In light of the recent debate over electoral reform in Great Britain, and in the spirit of electoral experimentation that is occurring throughout the world’s democracies, accurate knowledge of the effects of electoral systems is a mandatory pre-requisite for enlightened choice by reformers, legislatures and courts. The purpose of much research has been to provide the type of evidence about electoral systems that would allow these political actors to arrive at informed decisions. The eventual recommendations from these actors have a profound impact in shaping the debate over electoral reform and the eventual adoption or lack of adoption of reform.

In the context of electoral reform in Great Britain, the Jenkins Commission recommends the alternative vote plus (or AV+) for the House of Commons. This system combines the single-member districts of AV with an additional member system (AMS), effectively creating a number of multi-member districts and the seeking of greater proportionality of results. The Independent Commission on the Voting System recommends the single transferable vote (STV), a system with multi-member districts and proportional outcomes. The advantages and disadvantages of first-past-the-post (FPTP) versus proportional representation (PR), as well as the merits and flaws of AV+, AMS and STV have been abundantly detailed in this journal and other recent literature. I add to this wealth of debate by focusing on one narrow, but important aspect. I seek to illuminate one mechanism that AV, AV+ and STV have in common; namely, the transfer of ballots.

Many studies have examined whether AV and STV produce proportional results, shape intra-party and inter-party competition, and/or illicit strategic behavior from the voters. In this study I take a different approach by asking how often the transfer of votes
in STV and AV elections actually makes a difference. Specifically, I ask two questions. First, how often is a transfer of votes needed for a candidate to secure a seat? In other words, at what rate are candidates elected without having to resort to a transfer of votes? If the transfer were employed rarely, than it would seem to be a superfluous element of the electoral system. Second, I examine how often the transfer of votes actually changes the winner of a seat, i.e., how often the transfer produces a winner who was not a leader before the transfer. If the transfer of votes does not ‘make a difference’, than once again, the transfer process is superfluous.

**HOW OFTEN DOES THE TRANSFER ACTUALLY OCCUR?**

The first concern is at what rate the transfer of votes occurs in actual elections. To this end, I have examined elections employing AV in the Australian House of Representatives and employing STV in the Irish Dail and Tasmanian House of Assembly. Table 1 displays the number of seats in which a transfer of votes occurred. To obtain these figures I first calculate the rate at which candidates win seats without resort to the transfer of votes. Each such candidate does so by gaining a number of first-preferences in excess of the quota. This quota is 50%+1 for AV elections, and variable for STV elections depending on the number of seats per districts (i.e., the district magnitude), but always a smaller percentage of the total vote than the AV quota. I subtract the number of seats won this way from the total number of seats available to produce the second column. The third column is the ratio of the second to the first.
It is clear from Table 1 that resorting to the transfer of votes is rare in AV elections but commonplace in STV elections. At first this seems paradoxical. Because the quota is so much greater in AV elections, one might expect that the transfer would be necessary in almost all instances. One strong factor mitigates against this intuition. The Australian party system is best characterized as a two and one-half party system. The control of government alternates between the Labour Party and its opponents, the alliance of the Liberal Party and the Country/National Party. While AV allows voters to rank candidates based on their sincere preferences, a good deal of the Australian electorate has a strong preference for one of these three parties. These parties tend to obtain the lion’s share of the first-preferences. Scott Bennett has shown that as the Australian voter’s loyalty to the major party has begun to wane in the 1990’s, so has the rate at which candidates are elected without any vote transfers.2

Table 2 examines the rate at which transfers occur controlling for district magnitude. Of interest is that around one-fourth of all seats in multi-member districts, regardless of the district magnitude, are won by candidates with only first-preference votes. One should take from this that transfers are rarely needed in single-member districts, but are a staple of multi-member districts of all sizes.
WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES THE TRANSFER MAKE?

The next question is so what? Just because there is a transfer of votes between candidates does not automatically mean that this transfer is meaningful. Supporters of AV and STV tout the advantages to the voter, namely the ability to vote sincerely, to list a greater number of preferences, to cast an inter-party ballot, etc. They also posit that there are advantages to the system in general. In AV the transfer of votes insures a clear winner with a majority of the voters’ support. STV is a proportional system where the transfer of votes encourages inter-party cooperation and intra-party competition. These entire positive effects aside, one must ask to what degree does this make any difference in regard to the winners and losers of the election. If the leading candidates after the first-preferences are counted comprise the sole set of candidates who obtain office, the transfer is once again superfluous.

In order to study the rate at which such a result occurs, I begin by examining the rank order of candidates after the first count (i.e., after the first-preferences have been distributed). All of the candidates at the top of the rank equal to the district magnitude comprise the set of ‘leading’ candidates. I than compare this set to the set of candidates who eventually win office. If the sets are identical, than the transfer did not change the outcome from what would have occurred without the transfer of votes (i.e., if all ballots listed only a first-preference). However, if the sets differed in their composition, than the transfer had a meaningful impact.

[ Table 3 about here ]
Perhaps an example would help illustrate my research method. Table 3 displays the results from the Cork North-Central constituency in the general election of 1989 in the Republic of Ireland. The third column displays the number of votes for each candidate after the first count. The third column reports the rank ordering of these candidates based on the votes in the previous column. The final column identifies those candidates who won a seat.

My first remark is that one candidate (O’Sullivan) was elected prior to the transfer process because he had more votes than the quota. This is the typical pattern that Table 1 and Table 2 illustrate. My second remark is that one candidate (Burke) who was in the ‘leading’ set did not eventually win a seat. Instead, the sixth ranked candidate (Lyons) was victorious due to transfers from the two lower-ranked Fianna Fail candidates (Bowes and Brosnan). Also of note is that with Lyons’ replacement of Burke that Fianna Fail picked up a seat at the expense of Fine Gael. In this instance I report that 4 out of 5 seats needed a transfer of votes and that one seat changed because of the transfer process.

I must include one caveat about this approach. It is certainly reasonable to argue that the system is not a multi-member plurality (akin to the single non-transferable vote or SNTV) although the first-preference count produces a ranking of candidates similar to SNTV elections. The top candidates in SNTV (and FPTP for that matter) would differ from the top in AV and STV elections. Voters would cast strategic votes in SNTV and FPTP elections because they cannot transfer their vote and must try to minimize the chance that their vote is wasted. Thus, I am not measuring the total impact that a system with transfers can possibly have, but rather only what it actually has given that voters tacitly react to incentives inherent in the electoral system.
Table 4 reports the rate at which transfers actually make a difference. The third column displays the number of seats in which a candidate who won the seat was not a member of the set of leading candidates after the first count. The fourth column calculates the rate at which candidates need a transfer of votes to win. The fifth column shows the likelihood once a transfer occurs that a change will occur.

It is important to note three observations. First, the likelihood that the transfer of votes will promote a candidate not in the leading set increases with the number of seats in a district. This is an extremely important finding. It suggests that the importance of transfers will always be limited in AV elections because of its reliance on single-member districts. It also suggests that small-member districts with STV may also depress the usefulness of transfers. Second, the overall rate of change is not that dramatic but significant. Roughly one-tenth of seats in Ireland and one-seventh of seats in Tasmania are filled through the transfer of votes. Third, the rate at which transfers matter given the number of times that they are employed is associated in a positive manner with district magnitude, but only weakly.

Previous studies of the effect of transfers show that the beneficiaries are often the second or third largest parties. Most often, this is because these parties establish a formal or informal alliance to manage inter-party transfers and challenge the largest party. Without the transfer of votes, the largest party, who often dominates the list of leading candidates after the first count, stands to gain seats. This is true in Ireland, where
Fianna Fail would gain seats in all but three elections (1957, 1961, 1965) with Fine Gael losing seats in almost every election. The same has typically been true in Australia. Scott Bennett estimates that prior to the 1990’s, the Australian Labour Party often led after the first count, but without any significant party from which to receive transfer votes, it often lost to a Liberal or National candidate.

However, the logically deduced trend, i.e., the largest party is hurt by the transfer of votes, is not always realized. Bennett points out that the typical pattern in Australia has reversed itself in the 1990’s. In Tasmania the difference between the leading candidates and the elected candidates was enough in four of ten elections from 1950 to 1982 to change the party composition of government, with the Liberals, not Labour, benefiting in three of the four instances. Thus, the overall pattern of which party benefits with a transfer of votes, and whether or not transfers change the composition of government, is not clear for empirical results.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

What should one take from this? It seems apparent that the transfer of votes has an effect upon electoral results. While it is rarely used in AV elections, it contributes to the election of the overwhelming majority of candidates in STV elections. It is clear that district magnitude is of an utmost importance in determining whether the transfer of votes will play a significant role. The greater the number of seats per district, the greater the percentage of seats where transfers overturn the leaders after the first count. Whether this is a positive or negative effect of the system depends on how one views plurality
elections. Those who support the building of consensus and proportional results can see the overturning of one or more leading candidates as positive. Those who support plurality elections and believe that lower preferences should not count as much as first-preferences may perceive this overturning effect as negative. The end result in either case is that the transfer of votes does play a role in not only which candidate or party wins a seat, but also in the final composition of government. Although the exact effect is idiosyncratic to the particular election, parties, and place, its occurrence is testimony to the importance of vote transfers.

Returning to the debate on electoral reform in Britain, an observer should take away two insights. First, a transfer of votes has a greater impact in districts with more seats. This also occurs in any proportional system, including AMS. Critics of the Jenkins Report and AV+ point to the paucity of ‘top-up’ seats as hindering the goals of obtaining proportionality, thus defeating the purpose of the ‘plus’. Similarly, AV, with its single-member districts, and STV in small-member districts seem to make little sense. It appears incongruent to have each voter rank preferences when these preferences are rarely used and the probability of transfers making a difference is even more rare. On the other hand the transfer adds a dimension of inter-party competition and cooperation in large-member districts that significantly shapes the eventual outcome of the election. The proportionality of results aside, if a voter must take the time to rank candidates, the biggest gain for such toil occurs in districts with many seats.

Second, the transfer of votes does not automatically pre-determine which party will win. The fears of the Conservative Party that the transfer will automatically work against them are unfounded. The transfer helps those who best take advantage of it and
punishes those who do not. This is true of both AV and STV as evidenced from the aforementioned cases of Australia and Ireland.

In conclusion, a transfer of votes is not the panacea for all the ills of electoral competition and reciprocally it is not the bane of electoral systems. It often has only a small effect on the actual electoral results, especially in AV elections. However, it can at times have a significant impact, altering the composition of government and consequentially government policy. The district magnitude and the willingness of parties to manage vote transfers often shape the size of its impact.

Neal G. Jesse is an Assistant Professor in Political Science at Bowling Green State University.
Does the Transfer of Votes Really Matter?

Neal G. Jesse
Department of Political Science
117 Williams Hall
Bowling Green State University
Bowling Green, OH 43403
USA

njesse@bgnet.bgsu.edu
This is the Droop Quota, or \[ \frac{V}{S+1} + 1 \].


For example, see Neal Jesse, ‘Falling into a Niche: Institutional Equilibrium Between Plurality and Proportional Representation for Large Political Parties’, *Political Research Quarterly* (June 1998).

Bennett, p. 53.