

Gavin Huggett

Compare and contrast first past the post system and majority systems, and consider the advantages and disadvantages.

The British electoral system is known as first past the post, where the most successful candidate winning the highest number of votes becomes the elected candidate.

However this is not a majority system which it is sometimes mistakenly called. In order to win a constituency the candidate only needs to have a plurality of the votes and this is where e or she only needs to have more votes than any other single candidate.¹

The local and general elections in Britain works that each elector has one vote which is used to elect a candidate, the candidate with the most votes wins the seat and a candidate does not have to have 50% of the vote to win, as for example if there were three candidates standing in a constituency it is possible to win the seat if you have 34% of the vote and the other two candidates have 33% of the vote each.

The advantages of the first past the post system are that it produces a strong government as the party with the most votes is able to implement its decisions.²

It ensures there are strong links between an MP and the local community and means that small single-member constituencies mean that local people can raise the differences with their MP. This system is also easy to understand as everyone has a vote and the candidate with the most votes is the winner and the final argument in favour of the first past the post system is that it works and has been proved to work over many years.

However there are also arguments against the first past the post system and they are that in each constituency as many as 70% of the votes are wasted as votes that are cast

¹ Cowley and Dowding 1994 p.19

² George Foulkes 1992 p.9

Gavin Huggett

for the losing party are wasted in the sense that they are ignored during seat allocation and the votes that add to the winning candidates majority are also wasted as they have no extra benefit to the party whose candidate has won. As a result of this the number of seats won is not proportional to the number of votes in that parties favour and under this system a party can win fewer votes than another party but more seats. Another drawback of the system is that the winning party rarely wins an outright majority (more than 50% of the votes) meaning a majority of the voters voted against the winning party rather than in favour of them. The third drawback of the system is regional imbalance where conservatives at a disadvantage as there votes a geographically evenly spread from one part of the country to the other whereas labour and liberal democrats are more unevenly spread giving them areas of majority voters disadvantaging the conservative party when it comes to translating votes into seats. Another drawback is the over importance of marginals this is where the seats can go to any of the parties and determine the fate of the country. As 500 of the seats are known as 'safe' seats where the result can usually be predicted before the votes are cast. The link between MP's and constituents can also be seen as an MP cannot possible represent all those who live in the area, and that within many constituencies there are social, political, economic and ethnic cleavages which undermine the idea that constituencies are natural communities.³ The final drawback with the system is that there is a danger of a strong government which does not rely on coalitions becoming fixed in power.

The other type of voting systems is the majority system which differs completely to the first past the post system in that the candidate has to first gain a majority of the vote therefore meaning a minimum of 50% to be elected into power. There are three

³ Plant 1992 p.47

Gavin Huggett

main majority systems them being the Alternative Vote System, the Supplementary Vote System and the Second Ballot system.

Under the alternative vote system voters have the opportunity to rank the candidates names on the ballot paper in order of preference. If any candidate receives more than 50% of the vote in the initial ballot that candidate is elected however if no candidate receives more than 50% of the vote then the candidate with the lowest number of first preferences is eliminated and the second preferences are redistributed and this continues to happen until one candidate wins a majority of the vote. The advantages of this system are that the winning candidate must have a majority vote to win the vote however the disadvantages are that the system leads to disproportional support for the centre parties as they are not usually voters first choice and usually there second choice putting them at a disadvantage if the candidate is elected in on the initial ballot.

The second majority system is known as the supplementary vote system it differs slightly from the alternative vote system as the voters only have two preference votes. Those who gain 50% in the initial ballot are elected in just as they are in the alternative vote system. However if no candidate gains 50% then the two candidates with the most votes remain in the race and the second preferences from the losing candidates are distributed to the remaining candidates and after this the candidate with the most votes wins the seat and does not necessarily have to gain 50% of the vote. Its advantages are that like the alternative vote system it is constituency based and likely to produce a strong government, it is easy to understand and seen as only the top two candidates remain after the first preference it does not allow a third placed candidate to come through the middle.⁴

⁴ Plant Report 1990

Gavin Huggett

The third majority system is the second ballot system in the first ballot any candidate who receives 50% of the vote is automatically elected. However if none of the candidates receive 50% of the vote then a second ballot is held usually a week or two later, only the two candidates with the highest votes stand in the second ballot, the other variation of this is when candidates need 10% or more in the first ballot to be able to stand again in the second ballot. The candidate with the absolute majority at the end of the second ballot wins the seat. The advantages of this form of majority system are that the voters can vote for their favourite party in the first ballot knowing that their vote will not be wasted and that they will probably be able to cast a second vote in the second ballot. However the disadvantage of this system is that it is in no sense proportional and does nothing to ensure fair representation for small parties.

To conclude in the first past the post system you do not need 50% of the vote to win the seat it is a simple system to understand and the winner is the candidate with the most votes and votes are often wasted as they go to the losing party and have no effect on seats won. In the majority system however a candidate often needs 50% of the vote to win the seat, it produces a strong government, votes are not wasted as you can use first ballot to express choice.