

Should the UK reform the Electoral System used for General Elections?

The United Kingdom has had competitive elections since the 18th century, with calls for electoral reform dating back the 19th century. The system was almost changed in the 1930's by the Labour Government but they were defeated in the next election. The UK has never seen major change to its electoral system, but since the success of New Labour in 1997 it has become increasingly likely. To ascertain whether or not the system should be reformed, it is necessary to examine the current system and the proposed alternatives, whether in use or not, and to analyse issues surrounding possible electoral reform.

The current First Past the Post (FPTP) system is the most widely used democratic electoral system on account of its simplicity. It provides a clear choice for voters, usually between two main parties but allowing other representatives to stand. This gives a clear majority to the winning party, meaning the elected government have a clear mandate so coalition governments are rare and therefore reform is more likely. The FPTP system retains the link between representatives and their constituencies, giving rise to a Parliament of geographical representatives. The main criticism of the FPTP system is that it has "an inbuilt disproportionality" (Rose). Minor parties are excluded from fair representation as the number of votes won does not equate to the number of seats obtained in Parliament. For example, in the 1983 British general election, the Liberal-Social Democratic Party Alliance won 25% of the votes, but only 3% of the seats. This means that not only does the system work against minor parties, it exaggerates the lead of successful parties thus poorly representing all sides. It is possible for a party to win fewer votes than another but acquire more seats, such as in February 1974 when Labour won 301 seats with 37.2% of the vote and the Conservatives won 297 seats with 37.9% of the vote. Furthermore, the current system creates an "elective dictatorship" in which one party is in power for long periods of time with large majorities, meaning people of opposing views do not get much of a say for years. Wasted votes are another major issue connected with the FPTP structure, as any vote for a winning candidate surplus to what is needed to win is wasted, along with all votes for losing candidates. As many as 70% of votes are wasted in some constituencies, for example Labour votes in Reigate and Banstead, a Conservative stronghold. However, 500 constituencies in Britain are considered "safe seats", meaning that the over importance of the few marginal seats is encouraged by the current system. This results in the votes of a few thousand people effectively deciding the fate of the country.

Opponents of the FPTP system cite these reasons as enough to warrant a change. New Labour's success in 1997 provoked widespread speculation that the UK would see drastic modification to the electoral system, but as yet the suggested referendum has not been held and only in the devolved Assemblies and Parliaments have other systems been used. Labour, traditionally a socialist party for the working classes, is split over the issue of electoral reform. High profile politicians such as Robin Cook are in favour of a change but many, such as Roy Hattersley, criticise it on account of it preventing a Labour government ruling alone. Over the past decade support within the party for reform has grown, particularly with the advent of the LCER (Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform). Many Labour MPs, when asked for their opinion on the matter, refer to their signing of the Make Votes Count "Call for Democracy". Typically, Conservatives are against electoral reform as they have traditionally seen most success under the current system. In England at least, the FPTP system often over-represents Conservatives and for this reason many see no reason for change. In the Welsh Assembly, however, despite one in five Welsh people voting Conservative, the party did not win a single seat in the 1997 Election. Conservative MP for Canterbury Julian Brazier refers to the Labour founded Jenkins Commission

(ICVS) to show his approval of the current scheme: "As you know, the Labour Party set down four criteria by which Jenkins was to judge an electoral system: broad proportionality, voter choice, stable government and maintenance of a link between MPs and geographical constituencies. The current British system fulfils all of these proposals. In fact, our current system fulfils the criteria better than the 'AV+' proposal." Liberal Democrats are poorly represented under the current system and consequently the party advocates electoral reform. As mentioned above, minor parties suffer the most with FPTP and have the most wasted votes as a result of being third in a dominant two party system. When asked, the majority of Liberal Democrat MPs "follow the party line, i.e. STV, with AV+ as a step in the right direction," (Sue Doughty, Liberal Democrat MP for Guildford).

In addition to the criticisms of the current electoral system, there are many proposals for alternative systems. One already in use in Australia is the Alternative Vote (AV) system. This would retain the same constituency boundaries and voters would still elect one representative into Parliament. Voters number candidates in order of preference on the ballot paper. If a candidate receives more than 50% of the votes then they are automatically elected. If nobody has the majority, then the candidate with the lowest number of votes is eliminated and their supporters' second preferences are redistributed until somebody has the majority. The system is popular because it is simple to operate and would not involve too much of a change from the present system. It provides better representation for smaller parties and gives voters more of a say in who gets elected, as they indicate preferences. It ensures less votes are wasted, as the redistribution process can be repeated until somebody gets the majority. These factors would make people more inclined to vote and reduce apathy amongst the electorate. However, the system "offers little prospect of a move towards greater proportionality, and in some circumstances ... it is even less proportional than FPTP." (ICVS para.82) Candidates can be elected with less than 40% of the first preference vote. The system still exaggerates the lead of successful parties and works against third and fourth parties. It does not eradicate tactical voting and can exaggerate swings in public opinion.

The Jenkins Commission recognised that the AV was not a large enough step away from the disproportionality of the FPTP system, but advocates a variation called the AV+ system. This involves each voter using two votes to signify different choices. One is for the constituency representative, elected by the AV system. About 500 MPs will be elected in this way, with a further hundred elected at county (or equivalent) level. These "top-up" MPs would be elected from an open party list so voters can choose an individual or a whole party. The advantages of this system are widespread, as voter choice is enlarged and the importance of each vote is greater than before. The system ensures the targeting of marginal seats is reduced and producing majority governments, thus eliminating the possibility of coalition governments if the voters so choose. Conversely, the possibility of tactical voting is still probable and the ballot papers can be considered too complicated for the masses. The proposed larger constituencies damage the link between MPs and their constituencies, but not to such an extent that it would be greatly noticed as between 550 and 600 constituencies would still be in use.

The system used to vote members into the devolved Scottish Parliament is the Additional Member System. This is similar to the AV+ model in that voters have two votes, one for their choice of the 73 MSPs voted in using FPTP and one for the 56 MSPs using proportional representation (top-up members). This is a system also used in Germany, New Zealand (called Multi Member Proportional Representation) and Japan. Elections for the Welsh Assembly are also carried out using this system. In Northern Ireland local elections, the Single Transferable Vote (STV) has been

used since 1973. This is related to the AV system as voters indicate preferences on the ballot paper, but the STV works in multi-member constituencies. Voters can choose from a list of candidates proposed by parties so there is much greater choice and there are no wasted votes, as votes can be transferred such as in the AV system. When all votes have been cast, the winning candidate must achieve over a certain quota. Any votes over this are transferred to those voters' second preferences. If no candidate reaches the quota, the losing candidate is eliminated and their supporters' second preferences get the votes. The Northern Ireland Assembly elections involve the province divided into 18 constituencies from each of which six Members are elected. It is a broadly proportional system, but critics say the multi-member constituencies reduce the link between representatives and their electorate. The large constituencies also mean that many representatives have to spend too much time dealing with constituency matters and neglect broader issues. However, the voting is fair and competitive and, having been in use for 30 years, is working.

On coming into power, the Labour party established an independent commission under Lord Jenkins (Liberal Democrat) to find a new voting system to fit four criteria: to achieve broad proportionality, to maintain a link between MPs and constituencies, to ensure stable government and to give voters more choice. These are the main issues in the debate over electoral reform and so far there has not been a system in use that abides by all these factors in equal amounts. The current system arguably meets two of the criteria, but it is definitely not proportional and whilst voters may, in some constituencies, have a wide choice of candidates, it is often not worth voting for the minor parties or indeed second parties in "safe" constituencies. The much argued defence of its simplicity is not a valid enough reason to maintain the FPTP system and Labour's worryingly rapid shift away from the left is only highlighted by their hesitancy over electoral reform. The closest known system to fit all the criteria mentioned in the Jenkins Report is that of the AV+ system.

It is generally accepted that the FPTP system is unfair and its opponents range from minor parties to those who it has helped get into power but who seek reform for the good of the country rather than their own development. The electoral system used for General Elections in the UK is disproportionate, limited and in need of modification. The proposed AV+ system helps achieve proportional but majority governments and does not waste votes. Marginal seat targeting would be eradicated with its use, meaning politicians would spend their time campaigning all over the country thus involving everyone. Tactical voting cannot be removed entirely under any system of elections but the AV+ system does a great deal to minimise it. Smaller parties such as the Green and Independent Parties will have better representation and therefore more areas of society will be stood for. If the reformed system is a great success, the Liberal Democrats will have been proved right and may gain more support as a result of this, meaning the current dominant party system may be lessened, giving way to a wider range of political opinions in Parliament. It is evident that the British electoral system is in need of alteration and the most positive way to go about this is the adoption of the AV+ system.