

What form of electoral system would you recommend for Parliamentary elections in the United Kingdom?

It is important for a nation to adopt a good, strong electoral system that reflects its experiences, history and traditions. It is also important for an elected government to be able to take the country and its people forward. This is why it is in my opinion that Britain should keep its current electoral system, the first-past-the-post, which is a majoritarian system. In my studies I have looked closely at how the system works and what its main advantages are, on which I will base my argument around. However, I will also look into the disadvantages of the system whilst comparing it to systems of proportional representation. As there are many varieties of electoral systems, I will discuss each alternative and how it would change the government in Britain I have aimed to do this by researching how each system works and how it has been implemented in other countries.

The objective of the British electoral system is to elect the government of the country through a general election. The party who gains the majority of seats then forms the government, even if the winning party gains only 37.1% of the votes cast, as Labour did in February 1974. This is due to the way the first-past-the-post (FPTP) system works.

Under our current FPTP system Britain is divided into 659 constituencies, with one MP representing each constituency, and the party winning the largest number of constituencies gains the victory at the general election, as long as this number exceeds

the total of those won by the other parties. In recent British history, such an event has occurred once in February 1974 where the Conservatives won 37.9% of the vote and 297 seats, whilst Labour received 37.1% of the votes and 301 seats, however, the Liberals gained 14 seats which meant that Labour had no overall majority resulting in a hung parliament. Another election was called 8 months later in October where Labour managed to gain a majority of seats in the commons.

By looking at the above figures, we see an example of the main argument for reform of Britain's electoral system. Despite the fact that the Conservative Party won a higher percentage of the votes cast than the Labour Party, the Labour Party still managed to achieve a higher percentage of the seats. It's argued that this makes the FPTP system unfair, undemocratic and means that many votes are wasted. Another recent example of this was the 2000 USA general election where Al Gore of the Democrat Party managed to obtain more votes than his counterpart, George W. Bush of the Republicans, and still failed to get into office.

Although there are defects in the present FPTP system, it has given Britain stable government this century, based on clear majorities. It is important for Britain to have such a strong and stable government for it is important that the winning party can fulfil the commitments made in their party manifesto. If a stable government is not formed then it is likely that coalition governments will occur in which, by the compromises involved, are likely to be weak. Such an event is far more likely to occur in a Proportional Representation (PR) system than in a simple plurality system.

The weaknesses of a coalition government are that deals have to be struck between parties to allow for a coalition to successfully work, which means party manifestos will have to be fudged to allow for agreements or even sacrificed in the interest of agreement. Such 'horse-trading' takes place behind closed doors and is undemocratic leaving the electorate unaware of final policies and the members of the final coalition government. One example of such behaviour is in Germany where the free democrats practiced their power under the coalition government out of all proportion from the votes they received. Italy also, has recently changed its electoral system to one more that is more similar to that of our own. The following quotation shows why Italy had an electoral reform, with Britain as its inspiration.

“The fact that there have been so few coalition governments in our history (and none since 1945) shows us to be the envy of countries such as Italy which has had scores of governments since the end of the Second World War.”¹

One strong advantage of our current system is that by assigning one MP to every constituency a bond can be formed between the MP and their constituents, even those who did not cast their vote for them. Systems such as the Single Transferable Vote and most forms of PR allow for multi-member constituencies which may result in the weakening of any such relationships.

Another advantage of the FPTP system is that under PR systems, there is more danger of smaller extreme parties becoming a force in parliament. This has been seen in Germany with the Neo-Nazis and in France with Jean Le Pen's National Party.

¹ 'Voting Behaviour and Electoral Systems' Chris Robinson

However, under Britain's FPTP system the likeliness of such an event is smaller as votes towards such parties tend to count to nothing. It is said that

“PR is a system of unfair votes. It takes political power away from the electorate and gives it to smaller political parties.”²

It is because of the strengths of the FPTP system, that I believe it is a fair and just system as it allows each constituency to be represented in parliament by the candidate of their choice. More importantly it produces a strong and stable government which is important for a country to be able to grow, develop, allow the elected government to fulfil its potential and to complete its manifesto commitments made to the people, on which the people use to help them decide their vote.

The main alternative to a simple plurality system such as the FPTP system is a Proportional Representation system. Forms of PR systems include the Single Transferable Vote (STV), the Alternative Vote (AV), the Additional Member System (AMS) and the Supplementary Vote (SV). Such systems are considered truer and mathematically fairer than the FPTP as every vote in the general election is represented.

Under a PR system in Britain, smaller parties and more noticeably the third party, the Liberal Democrats, have a better chance of matching their seats gained to the votes cast for them. A prime example of this was in the 1983 general election in Britain where the Alliance of the Liberals and the Social Democratic Party managed to obtain 25.4% of the total votes cast and won 23 seats in the House of Commons. In contrast,

² The Guardian, 25 February 1998

The Labour party obtained 27.6% of the total votes cast yet still managed to win a massive 209 seats. Under a PR system the Labour Party would have received 172 seats whilst the Alliance would have won 160 seats which, amazingly, is an increase of 137 seats.

“The system is clearly unfair. It discriminates against small parties and does not give equal value to all votes”³

One of the arguments against a reform in the British electoral system was that FPTP allowed for a strong relationship between an MP and their constituents, however, those who are in favour of reform argue that there is no strong evidence to show that such relationships always exist. The argument is that, those who didn't vote for the MP are not really represented. For example, in 1990, Mrs. Thatcher was the MP for Finchley and the question can be asked if Labour supporters were comfortable taking their complaints to her. Also, there is no law that states an MP needs to be a resident in their constituency which means that if this was the case, it is unlikely that the MP had any previous interest or knowledge in the area. Even with all this put into consideration, there is nothing to say that by having 2 local MP's, that the relationships between them and their constituents will be any less.

One noticeable problem in the FPTP system in the way it produces strong governments is that, when it comes to a change in government, it means there will be changes in policy and stances on issues. This can be a problem as it can produce a 'pendulum effect' where policies will swing variably from one side to the other.

³ 'Success In Politics' Neil McNaughton

However, under a PR system there is a larger possibility of establishing a desirable effect on consensus and continuity on policy.

If Britain was to reform its electoral system, most alternative systems would be based on some form of PR, were the degree of proportionality will depend upon the electoral system used. The three electoral systems that are the most dominant contenders to the current FPTP system are the STV, AV, and AMS.

The STV system is the most advocated of the PR systems and is supported by both the Liberal Democratic Party and the Electoral Reform society. This system is currently used in the Republic of Ireland, in Australia, for the senate, and in Northern Ireland to elect its district councils and Euro MP's. The STV system will mean that there will be multi-member constituencies of 3 to 5 MP's and is also one of the more complicated voting systems to understand.

Due to the nature of the STV, it is likely that the electorate would start to spread their votes tactically or vote solidly for their chosen party reducing the chance of 'wasted' votes and negative voting. This will then benefit the smaller parties as it gives them a higher chance of being elected. Although this is generally a good thing, tactical voting is also criticised.

"Tactical voting matters because its existence carries a message about the voting system... it is a symptom of the flaws in the electoral system"⁴

⁴ 'Parliamentary Affairs' Helena Catt

One disadvantage of the STV is the question should second, third, fourth, fifth and so on choice votes have the same value as the voter's first preference? I would not recommend this system for use in Britain as it is likely voters will distribute their votes between parties despite differences in policy. It is because of this, the main benefits of the system will fail to materialise. For example in Ireland, the STV has not prevented Fianna Foil from being the dominant party and despite them losing the previous election; they still dominated the coalition government.

Another voting system that could be used in Britain is the AV system. The AV was recommended by the Royal Commission, in 1910, to be used in British Elections. Then in 1917 and 1930 the system was put on a bill by the Liberals and then the Labour Party, it managed to pass through the House of Commons but was then defeated in the House of Lords. The main objections to AV, is that the system is not truly proportion and like with other systems, that use an order of preference, second and third choice votes hold as much value as first choice votes. The only country to adopt the AV is Australia, where the results produced can be seen not to be steady over the years.

The third main contender to our current electoral system is the AMS, which is considered to be a hybrid electoral system as it blends PR with simple plurality.

In 1976, The Blake report of the Hansard society recommended an adapted version of AMS to be used for the British electoral system. The reasons for this were because of the advantages the system offered. It allows both regional and local interests to be represented and because of the way the system works, it reflects the strength of parties

in both votes and seats won. The Blake report also mentioned how the system can easily be implemented as it simple to operate and understand and there will be few changes from our current system, one of which being that there will be half the amount of constituencies. Also, it can be assumed that AMS will keep the link between MP's and constituents because, although the constituencies will be twice as big, there will be two MP's elected for each.

Realistically, there will be little chance of the AMS being adopted in Britain because there will be two types of MP, one elected and the other chosen from a list, which lacks electoral legitimacy.

One set of people who wanted to see a reform in Britain's voting system was the Roy Jenkins Commission. In October of 1998, the Jenkins Report was released recommending the Alternative Vote Plus system (AV+). Reactions to the Jenkins Report was mixed, with the Liberal Democrats being the most supportive of it being used and the current Prime Minister, Tony Blair, 'warmly welcomed' the report and suggested bringing it to debate.

The criticisms were that the system was too complicated and it would again produce two types of MP, in this case, one more superior than the other. Another more cynical criticism of the Jenkins Commission was that "it was there to marginalise the Conservatives."⁵ This is suggested because Roy Jenkins is a former leader of the Liberal Democrats.

⁵ Dunleavy & Weir 1997

After studying the processes of alternative voting systems and seeing what advantages and disadvantages they may bring by looking at how they have worked in other countries, I still believe FPTP is the most suitable for Britain. I feel that it is important for Britain to stay away from coalition governments as this undermines the electorate and could often result in disastrous problems for the government and the parties involved. This is why I support Britain's FPTP system because apart from reducing the chances of a coalition government, it also reduces the power of any extreme parties such as the British National Party. The single most important argument for the FPTP system was that it produces a strong and stable government which over the past has been one of the key reasons for Britain's development.

There were disadvantages in our electoral system which I feel can be improved by improving the methods of registration and concentrating on constituency boundaries as it has been stated that electoral registers have only been, approximately, 85% accurate.

A reform to our voting system would most likely happen if a third party, the Liberal Democrats, can gain more support, increasing the likeliness of a hung parliament. This would cause a coalition government which gives more ground for a reform. However, it looks like Britain's FPTP system is likely to stay.