The uk voting system

Should the United Kingdom general election voting system be reformed in order to give the electorate more choice and accountability, and increase turnout?

We will answer the research problem presented in this dissertation in five distinct chapters. In the first chapter we will consider the nature of the problems in the current electoral systems and here we will also offer a general introduction to the dissertation, outlining the structure that will be used in answering the question. In the second chapter we will examine the current UK electoral system in detail, offering arguments for and against the current system. In the third chapter we will address some of the problems of the current system in terms of voter turnout before moving on to present the reforms toward alternative electoral systems currently on the table. In the fourth chapter we will assess the likelihood of the reforms coming into effect and the reluctance of major parties throughout history to accept electoral reform. In the fifth and final section we will offer a summary and conclusion of the evidence and findings presented within this dissertation as well as a brief discussion of the limitations of this study.

Methodology

The object of this dissertation is to ascertain whether electoral reform in the UK general election voting system would increase accountability, voter choice and voter turnout. In order to answer this question we will conduct an extensive literature review, providing a theoretical framework from which to assess the arguments in favour and against electoral reform. This theoretical framework will be re-enforced by the empirical evidence presented by studies from pressure groups such as the Electoral Reform Society and

political scientists engaged in the study of this field. Extensive engagement with the literature of political scientists on electoral reform will provide us with the necessary conceptual dexterity in approaching this research question and the data presented will offer quantifiable yardsticks by which we can accurately measure the extent to which electoral reform would increase each one of the three factors outlined in the question, those of accountability, voter choice and voter turnout. This will allow us to offer a clear conclusion on whether electoral reform is needed in the UK general election voting system based on an appreciation of the scholarship and empirical evidence available in this field.

Chapter 1 - Introduction to problem

The most recent UK general elections have seen the worst voter turnout since the end of the First World War. Whilst there are undoubtedly many reasons for this increase in voter apathy, the electoral system has been highlighted as an important contributory factor in undermining the accountability of representatives and in restricting voter choice. In this dissertation we will examine the current electoral system used at UK general elections and highlight the extent to which it restricts voter choice and hinders accountability. In order to do so it will be vital to clearly define the current electoral system and we will also outline the arguments for and against the present system. We will undertake this task in Chapter 2 and it will be seen that the present system fundamentally undermines the accountability of representatives because of the minimal levels of voter support needed in order to win seats to the House of Commons, often less than 40% of the total vote share. In addition to this, the current system

wastes an enormous number of votes, because as soon as the winner is declared using the first-past-the-post system all the votes for other candidates count for nothing. It is clear, therefore that the minimal levels of public support necessary and the enormous number of wasted votes pose a direct challenge to ensuring that MPs are held accountable by their constituents. The current first-past-the-post system also severely restricts voter choice. We will see that the current system is designed to exaggerate the proportion of seats won by the dominant parties, thereby ensuring that the UK electoral system continues to encourage the formation of a two-party political system. Smaller political parties are therefore marginalized under the first-past-the-post system and this has a direct impact upon restricting voter choice.

This dissertation we will focus upon measuring the accountability of representatives, the extent of voter choice and levels of voter turnout under different electoral systems. We can clearly measure the effect of different electoral systems upon accountability, voter choice and voter turnout. In this dissertation we will examine the current UK electoral system, the proposed reform by the government to the Alternative Vote (AV) system and the system advocated by electoral reformers, known as the Single Transferable Vote (STV), a system of proportional representation. We will outline the arguments in favour of reform of the current electoral system and directly measure the impact of such systems in other countries, which have moved from first-past-the-post to alternative systems. We will also highlight evidence from the Electoral Reform Society that analyses the 2005 UK general election and offers the election results under the Single Transferable

Vote system. This will allow us to clearly establish whether reform of the current electoral system would offer the electorate more choice and accountability and we will also examine evidence that suggests that such reforms lead to greater voter turnout in other countries. The proposed reforms currently on the table will be analysed in Chapter 3. In Chapter 4 we will examine the extent to which reform of the current electoral system is likely to become reality. We will argue that the switch to the Alternative Vote system is very likely whilst the move towards a system of proportional representation is far less likely. We will also produce an analysis of the reasons why dominant political parties have historically been so reluctant to accept electoral change. In the fifth and final section we will offer a summary and conclusion on the evidence and findings presented in this dissertation and we will argue that the evidence clearly suggests that broad electoral reform is necessary in order to produce greater accountability, voter choice and voter turnout. We will also briefly examine some of the limitations of this study.

Chapter 2 - The present UK electoral system

Under the current electoral voting system general elections are decided using the first-past-the-post system (FPTP) and Members of the House of Commons are elected in single-member constituencies. The first-past-the post system is renown for its simplicity, because under this system voters simply put a cross next to the box of one candidate on their voting forms and the candidate that accrues the most votes wins. Candidates, therefore, are elected by simple majority voting and such a majority constitutes more than half the votes cast in an election. However, under the first-past-the-post

system very few candidates ever register more than half the votes cast, because in most cases there are more than two candidates and therefore some have described it as being a furthest-past-the-post rather than a first-past-the-post system. According to this interpretation it is more sensible to think of " the post as a starting point rather than a finishing point" (Electoral Reform Society). For this reason it is more apt to consider UK general elections to be determined by a relative majority rather than by an absolute majority. Under the FPTP system the highest polling candidate wins and the other votes cast count for nothing. This type of system is referred to as plurality voting and more broadly it falls under into the category of a majoritarian system. One feature of majoritarian systems that has been commonly noted is that they tend to work to the benefit of larger political parties, because larger parties often obtain far more seats than their share of the vote merits. As Heywood points out, " majoritarian systems enable larger parties to win a significantly higher proportion of seats than the proportion of votes they gain in the election" (Heywood 2000: 199). The result of this is that it " increases the chances of a single party gaining a parliamentary majority and being able to govern on its own" (Heywood 2000: 199).

Let us now move to assess the arguments in favour and against the FPTP system. It has been argued that the first-past-the-post system provides accountability in UK general elections. According to Norton, there has been an assumption amongst many political scientists that elections are solely concerned with choosing a government. However, this view fails to take into account the extent to which UK general elections serve as a means of

removing a government from office. " In the UK, a government knows that it may be out in the cold after the next election. Consequently, it has to be sensitive to what electors want" (Norton 1997: 84). Popper argues that the possibility of a removal from power at any given election is a powerful spur for political parties and that it fosters a self-critical attitude within political leaders that is beneficial for democracy as a whole. " A democracy needs parties that are more sensitive and constantly on the alert. Only in this way can they be induced to be self-critical" (Popper 1988: 28). Those proposing an account in favour of FPTP argue that two-party systems tend to produce single-party governments, which means that firstly voters can express a clear preference for the party of their choice and that secondly, the governing party does not need the support of other parties in order to pass legislation and effectively run the government. Indeed, Duverger's Law states that FPTP produces two-party systems. " Duverger's law proposes that 'the simple-majority single-ballot system favours the two-party system. Duverger described this sentence by saying, 'of all the hypotheses in this book, this approaches most nearly perhaps to a true sociological law" (Riker 1982: 754). Another argument put forward in favour of the first-past-the-post system is that it is easy to understand. As we have seen, the system is very simple in nature and it means that the candidate with the most votes wins. Such a concept is readily grasped by the electorate and it is for this reason that Norris argues, majoritarian systems are " the oldest electoral system, dating back at least to the 12th Century, and also the simplest" (Norris 1997: 298).

Let us now turn to assess the arguments against the first-past-the-post system. Critics of the FPTP system argue that the system undermines the legitimacy of elected representatives, because MPs can be elected on the basis of minimal amounts of public support. The Electoral Reform Society shows, for example, that " in 2005, George Galloway polled the votes of only 18. 4 per cent of his constituents, yet ended up in the House of Commons" (Electoral Reform Society). This lack of legitimacy is put into further focus when one considers that " only three MPs elected in 2005 secured the votes of more than 40 per cent of their constituents" (Electoral Reform Society). This lack of public legitimacy carries with it two fundamental problems. Firstly, it allows for the election of governments with minimal public support and in some cases such governments can have radical agendas that are at odds with the majority of public opinion. " In Britain, in the 1980s, the 'first past the post system' came to be identified with the re-election, twice, on a minority (barely more than 40%) of the popular vote, of a parliamentary majority used contentiously for the introduction of radical policy changes" (Criddle 1992: 108). The second problem with the FPTP system is that it wastes an astonishing number of votes. Due to the fact that the only votes that count are those that lead to the election of the winning candidate and due to the fact that the winning candidate almost always polls below 40% of the total vote, this means that a majority of the total vote is actually wasted. These votes count for nothing and " in 2005, 70 per cent of votes were wasted in this way - that's over 19 million ballots" (Electoral Reform Society). It could, therefore, be argued that the first-past-the-post system has led to unaccountability amongst governments, because political leaders are aware of the fact that they do not need an actual majority of over 50% to govern

effectively. This can in turn lead to voter apathy and lower turnouts, further fuelling a downward spiral of electoral legitimacy.

It has also been argued that FPTP restricts voter choice, because the preponderance of the two-party system leads to a situation in which the dominant two parties marginalize the smaller parties in the system. Norris shows that this is not an unintended consequence of the FPTP system, indeed it is engineered precisely in order to achieve this result and thus goes to the very heart of the first-past-the-post system. Its aim is " to penalise minor parties, especially those whose support is spatially dispersed. In 'winner take all', the leading party boosts its legislative base, while the trailing parties get meagre rewards. The focus is effective governance, not representation of all minority views" (Norris 1997: 299). The Liberals and Liberal Democrats have suffered particularly under the FPTP system and it is not surprising that they are the most enthusiastic proponents of proportional representation. However, Lijphart shows that electoral reform in this direction is unlikely because the dominant two parties have too much to gain from the status quo. " Because plurality has greatly benefited the Conservatives and Labour, these two major parties have remained committed to the old disproportional method" (Lijphart 1999: 15). The situation is even more desperate for new political parties, which stand little chance of succeeding under the current UK electoral system. Lucardie argues that " a first-past-the-post electoral system offers few political opportunities to new parties, unless they cater to particular regional interests" (Lucardie 2000: 182). Voter choice is, therefore, restricted because

in many cases there is simply no point in voting for smaller parties, because the huge majorities of larger parties are virtually impossible to overturn.

Chapter 3 - The proposals on the table

In this chapter we will begin by assessing the extent to which these problems create voter apathy and low turnouts in UK general elections. As we have already seen, majoritarian systems such as first-past-the-post encourage a two-party system and single-party governments. The expectation amongst voters that the electoral system will produce such an outcome has a clear and direct effect on their voting behaviour, especially in instances where no change of government is anticipated. The 2001 UK general election is a clear example of voter apathy and low turnout caused, at least to some extent, by the FPTP system. Harris points out that " the turnout for the 2001 general election in Britain was the lowest ever after full adult suffrage" (Harris 2005: 2). The first-past-the-post electoral system had a direct impact upon the election in 2001, because Labour was able to use the system in order to continue to dominate the UK political system despite the fact that support for the party and for the government had decreased. The extent of the electoral victory in 1997 was a key factor influencing the 2001 election. In 1997, the Labour Party achieved an " electoral landslide, gifting it a Commons majority of 179, the largest in the party's history on 44. 4 per cent of the votes cast" (Chadwick 2003: 49). Due to the fact that the margin of victory for the Labour Party was so enormous in 1997, the electoral system had in-built advantages for the continued dominance of the Labour Party in future elections. The " mechanisms of the first-past-the-post electoral system allowed the Labour Party to lose votes without losing seats" (Harris 2005: 7).

The FPTP system had the effect of producing an election result that was highly biased in favour of Labour and whilst " that may have been good news for New Labour whether it is good for the health of Britain's democracy is a far more debatable point" (Harris 2005: 7). The nature of the electoral system meant that many people felt it pointless to go out and vote, because there was effectively no way of displacing the enormous Labour majority in place since 1997. This meant that " turnout plummeted from 71. 5% to 59. 4% and four out of ten voters stayed at home" (Norris 2001: 569) and according to the Electoral Commission this was " surely the single most important aspect of the 2001 general election (Electoral Commission 2001: vii). It can be argued, therefore, that the first-past-the-post system directly led to voter apathy and low turnout in the 2001 election.

Let us now move on to consider some of the proposals on the table for reform of the electoral system. The government has recently put a proposal before MPs in order to amend the electoral system and move it from a first-past-the-post to an alternative vote (AV) system. The government has received the backing of MPs to put a referendum on the alternative vote system before the general public in the form of a referendum in the autumn of 2011. Under an alternative vote electoral system, voters would mark the candidates on the ballot paper in order of preference instead of simply placing a cross next to their preferred candidate, as is currently the case under the FPTP system. This means that voters would place a 1 next to their first choice candidate, a 2 next to their second choice candidate and so on. If a candidate received more than 50% of the vote they would be elected in exactly the same way as the under the present system, but if a candidate

received less than 50% then the second choice preferences would be redistributed and this process would be repeated until one candidate ascertains an absolute majority. However, despite the fact that the alternative vote system is different from the FPTP system, AV similarly falls under the category of majoritarian electoral systems. Prime Minister Gordon Brown advocated this reform on the basis that it offers the electorate more choice and gives candidates a stronger mandate whilst simultaneously retaining the link between an MP and their constituency. " In short it offers a system where the British people can, if they so choose, be more confident that their MP truly represents them, while at the same time remaining directly accountable to them" (BBC 2010).

The Liberal Democrats, renown as keen supporters of electoral reform have labelled the alternative vote system as " a small step in the right direction, but the most minimal change a Labour government could devise" (Huhne 2010). Critics of the AV system argue that there is little difference between the alternative vote and first-past-the-post and indeed claim that AV often manages to undermine the electoral system further than FPTP. For example, in Australia the alternative vote system in place stipulates that voters must express a preference for every single candidate on the ballot paper. Theoretically, this should serve to give voters more choice and accountability and therefore increase voter turnout, but the reality of this system in operation can produce very different results. In Australia, it has opened the door for party machines to produce 'how to vote' cards, which direct voters on how exactly to complete their preferences. " Arguably it diminishes the whole point of preferential voting if the order of preferences is pretty much

determined in advance by party strategists" (Farrell 2001: 66). However, the most damning indictment of the AV system is that it does not deal with the problem of wasted votes. When Brown advocated the AV system it was on the basis that it offers voters greater choice and makes MPs more accountable, but the evidence from Australia suggests that there is little difference between the alterative vote and FPTP. " There is still a large number of wasted votes under the Australian system: 49. 7% of those who voted in the Hinkler division in 1998 did not support the winning candidate" (Farrell 2001: 66). It is clear, therefore, that under the alternative vote system a large proportion of voters remain unrepresented and that it offers only minimal change when compared to the first-past-the-post system.

Advocates of electoral reform argue that the electorate can only be given more choice and accountability if the UK electoral system is fundamentally reformed. Such reformers call for electoral systems to be based upon proportional representation (PR). Systems of proportional representation focus upon ensuring that the percentage of votes match the number of seats in any given election and, as we have seen, this is in total contrast to the disproportionate number of seats obtained by large parties under majoritarian systems. Therefore, if a party receives 20% of the share of the vote, they will receive 20% of the seats. Pitkin claims that " it may be argued that the 'fundamental principle' of proportional representation is the attempt to 'secure a representative assembly reflecting with more or less mathematical exactness the various divisions in the electorate'" (Pitkin 1984: 61). The Single Transferable Vote (STV) is regarded as the most suitable reform to the UK electoral system. Under this system, each constituency

would elect a certain number of MPs depending on its size, usually between 3 and 5 MPs. Voters would rank candidates in the same manner as under the alterative vote system, but the critical difference between the two systems is that under the STV system if the first choice candidate does not need the vote, either because they have already won or has too few votes to win, then that vote is transferred to the second choice candidate of the voter and so on. This means that votes are almost always used positively in order to directly elect candidates and as a result far fewer votes are wasted. As Karp points out, " where the outcome of an election is determined by proportional representation, rational voters are free to cast a sincere vote without fear of it being wasted" (Karp 2002: 3).

There are many arguments put forward in favour of reforming the UK electoral system to one based upon proportional representation (Electoral Reform Society). As we have seen with both AV and FPTP one perennial criticism is that both systems waste an enormous number of votes. The Single Transferable Vote wastes far fewer votes and this means that under STV candidates are far more accountable to their constituents, because they have been directly elected by the support of their voters. " This means that most voters can identity a representative that they personally helped to elect. Such a link in turn increases a representative's accountability" (Electoral Reform Society). It has also been noted above that the current UK electoral system places too much power in the hands of political parties, whereas under the STV system candidates need to be far more responsive to the electorate rather than to their party machines. As Horowitz points out, " it is generally thought that electoral systems which limit the power of central

party leaders to choose candidates produce more responsive representatives" (Horowitz 2003: 117). Advocates of proportional systems such as STV argue, therefore, that electoral reform would increase the accountability of candidates. In addition to this, they also argue that the STV system would offer the electorate more choice. Hallett argues that under the STV system " the voter is saved from any worry about wasting his vote. His preferential vote is insurance against that. He can safely vote his real order of choice and therefore, voting will always be worthwhile" (Hallett 1984: 119-120). Commons agrees with this assessment stating that, " proportional representation promises, above all, the independence of the voter, and freedom from the rule of the party machine" (Commons 2009: 143). Grofman analyses electoral patterns in Japan and Korea and concludes that STV systems offer " voters greater choice and that such systems make possible ballot splitting to express highly differentiated preferences" (Grofman 1999: 1).

All of these arguments about an expansion of voter choice agree on one key point, that the increase in voter choice would instil the belief amongst voters that their decision at the ballot box matters and makes a real difference. It increases competition amongst candidates, abolishes the necessity of tactical voting and abolishes the notion of safe seats. The increased accountability and voter choice has been shown to directly increase voter turnout in other countries. A study of voter turnout for 509 elections in 20 countries by Blais showed that " voter turnout is 8% higher in proportional representation systems than in single-member plurality systems" such as FPTP (Loenen 1997: 184). Another study undertaken by Lortie showed an

increase in voter turnout of 11. 4%" (Loenen 1997: 184). Blais also points to evidence from several studies on advanced democracies and post-Communist countries to conclude that " turnout is higher in proportional representation systems" (Blais 2006: 113-114). It seems clear therefore from the evidence of other countries that if UK general elections were reformed on the basis of the STV system voter turnout would increase and tactical voting would diminish. In addition to this, Lijphart points to evidence from PR elections to the Australian senate to show that the single-transferable vote in Australia, as in other countries increases the strength of smaller parties by changing the two-party into one of multi-partism. " PR is generally associated with a change from two-party to multi-party systems or an increase in multi-partism. Australian Senate elections show a very clear trend toward multi-partism" (Lijphart 1999: 319). He shows that the Australian elections before 1980 had produced two party-systems but that " since 1980, the system has been more like a two-party-and-a-half party system (with between 2. 40 and 2. 68 effective parties)" (Lijphart 1999: 319-320).

There is also evidence that the " European countries that changed from plurality to proportional representation changed from a two-party system to a multiple-party system" (Riker 1982: 758). Even within the context of European elections within the UK the use of PR systems has shown a clear increase in the number of small parties gaining support. " Whenever voters exercise their choices in proportional systems of voting they assign significant support to at least six parties, as in the 2004 European election when electors in the median British region supported 5. 3 effective parties" (Dunleavy 2005: 503). A report on the 2005 election by the Electoral Reform

Society shows that if the 2005 election had been held along the lines of the STV system the results would have been radically different. The number of Labour seats would have decreased by 92 seats, the Conservatives would have gained 2 seats but the Liberal Democrats would have almost tripled their number of seats, gaining 85 extra seats in the House of Commons. There would also have been small increases for almost every other small party, such as the Green party, which would have gained 1 seat and the SNP, which would have gained 3 seats (Electoral Reform Society). It is clear, therefore that proportional systems produce a larger share of votes for smaller political parties, but this development is not seen as universally positive. Whilst those in favour of PR argue that giving small parties a larger share of the vote is fairer, Norton argues that it is " not necessarily fairer to transfer disproportionate political power from the largest single party to the smallest political parties. Creating a system that facilitates a king-making role for the third party, for example, is not demonstrably a fair thing to do" (Norton 1997: 86). However, despite these objections such a system is surely preferable to one in which small parties are marginalized to such an extent that they cannot realistically wield any effective power. We have seen that a preponderance of small parties offers the electorate more choice and that this is a factor that clearly increases voter turnout.

It is for these reasons that a number of pressure groups and political parties have been calling for reform of the UK electoral system at general elections. The Electoral Reform Society represents people that believe passionately in reforming the electoral system and it seeks to influence the general public via measures such as lobbying politicians, publishing books and leaflets and

via high-profile media campaigns. It has four stated aims, which are to " ensure all votes have equal value, give effective representation to all significant points of view within the electorate, allow electors to vote for their preferred candidates without fear of wasting their votes and to ensure the accountability of individual representatives to their electorates" (Electoral Reform Society). Another important pressure group is Unlock Democracy. This group is also in favour of switching to an electoral system based upon proportional representation and it calls for " fair, open and honest elections, rights, freedoms and a written constitution, a stronger parliament and accountable government, bringing power closer to the people and a culture of informed political interest and responsibility" (Unlock Democracy). Unlock Democracy is entirely owned by its members and similarly to the Electoral Reform Society seeks to provide an outlet for people passionate about electoral reform to campaign in the UK. The most important political party calling for reform along the lines of proportional representation in the UK is the Liberal Democrat Party. The Liberal Democrats have over 60 seats in the House of Commons and are the third largest party in the UK political system and are therefore the most powerful force in favour of proportional representation and the STV system. As Chris Huhne, the Shadow Home Secretary states " only the Single Transferable Vote in multi-member seats would abolish MPs' meal tickets for life, and we will fight to amend this proposal (to an AV system) to give people a real choice for a more significant change" (Liberal Democrats). During the recent vote concerning a move towards the alternative vote system the Liberal Democrats put forward an amendment to hold a referendum earlier and on a different voting system,

namely the Single Transferable Vote but this was amendment was defeated by 476 to 69 MPs.

Chapter 4 - Is reform ever going to happen?

In this chapter we will examine whether the goal of electoral reform will ever realistically be put into practice. The reform of the UK electoral system to the alternative vote system is highly likely to come into practice for a number of reasons. Firstly, the bill, although it has not yet been made into law, has been approved by a majority of MPs in the House of Commons and a pledge has been made to bring the question of switching to the alternative vote to the general public in a referendum in the autumn of 2011. It was the size of the Commons majority more than any other factor that makes it likely that the AV voting system will become reality. As the Independent pointed out, " Gordon Brown's plan to hold a referendum next year on scrapping the first-past-the-post system for elections for Westminster won a convincing majority" (Independent 2010). In addition to this, the fact that public opinion is largely in favour of electoral reform and the fact that AV is an improvement upon first-past-the-post make it highly likely that there will be a yes vote in the referendum. This will be a victory for the government, which believes that only a set of minor changes is needed in order to improve upon the present system, but that the present system should remain more or less intact. However, it is far less likely that the more broad and sweeping reforms advocated by various pressure groups and the Liberal Democrats will come into for