What are the advantages and disadvantages of using a Proportional Representation (PR) electoral system?

Proportional representation (PR) is a term used to describe a range of electoral systems in which the distribution of seats corresponds closely with the proportion of the total votes cast for each party or individual candidate. PR offers alternatives to first past the post and other majoritarian voting systems based on single-member electoral areas, which tend to produce disproportionate outcomes and to have a bias in favour of larger political groups. PR systems by contrast tend to offer a better chance of representation to smaller parties and groups.

There are many different forms of proportional representation. Some are focused solely on achieving the proportional representation of different political parties (such as list PR) while others permit the voter to choose between individual candidates (such as STV-PR). The degree of proportionality also varies; it is determined by factors such as the precise formula used to allocate seats, the number of seats in each constituency or in the elected body as a whole, and the level of any minimum threshold for election.

The advantages of a PR electoral system

- Moving to proportional representation (PR) in the UK may offer would give minority parties and independent candidates a better chance of winning seats in Parliament.
- The current First Past the Post electoral system is considered unrepresentative, as candidates can be elected with a very small share of the votes while all other votes cast in the constituency are wasted.
- PR ensures that the parties would have to appeal to their core supporters, rather than a small number of so-called 'swing voters' in marginal seats.
- It could be argued that PR delivers fairer treatment of minority parties and independent candidates
- Under PR fewer votes are 'wasted' as more people’s preferences are taken into account
- PR potentially offers greater and more-representative choice for voters.
- PR may encourage turn-out and reduce apathy.
- PR rarely produces an absolute majority for one party, however, it could be argued that PR ensures greater continuity of government and requires greater consensus in policy-making.

The disadvantages of a PR electoral system

- Under FPTP, MPs serve the constituency they campaign in. This makes them more inclined to tackle important local issues.
- PR can potentially provide a route for extremists to force their way into the political mainstream: under a FPTP electoral system this would be unlikely to happen.
- Some would say that PR produces 'weak' coalition governments rather than 'strong' majority governments, which arguably can lead to indecision, compromise and even legislative paralysis.
- PR can also reduce accountability to voters, as an ousted party of government can retain office by finding new coalition partners after an election.
- The adoption of PR list systems weakens the link between the elected representative and his or her constituency.
- The greater complexity and choice that PR allows can put voters off voting, by requiring them to have a greater knowledge of individual and party positions.

For an independent assessment of your organisation’s electoral needs and impartial advice and guidance about the electoral system that best fits your requirements speak to UK-Engage.