people's votes, not in their opinions."

Each item comprised a five point agree-disagree response option. These items were summed ( $\alpha$  in both years = 0.75) to yield a single nine point item, where 2=high efficacy and 10=low efficacy.

*Support for devolution*

"Thinking about the referendum in 1997 on whether or not there should be a Scottish Parliament, how did you vote?"

Against the Scottish Parliament being set up=0; Did not vote in the referendum =1; For the Scottish Parliament being set up=2

**APPENDIX 2**  
**Factor analysis of attitudes towards electoral systems, 2003**

|  | I     | II    | III   | IV    |
|--|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Two party governments best for representation                            | 0.76  | 0.33  |       |       |
| Coalition for Scotland   | 0.74  |       |       |       |
| Two parties for representation   | 0.80  |       |       |       |
| Prefer several MPs   | 0.44  |       |       |       |
| Voting system fairer   |       | 0.85  |       |       |
| Voting system leads to unstable government                               |       | -0.69 | 0.31  |       |
| Voting system gives too much power to small parties                      |       | -0.60 | 0.31  |       |
| There is more point voting as every vote counts                          |       | 0.81  |       |       |
| Governments should only comprise parties who win at least half the votes |       |       | 0.54  | 0.34  |
| List MSPs will be controlled by their party                              |       |       | 0.73  |       |
| Elections should produce fair result                                     | 0.59  |       |       |       |
| Parties should decide which list candidates are elected                  |       |       |       | 0.87  |
| Prefer to have voted for candidate not party                             |       |       | 0.65  |       |
| Eigenvalues  | 4.00  | 1.43  | 1.30  | 1.00  |
| % of variance explained  | 30.8% | 11.0% | 10.0% | 7.7%  |
| Cumulative   | 30.8% | 41.7% | 51.7% | 59.5% |

Principal Components Analysis, with varimax rotation.  
 Components with eigenvalues greater than 1.0 extracted.  
 Only coefficients greater than 0.3 reported.  
 Source: *Scottish Social Attitudes 2003*