

Recent general
election results have
shown the need for
electoral reform



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Whether or not you think there is a need for electoral reform depends on your political view. For instance if you follow the Liberal Democrats then you would certainly agree that there is need for electoral form. However if you were a Conservative supporter you would not agree with that viewpoint as they had an advantage under FPP (First past the post) for a majority of the 20th century.

Labour are doing very well out of FPP at the moment and it looks like we may be in a Labour hegemony so they would to disagree with the statement above. Ultimately the need for electoral form depends on your situation in the ' House of Commons.' One of the greatest flaws with FPP is that is very unfair to the third party, in this case the Liberal Democrats. In 1983 the Alliance got 25% of the vote and only 4% of the seats. That's 23 seats out of a possible 659 on 25% of the vote. Whereas Labour got only 2% more in votes but 209 seats.

The Times said that it was the " most unfair election of all time." Charles Kennedy (Leader of the Liberal Democrats) said, " The Labour Party's manifesto commitment makes clear that the case and the cause of constitutional reform, particularly fair votes, proceeds." This clearly shows that the Liberal Democrats are for the idea for electoral reform. FPP is disproportional in translating number of votes into seats (1983). In 1951 48.8% voted for Labour (more than ever) yet they lost to Conservatives 40% of the vote.

Labour got 277 seats where as Conservatives got 345 seats. Lord Jenkins points out that FPP has marginalised the Liberal Democrats. FPP produces

stable majority governments, exception of February '74 when Labour formed a minority government known as a 'hung parliament.' There are 659 constituencies each sending one candidate to parliament. The people of that constituency vote for each candidate. A government is formed when a party has a majority of one, meaning more seats than all the other parties put together.

Therefore producing a majority government, giving political stability. FPP produces strong single party government, for example the Conservatives were in power for a majority of the 20th century. Although supporters of FPP say that it produces 'stable' governments, but how stable is a government, which changes policies to its predecessors. For example the steel industry was nationalised, denationalised, re-nationalised then privatised. The public as a whole shows no great demand for a referendum to be given about electoral reform.

This may be because there really is no demand, or that people don't know what the alternative is to the current system. FPP is easy to understand, but so are the Alternative Vote (AV) and the Supplementary Vote (SV). Under FPP parties produce a manifesto, (a rough guide to what they wish to carry out during government). The manifesto will try to appeal to everyone from all walks of life.

The party can claim a mandate to the people to carry out the manifesto if they win the election. The idea of a mandate is a 'constitutional fiction' as no party since 1935 have got more than 50% in an election so the party can not claim a mandate to, for example Labour in 1997, 1 in 4 people.

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Supporters of FPP claim that there is a strong link between the MP's and their constituents because constituencies are small. Whereas under electoral systems using multi-member constituencies such as Additional Member system and the Single transferable vote. They claim that other electoral systems break down this link. However most people do not know the name of their MP.

FPP does not use one vote of equal value, 70% of votes are wasted due to this system. The entire safe seats (constituencies which a party has no trouble winning) stack up 1000's of wasted votes. In may 1979 the Liberal Democrats needed an average of 391, 393 votes to elect one candidate whereas the Conservatives only needed an average of 40, 406 votes to elect one candidate. Thatcher was only voted for by 3 out of 10 people yet she had a majority of 143. Many people vote tactically, in 1997 Labour gained 35 seats due to tactical. People who support Liberal Democrats may not necessarily vote for them, as it would probably be a wasted vote in the sense that it would make no difference to the electoral outcome.

So they would vote for another party to keep another one from going to power. Elections are won and lost in the marginal constituencies; in 1992 1200 people in 11 constituencies determined the election outcome. This means that the parties (if they wish to win the election) need to appeal in 'switches' (the voters that will change their mind) in marginal constituencies. Switches have known to be mostly, xenophobic, pro-Thatcher, believe strong in 'law and order' and 'acquisitive individualism.

' Party leaders such as Blair will focus on gaining their support. So these minorities of switches hold power out of all proportion as they determine much of the political agenda. Even though their opinion is not that of the public reflection. In 1997 0. 2% of switches determined the election outcome. There are many alternatives too first Past the Post, Proportional Representation being the most common.

There are two many types of PR, list systems (closed and open) and the Single Transferable Vote (STV). Closed List Systems are used in most European countries, such as, Norway, Spain, Portugal, Finland, Israel and European Parliament (EP) elections in the UK. Open list systems are used in Luxembourg and Sweden. STV is used in the Australian Senate and the elections for the Republic and Northern Ireland Assembly.

STV is not strictly proportional as Fianna Fail in 1987 got 43% of the seats on 44% in the Irish elections. If STV had been used in the 1997 elections Labour would have only had a majority of 25 whereas under FPP he had a majority of 179. Under STV voters rank the candidates for their constituency in order of preference, and seats are won under a quota system. In order to get into Government you need to get above a certain amount of votes (quota).

It works with multi-member constituencies, which represent everyone's views much better, constituencies are much bigger, so the argument that larger constituencies breaks down the relationship between candidates and the people comes in again. There are no wasted votes compared to the 70% of wasted votes under FPP. There are two types of list systems; closed and open. Closed list systems give the voter no choices, to which candidate to

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vote for, only which party. It gives immense power to the Central party Bureaucracy as the candidates are listed in order of preference by the party leadership (putting candidates, which they like nearer, the top of the list) and the seats are allocated accordingly by the percentage of votes for the party.

The place on the list is essential as it decides who becomes an MP. Tony Blair used it in the elections for the EP to get rid of non-Blairite MEP's. Critics called it a 'Stalinist technique to get rid of Trotskyites.' Closed list systems can, however, be used to increase the number of women and ethnic minorities in parliament.

Under FPP parties have the tendency to keep to using 'white' male candidates rather than ethnic minorities and women. Countries, which use closed list systems generally, have more women and ethnic minorities in parliament. Open List systems allow the voters to vote for a candidate, in order for a candidate to get into parliament he would need to have a high number of votes. The Candidates with the highest number of votes get into parliament.

Critic's say that it gives disproportional power to the smaller parties, " why should redistributed votes with a second or even third preference have as much value as the first preference." The Liberal Democrats would do well from this system as a lot of people would put them as their second choice, as they are the third party, therefore they would come off doing quite well. If a referendum is held asking whether or not there is need for electoral reform, and suggest Proportional Representation (PR) as an alternative there

would probably be propaganda saying that PR brought the Nazis to power. However this is far from the truth. The Nazis won 44% of the vote and need to go into coalition to form a government however under FPP he would not have needed to form a coalition.

Supporter of FPP argue that it keeps extremist parties out of power, as the Weimar Republic in the 1930's shows this is no different to PR. In fact Hitler would have had a landslide under FPP. An advantage of FPP is that government can act decisively in times of crisis, for example Blair did not have to agree with coalition partners before committing troops to Kosovo. Under PR voters do not choose the government the parties in a process called horse-trading where parties well try to form coalitions with each other. In the Bundastag the FDP held the balance of power between the CDU and the SPD on about 10% of the vote.

This shows power out of all proportion to the smaller parties. Ultimately they choose the government. In Israel a party with less than 1% of the vote held up the peace process for years. Now the Greens have taken the FDP's place and are in coalition with the SPD.

The Greens only got 8% of the vote nationally yet they are in charge of the foreign ministry (very important in Germany), this shows the disproportional power to the smaller parties due to coalitions. The FDP have been in a coalition with one of the two main parties mostly since 1949 yet they have not ever secured more than 10% of the vote. Critics of PR say that it produces weak unstable governments. Well this depends entirely on what you mean by weak and unstable. Elections for the Scottish Assembly use a

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form of PR and there is a Liberal Democrats-Labour coalition. Student fees have been abolished and there is free care for the elderly.

These are changes which a majority of people would want, so can you call the Scottish government weak? On the other hand Italy has been called an example of 'stable instability' as it does not have many more elections than in the UK but they have had more governments than years since WW2. The average government lasting 10 months. Governments are constantly being made and unmade, although there is only minor shifts in policies with each change. Governments formed by Coalitions under PR may be called weak as the policies are much more moderate, as two (or more) parties have to compromise policies to form a coalition. The Additional Member System is used in Germany. Supporters claim that it uses the best features from majority systems and plurality systems.

The Voter gets two votes, one for a constituency candidate and one for a party. The country is split into regional constituencies like under FPP. Parties must gain at least 5% (in Germany) to get any seats, this is called the Threshold and is used to keep out extremist's parties. Finland and Israel do not have a threshold and this would explain the extremist's parties, which have power there. For example a party with less than 1% of the vote held up the peace process for years in Israel.

AMS still does have in flaws, like PR systems it produces coalitions, which can cause many problems. In Germany in 1982 the FDP pulled out of a coalition with the SPD and went into coalition with the CDU without consulting the electorate. The Voters were furious, as they were not consulted. In

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conclusion to this question I believe that it purely depends on your situation within the houses of commons or which party you follow. FPP does produces strong, effective, stable governments even if it does not represent power fairly from all aspects.

But then again do any of the systems I have been through. FPP marginalises the third party, PR gives power out of all proportion to the smaller parties. Switches in marginal constituencies determine much of the political agenda under FPP. The voters do not get to choose the government under PR; the parties do through horse-trading.