

EXPLAINER: The Scottish Parliament's Electoral System and the 'Modified D'Hondt Formula'. (921w.)

Three of the UK devolved assemblies use an electoral system that is often referred to as a version of the Additional Member System-AMS. Indeed it involves applying two electoral systems and two types of representative, but Modified D'Hondt achieves its desirable effect from the point of view of electoral reformers not just in allowing voters to vote for 2 types of candidates, but in reducing the power of FPTP to shape the result, particularly reducing the power of the leading party, which is prevented from gaining more seats than it deserves according to its votes. So adding members (AMS) is not as effective as is having a dual-system of representation that, literally, shrinks the impact of the leading party/ies in the constituencies, limiting it to gains that are more comparable to their votes. To create a fair distribution of leading and middle-sized parties in parliament and to reduce the current disproportionality just adding more MPs through winner-take-all rapidly favours leading conservative party in rural and low-density areas and acts against traditional working-class areas of high population density.

Perceiving this, what the devolved assemblies did was to create a Mixed-Member, two-tier representation system with two votes for each voter and then apply the little-known 'Modified D'Hondt' formula for counting the votes. This formula can rebalance results. This is a compensatory system that *modifies* the presence of FPTP seats in the assemblies by reducing their presence, substituting them with new regional seats elected from party lists of candidates grouped in order of priority.

The Scottish, Welsh and London assemblies use this method. Firstly they deploy the well-known First-past the Post (FPTP) single-member constituency method across the whole of Scotland. Reformers will note that it is odd to want to change a system by first repeating it (called Single Member Plurality or winner-take-all). Then a 2nd tier of regional representatives is also created to represent regions, in which parties field lists of candidates, each in order of the party's preference.

This second, broader regional tier of representation introduces a different kind of politics, as candidates represent both their party and their region together with others (there is more than one-winner per region and more than one or 2 parties can gain a presence). The second broader tier of representation encourages winners to work together as teams. Some parties do not even field candidates to constituency elections, a form of critique of the "winner-take-all" rule of FPTP.

However, the method of having two systems with countervailing effects on each other is complicated to calculate and difficult to present clearly, with the term 'Modified D'Hondt' not well known and easily confused with the widely used proportional method known simply as D'Hondt, which is used for the multi-member constituencies of single-system in national-level parliaments not used in the UK.

The results are processed by this 'Modified D'Hondt' method ensures that, after parties have been allocated the constituencies they deserve, they cannot get any more seats in any regions - unless their overall proportion of votes allows them to, which the voters' choices may or may not permit. In fact, the Region-based seats tend to go to smaller parties who did not win in the constituencies. So, the overall effect is for the 2nd vote in the regions to compensate for the disproportionality of FPTP/SM, and also allow small parties to enter Parliament in accordance with the overall vote they got in both tiers, thereby avoiding the 'wasted-vote syndrome' of the constituency elections. This in practice prevents the leading party in the constituency tier from gaining an avalanche of further seats in the Regional tier if this were disproportional to their total vote. In effect, the Modified D'Hondt electoral formula tends to allocate seats to each party that is entitled to them, which makes it a fairer system - although it has its quirks, not least, its very complex appearance.

In sum, Modified D'Hondt is not a clearly proportional system, but goes some way to rebalancing the results, cutting back, sometimes quite severely, on the potential constituency wins of the leading party in the regional tier, as can be seen by the results for Labour in the 2000s and for the SNP in recent decades. It also allows small parties a voice in the Parliament and the Regional list of candidates strengthen the visibility of regional interests as well as making it easier for women to win seats by being fielded among groups instead of being lone candidate figures.

The Implications for supporters of electoral reform is that - if the Scottish system were to become the basis for a reformed Westminster system – it would be necessary to create a diverse dual tier of representation at Westminster and to introduce the more varied candidates necessary to run a dual system. One would have to decide whether to keep the Scottish level of *moderate* proportionality or create a stronger degree of proportionality by setting up a balanced 50-50 representation of constituency seats vs. regional seats in the new parliament, as Ken Richie has pointed out. Currently the Scottish Parliament has 73 constituency vs. 56 regional seats. This could instead be 64 or 65 each, out of a total of 128 or 130 instead of 129. In the Welsh Assembly the two

systems are unbalanced in numbers (60/40 MPs) so little rebalancing effect takes place, and winner-take-all constituencies dominate. In London, Modified D'Hondt is applied only to the 25 Assembly members, not the Mayoral election, so has a reduced effect.

Finally, the visual representation of Modified D'Hondt. The clearest visual design of the Modified D'Hondt formula – though is not really clear at all - is the one produced by the London Assembly elections team and will be explained in an Explainer on the London Assembly.

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