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Ministers Revert to Preferential Voting for Mayoral Elections Under New Devolution Bill

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Ministers have announced plans in the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill to bring back the supplementary vote (SV) system for mayoral and Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) elections in England, reversing the 2022 switch to first past the post (FPTP). The move aims to ensure mayors command broader voter support and

address concerns that recent FPTP contests, notably victories by Reform UK, lacked sufficient legitimacy.

The SV system allows voters to rank their first and second preference. If no candidate secures an outright majority from first preferences, the top two advance to a run-off based on second choices. This contrasts with FPTP, wherein the candidate with the most votes wins, even if they fall short of 50%. Critics previously warned FPTP advantaged the Conservatives and Reform UK by consolidating right-leaning votes while splitting the centre-left vote.

Reform candidates recently claimed mayoralties in Lincolnshire and Hull, reportedly with under-majority support—a result ministers say underlines the need for SV's return. The Devolution Bill also grants the Secretary of State new powers to reorganise local councils into larger unitary authorities, strengthens community asset purchase rights, safeguards sports venues, and introduces a Local Audit Office for tighter financial oversight. It enhances mayoral authority over development planning and regulates electric bike rentals.

While SV is set to return, the bill continues devolution efforts championed by Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner and Minister Jim McMahon, devolving powers over housing, transport and licensing. Supporters claim these reforms empower local communities and drive regional growth, part of the government's "Plan for Change". The bill also includes the right to establish combined authorities and mayoral elections in previously unreach areas by 2026.

Opponents from the Conservative benches argue the SV revival and increased central control constitute a "centralising power grab,"

questioning whether it genuinely reflects local choice. Some Reform UK and Conservative voices suggest the changes could muddle accountability and potentially favour larger parties.

From a centre-right perspective, the return to SV prioritises legitimacy and consensus in regional leadership, requiring mayors to appeal beyond base supporters. Granting mayors enhanced development powers could also unlock infrastructure projects more efficiently. However, ensuring the reforms are not unduly influenced by Whitehall or partisan strategy will be critical to their success.

As the bill proceeds, key tests lie ahead: defining which councils will be reorganised, how and when SV is implemented, and whether this package truly delivers meaningful empowerment, or simply another layer of government complexity.