BRIEFING

Worst of Both Worlds

Why First Past the Post no longer works

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Introduction

The 2010 general election produced the first 'hung parliament' since 1974, which led to the formation of Britain's first peacetime coalition government since the1930s. A key component of the historic Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition agreement is the decision to hold a referendum on the Alternative Vote (AV) in spring 2011. To help inform the debate on electoral reform, this short report looks at the operation of the incumbent First Past the Post (FPTP) voting system. It briefly summarises the claims advocates of FPTP make in its defence and outlines the conditions which are needed to enable it to operate effectively. Following on, we argue that FPTP is no longer fit for purpose.

Not only does FPTP fail the 'fairness' test by generating major discrepancies between the number of votes secured and the proportion of seats won in the House of Commons but, as the outcome of the 2010 general election proves, FPTP can no longer claim to guarantee 'strong single-party government'. This conclusion is significant, since this is the principal case promoted by those who champion FPTP. In other words, FPTP fails on its own terms.

Drawing on the most relevant academic research, and conducting our own analysis of voting election data, this report suggests that the 2010 election result was not a one-off aberration. Instead, we believe it reflects long-term changes in voting patterns across the UK – declining support for the two main parties and divergent support for them across the nations and regions of the UK – that significantly increase the likelihood of hung parliaments in the future. Unless FPTP is reformed the UK will be left in the 'worst of both worlds': a voting system that neither delivers fair representation nor single-party majority government.

The greater prospect of hung parliaments in the future is just one possible outcome of an unfit FPTP electoral system. Under pressure from long-term voting trends, we can also expect FPTP elections to produce if not hung parliaments then at the very least governments elected with small and unstable majorities. Given FPTP's failure to treat parties equally and the prevalence of electoral bias, it is also likely that the 'wrong winner' may emerge, wherein a party wins the most seats despite coming second in terms of the share of the popular vote.

Not only is the principal case for FPTP being undermined by shifts in voting behaviour but these changes are also aggravating a wider set of deficiencies associated with FPTP. For instance, the rise in support for third parties makes it more difficult for individual MPs to secure a majority of support (50 per cent or more) among their local electorate, which raises serious questions about the legitimacy of MPs to represent their constituents. It also makes it much harder for governments to win an overall majority nationally, which again undermines the representativeness of governments formed under FPTP. This is compounded by the fact that the greater the number of parties competing under FPTP the more disproportional the result will become, and the more unrepresentative future parliaments will be.

In a time of greater political pluralism, British politics is no longer well served by a voting system that was designed for a two-party era. Nor are the interests of British democracy. Arguably the biggest democratic-deficit associated with FPTP is that election outcomes are effectively decided by a handful of voters who happen to live in all-important marginal seats. The overwhelming majority of us live in safe seats where we are increasingly neglected by the political parties both during and between elections –and where we have little chance of influencing the result of general elections.

The arguments in favour of FPTP

As the distinguished authors of a recent comparative survey of voting systems have rightly argued, there is 'no such thing as a perfect electoral system' (Hix et al 2010). The design of electoral systems involves trade-offs between a range of normative objectives; crudely speaking there are two schools of thought. The first emphasizes the importance of 'representativeness', arguing that there should be a clear relationship between the proportion of votes won and the proportion of seats a party gains in the legislature. In this camp sit the proponents of proportional representation. The second school believes that the primary objective of an electoral system should be to produce single-party majority governments that are clearly accountable to the public. This is the FPTP camp.

As Hix et al point out, it is difficult for an electoral system to achieve both of these goals (2010), and a clear case can be made for either type of system. For the purposes of this report, we are interested in assessing the extent to which FPTP achieves the objectives its defenders attribute to it.

Broadly speaking, there are three arguments traditionally used to defend FPTP:[1]

- That it leads to 'strong' and 'stable' single-party government, and that elections produce clear and unambiguous outcomes
- That it ensures that both governments and MPs are accountable to voters and that the electorate is able to 'throw the rascals out'
- That voters, and not politicians, determine the outcome of elections

A number of conditions must be met if FPTP is to achieve these ends:[2]

- FPTP works best under a two-party system – indeed, FPTP is designed to punish third parties and discourage the public from voting for them
- There needs to be a sufficient number of marginal seats contested between the two main parties in order to create a 'winner's bonus', so that the party that comes first has a secure majority to govern
- The winner should be awarded this bonus irrespective of who they are – in other words, to operate effectively FPTP should not bias a particular party.

This report explores the degree to which these conditions hold and thus the degree to which FPTP is able to do what it is supposed to do.

1 See Curtice 2010b
2 See Curtice 2010b

Undermined from within: FPTP in an age of political pluralism

The strongest case in favour of FPTP is that it delivers single-party majority government; however, there is good reason to believe that this will be more difficult to achieve in the future because of long-term trends in voting patterns across the UK (Hix et al 2010; Curtice 2010a; Curtice 2010b).

The two principal forces undermining FPTP's ability to produce single-party government are:

- The declining share of the vote for Labour and the Conservative parties, and the rise in support for third parties
- The changing electoral geography of the UK.

Rise of third parties

FPTP works best when there are two parties competing to form a government. Indeed, the political scientist Maurice Duverger argued that FPTP favours a two-party system by discouraging people from voting for third parties, thereby denying those parties seats in the legislature (Duverger 1954). Duverger was writing in the 1950s, during the hey-day of the British two-party system, when the evidence seemed to support his cause. As Table 1 and Figure 1 below show, the two main parties regularly polled over 90 per cent of the vote in the 1950s. However, what they also show is that the traditional British two-party system came under considerable pressure from the 1970s onwards. In 1974, there was a sharp fall in voter support for Labour and the Conservatives (down to 75.1 per cent from 96.8 per cent in 1951). This trend of growing support for third parties has continued ever since, and in 2010 the two main parties recorded their lowest combined share of the vote in post-war history (65.1 per cent). Duverger's 'law' is in fact no more than an historical phenomenon: FPTP is no longer discouraging voters from supporting third parties. For the last 35 years, around a quarter of all votes cast have been for third parties.

Moreover, this is not simply a reflection of increased support for the Liberal Democrats: across the UK as a whole, voting has become more widely fragmented. In 2010, one in ten voters opted for parties other than Conservative, Labour or Liberal Democrat, an all-time high for minor parties. The three-party vote was, at 88.1 per cent, by far the lowest since the war.

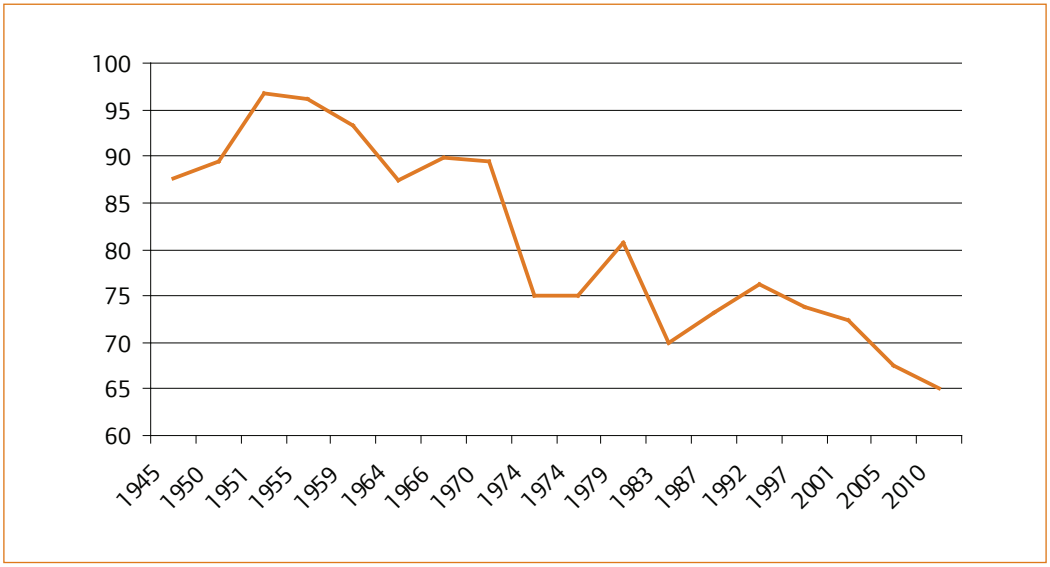
Table 1: The rise and fall of the two-party vote, 1922–2010, percentage

Year	Conservative and Labour	Liberal/Alliance/ Liberal Democrat	Other parties
1922	68.2	28.8	3.0
1923	68.7	29.1	1.6
1924	80.1	17.8	2.1
1929	75.2	23.5	1.3
1931	91.6	7.0	1.4
1935	91.3	6.7	2.0
1945	87.6	9.0	3.4
1950	89.5	9.1	1.4
1951	96.8	2.6	0.6
1955	96.1	2.7	1.2
1959	93.2	5.9	0.9
1964	87.5	11.2	1.3
1966	89.9	8.5	1.5
1970	89.5	7.5	3.0
1974	75.1	19.3	5.6
1974	75.1	18.3	6.7
1979	80.8	13.8	5.4
1983	70.0	25.4	4.6
1987	73.1	22.6	4.4

1992	76.3	17.8	5.8
1997	73.9	16.8	9.3
2001	72.4	18.3	9.4
2005	67.6	22.0	10.4
2010	65.1	23.0	11.9

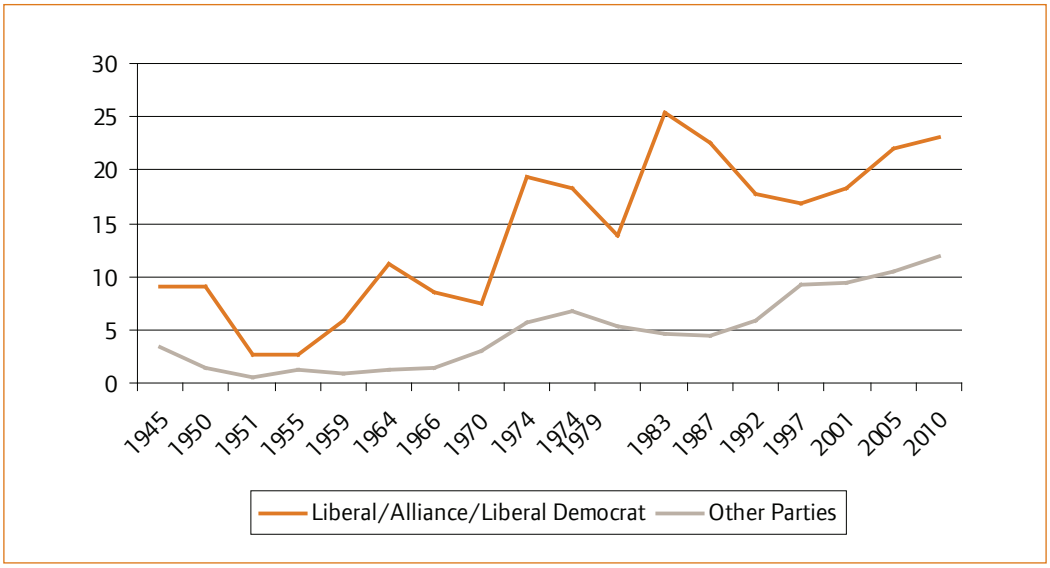
Source: Curtice 2010a

Figure 1: FPTP under strain: the decline of the two-party vote, 1945–2010, percentage



Source: Curtice 2010b

Figure 2: Third-party vote, 1945–2010, percentage



Source: Curtice 2010b

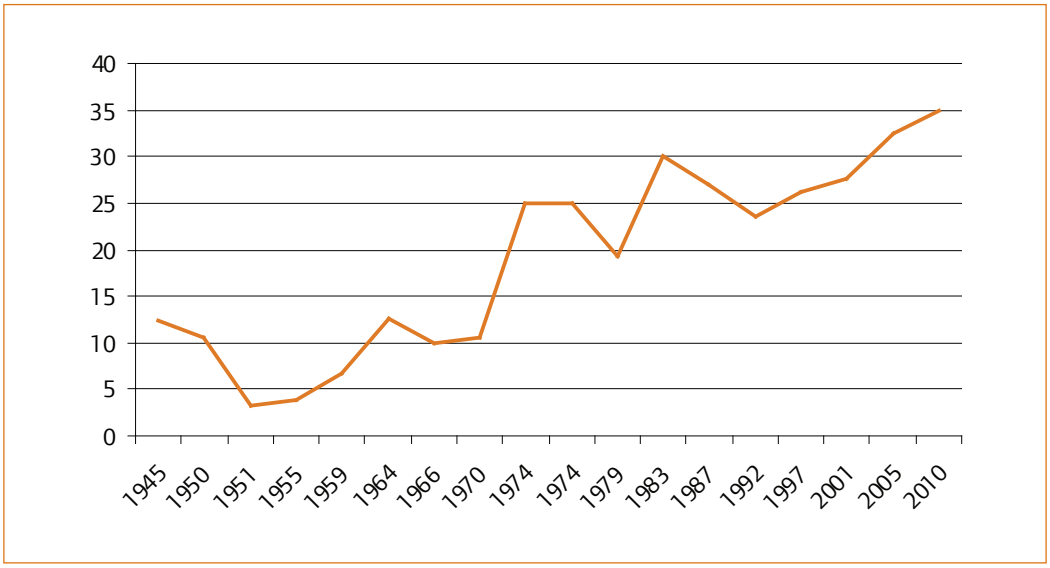
Although FPTP still heavily penalises third parties (see p14) in terms of their vote–seat share, it is nonetheless the case that since the 1970s they have been able to significantly increase the number of seats they win. This is largely because their support is geographically concentrated within the distinct party systems that have emerged across the regions and nations of the UK in the last 30 years. For instance, the 18 seats in Northern Ireland are contested by Northern Irish parties,[3] while in Scotland and Wales, nationalist parties have emerged as an important electoral force.

Liberal Democrat support has also become less evenly spread, with support concentrated in places like the south-west and in university seats. This means they can win more seats for their share of

3 In 2010 the Conservatives formed an electoral pact with the Ulster Unionist Party which meant they once again contested seats in Northern Ireland. However, the pact failed to win a single seat.

the vote. To illustrate, in 1983, 26 per cent of the vote in Great Britain delivered the party just 23 seats; in 2010, 24 per cent was enough to secure 57 (Curtice 2010c). As Figure 3 indicates, third parties now regularly win around 85 seats combined in the House of Commons.

Figure 3: Third-party seats, 1945–2010



Source: Curtice 2010c

What does all this mean? The most obvious implication is that it will be more difficult for a single party to win a majority, making the prospect of a hung parliament greater in the future. A cursory glance at British history shows this to be the case: under FPTP, multi-party politics often produces indecisive results, as the elections of 1910 and the 1974 (February) election prove. If future parliaments are likely to include at least 85 MPs from parties other than Labour or the Conservatives, then in order to secure an overall majority one of the main parties needs to secure at least 86 more seats than its rival (Bogdanor forthcoming 2011). But as Table 2 records, this has happened in fewer than half – seven – of the 18 general elections since the war: in 1945, 1959, 1966, 1983, 1987, 1997 and 2001. And achieving a majority of only 20 seats– which it could reasonably be argued is the minimum a party needs to govern securely – would entail one party having to win over 100 seats more than the second-place party, a result which has occurred even less frequently: since the war, only in 1945, 1983, 2001 and 2005. On this reading then, there is greater chance of either hung parliaments or governments elected with small majorities.

Table 2: Government majorities since 1945

Election	Government	Seat majority
1945	Labour	146
1950	Labour	5
1951	Conservative	17
1955	Conservative	60
1959	Conservative	100
1964	Labour	4
1966	Labour	98
1970	Conservative	30
1974 (Feb)	Hung	
1974 (Oct)	Labour	3
1979	Conservative	43
1983	Conservative	144
1987	Conservative	102
1992	Conservative	21
1997	Labour	179
2001	Labour	167
2005	Labour	66
2010	Hung	

Of course, it is not certain that support for third parties will either continue to grow or remain at current levels. A current reading of the polls suggests that the Liberal Democrats could see their recent advances seriously reversed at the next general election. However, even if they were to do very badly – suppose they were reduced to 25 MPs[4] – this would still leave third parties with a combined block of 50-odd seats. In these circumstances, either the Conservatives or Labour would need 50 seats more than the other simply to secure a majority. Looking again at post-war election results, it can be seen that since 1945 half of all elections – nine of 18 – have achieved this. This suggests, at the very least, that even under these circumstances (that is, of a reduced Liberal Democrat vote) we would have had many more hung parliaments in the past than under a pure two-party system.

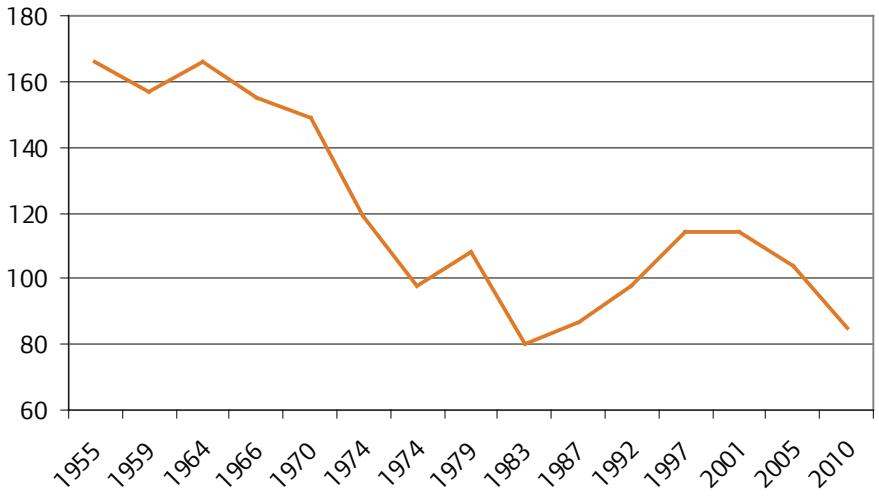
The rise of third parties is not the only reason for believing that FPTP is likely to produce indecisive outcomes in the future: a second crucial factor is the UK's changing electoral geography. It is these two factors working in combination that are undermining the case for FPTP.

The changing electoral geography of the UK

The second reason why FPTP is less likely to deliver single-party government concerns long-term incremental shifts in the electoral geography of the UK (Curtice 2010a; Hix et al 2010). FPTP is said to guarantee single-party majority government because it is supposed to give the party that comes first a 'winner's bonus' – that is, a small swing from one to the other should see a significant number of seats change hands. As a result, even if the largest party only has a small lead in vote terms over the second party, it is still able to secure an overall majority in seat terms.

This claim, however, rests on the assumption that the same two parties are competing for most of the seats (which as indicated above is no longer the case) and that these seats are highly competitive. In other words, the existence of a winner's bonus depends on the prevalence of large numbers of marginal seats. But, because of long-term shifts in the geography of Conservative and Labour support, the number of two-party marginals is in decline. In fact, as Figure 4 below indicates, the number of such marginal seats has halved since the 1950s.

Figure 4: Marginal seats within the two-party vote, 1955–2010[5]



Source: Curtice 2010b

What explains this? Since the late 1950s, Conservative support has been increasingly concentrated in areas in which it was already strong, like the south of England and in rural areas, while Labour has consolidated its electoral base in Scotland, the north of England and inner-city seats. Curtice writes: 'as the country has pulled apart into two distinct halves politically, so the number of constituencies

4 This assumes the Liberal Democrats receive 11% of the vote. The calculation for the number of seats the Liberal Democrats might be expected to win is derived from UK Polling Report: see http://ukpollingreport.co.uk/blog/swing-calculator

5 Marginal is defined as seats where the Conservative share of the two-party vote lies within 45–55%. The two-party vote is the combined vote of both Labour and the Conservatives (Curtice 2010).

where both Conservatives and Labour do well has fallen away' (Curtice 2010c). A further consequence of this is that Britain has become significantly divided along political lines, with Labour barely represented in rural and southern England, and the Conservatives poorly represented in the north and metropolitan areas (see p18).

It might be argued that the potential for these two developments – the rise in the representation of third parties and the decline in marginal seats – to result in hung parliaments will to some degree be offset by the electoral bias FPTP generates, and which currently strongly favours Labour. After all, FPTP has delivered a number of landslide election victories for the two main parties over the last 30 years. Currently, Labour only needs a three-point lead in votes in order to secure an overall majority, whereas the Conservatives need around a lead of around 11 points to govern on their own (Curtice 2010a).

There are two responses to this. Firstly, there is no credible defence of electoral bias, and the Labour bias is likely to generate its own controversy should they win majorities in the Commons on a declining share of the vote – they won a majority of 66 in 2005 based on just 35.2 per cent of the vote – or, worse, should they win most seats on a smaller share of the vote than the Conservatives. Secondly, and more importantly, as Curtice has argued, even when you allow for such bias, the gap between the 3-point lead needed for a Labour majority and the 11-point lead needed for a Conservative majority leaves a 14-point range in which a hung parliament is the likely outcome, which is the widest it has ever been (Curtice 2010a).

It is thus reasonable to suggest that hung parliaments are likely to become a more regular feature of the British political landscape. There is nothing inherently *wrong* with this situation, but it does leave the advocates of FPTP with little to hide behind. If they can no longer support their case with some sureness of achieving stable, majority-based government, then what is left to them with which to defend FPTP?

Voter power: FPTP and coalition politics

If hung parliaments regularly lead to the formation of coalition governments, as happened in May 2010, then another argument which is used to prop up FPTP will be undermined: the idea that voters and not politicians should determine the formation of governments.

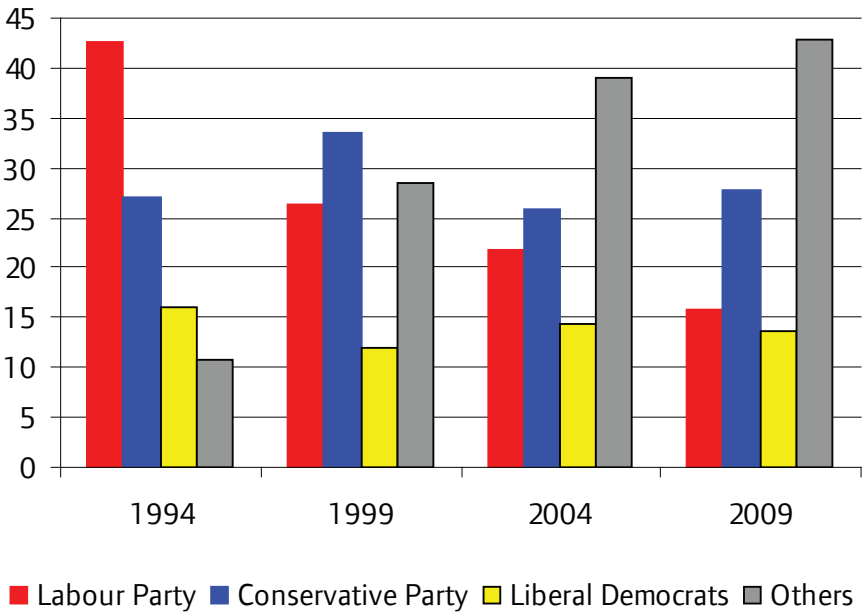
Supporters of FPTP are also traditionally opponents of coalition government, since they dislike the idea of parties haggling for power in 'smoke-filled rooms'. Yet this is precisely what happened in May 2010. Had the parliamentary arithmetic been marginally different and had the Liberal Democrats performed better, then the notion of a 'Lib–Lab' coalition would have been able to compete more seriously with the Conservative–Liberal Democrat proposal. In other words, a number of different governments might have emerged from these negotiations in which the public had little say.

Why is this relevant? There is a case for arguing that FPTP is poorly suited to coalition politics because it inhibits parties from signaling their intention to the electorate about whom they might form a government with before the election. Under preferential voting systems (such as alternative vote, or AV) and proportional systems, there is more scope for such transparency. In addition, under FPTP parties sharing power at one moment find themselves fighting each other in subsequent elections. One way round this is some form of electoral pact, such as the 'coupon' used in 1918 by Lloyd George for candidates from his Liberal–Conservative coalition, which ensured there was only one coalition candidate fighting each seat. But such solutions are often unpopular with the party membership, who dislike voting for other parties on principle. Preferential voting systems, such as AV, potentially help resolve this issue for coalition parties, who can each ask these conflicted voters to give them their second-preference votes (Bogdanor 2010). So in addition to producing more hung parliaments, FPTP looks set to produce more coalition governments which it is not well-suited to manage.

The fact that FPTP appears to be allowing third parties to flourish in a way that it is not designed to do should not encourage acceptance of the status quo. Indeed, the rise in support for third parties is happening *in spite* of FPTP, not because of it. In no way does FPTP facilitate the type of pluralist politics for which the public has indicated an increasing appetite. Voters may not be discouraged from supporting third parties to the extent Duverger assumed, but FPTP clearly still has a powerful effect. This effect is demonstrated by comparing voting patterns in general elections with those for the European Parliament (EP), which are held under a proportional representation system in which there is more of an incentive to vote for minor parties. In the last two EP elections, combined

support for minor parties has outstripped that of any of the three main parties.[6] UK voters are fed-up with a two-party politics which FPTP is struggling to sustain but which still militates against the electorate's desire for greater pluralism. In short, Britain has over the last 30 years evolved into a multi-party system which retains an electoral system designed for only two parties.

Figure 5:
Vote in European Parliament elections, 1994–2009



Source: Data made available from the Norwegian Social Science Data Service at http://www.nsd.uib.no/european_election_database/election_types/ep_elections/

This shift to multi-party politics is a growing feature of other Westminster model systems which use majoritarian voting systems. They too, as Patrick Dunleavy has shown, are struggling to produce single-party majority government. Indeed, following the indecisive outcome of the Australian general election, which has resulted in the formation of an alliance between Labour and the Greens, Dunleavy points out that 'every key Westminster model country in the world' that uses majoritarian voting systems (this includes AV) now has a hung parliament (Dunleavy 2010b). He argues that Duverger's law and 'the idea of using voting systems to artificially create parliamentary majorities' is 'clearly dead' (ibid).

Table 3:
Hung parliaments across Westminster model systems

Country (population)	Current parliamentary and government situation
India (1,187 million people)	• Hung parliament including a large number of parties (approximately 45, depending how these are counted) • Governed by an 18-party coalition, headed by Congress; the rival BJP bloc also includes many parties.
United Kingdom (62 million people)	• Hung parliament • Governed by a Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition.
Canada (34 million people)	• Hung parliament across three general elections • Governed by a Conservative minority.
Australia (22 million people)	• Hung parliament • Governed by a Labour–Green coalition.
New Zealand (4.4 million people)	• Governed by a coalition; no party has had a majority in balanced parliaments since elections were first held under a mixed system in 1996.

Source: Dunleavy 2010b

6 We acknowledge that EP elections are often used by the electorate to cast protest votes, and no doubt this was a significant factor in the 2009 elections, which were held during the parliamentary expenses crisis. Nonetheless it does not seem reasonable to explain the roughly 40 per cent share of support other parties are getting entirely on the grounds of protest voting.

The case against FPTP

Under FPTP elections are decided by a handful of voters in marginal seats

Under FPTP, election results are effectively determined by the small minority of voters who happen to live in all-important marginal seats. Conversely, it means that the vast majority of voters who live in safe seats have little ability to shape the outcome of national elections. This situation makes a mockery of the idea of political equality, since it implies that some votes are 'more equal' than others. As Stuart Wilks-Heeg writes:

> 'The electoral system dramatically empowers a small minority of voters by geographical accident – voters in marginal seats have a more genuine choice of local candidates with a realistic chance of winning, and exert much greater influence over the overall outcome of the general election.' (Wilks-Heeg 2010a)

At the 2010 general election, about 31 per cent of voters (approximately 9 million people) lived in marginal seats, defined as seats with a majority of less than 10 per cent. Put another way, 69 per cent of the electorate (approximately 20.5 million people) – simply because they live in safe seats – cast votes which had little chance of making a difference.[7] This rather undermines the idea that the results of national elections are generated by the nation as a whole.

Moreover, the number of people who are *decisive* in determining the outcome of a general election is even smaller than the number of voters living in marginal seats. To calculate this, we need to look at the marginal seats that changed hands – the swing seats – and count the number of voters who made up the majority for the winners in these seats. We use this as a proxy for swing voters. Table 5 below shows that 111 seats changed hands.[8] In particular, gains for the Conservatives (and Liberal Democrats) from Labour proved to be the key seats in terms of deciding the election. This shows that just over 460,000 voters – or 1.6 per cent of the electorate – gave the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats majorities in those seats they gained from Labour. Lewis Baston has described these voters as the 'ruling minority' (Baston 2008).

Table 4:
Marginal and safe seats in the 2010 general election[9]

Status	Seats	Percentage
Marginal	194	30.74
Super marginal	88	13.95
Safe	438	69.41
Super safe	58	9.19

Source: British Election Study (made available from Pippa Norris at www.hks.harvard.edu/fs/pnorris/Data/Data.htm)

* Great Britain only
* Marginal seat defined as having a majority of less than 10%
* Super marginal seat defined as having a majority of less than 5%
* Safe seat defined as having a majority greater than 10%
* Super safe seat defined as having a majority greater than 35%

Table 5:
Seats that switched in the 2010 general election, Great Britain only

Direction	Seats	Majority votes
To Conservative		
from Liberal Democrat	12	23,820
from Labour	87	309,127
To Liberal Democrat		
from Conservative	3	4,234
from Labour	5	104,653
To Labour		
from Liberal Democrat	1	550
from Respect	1	18,523

7 Figures calculated from data made available by Pippa Norris. See www.hks.harvard.edu/fs/pnorris/Data/Data.htm
8 This includes Labour gains, comprising one seat which swung from the Liberal Democrats.
9 Totals for 'super marginal' and 'super safe' seats are included in the totals for 'marginal' and 'safe' seats.

To Plaid Cymru		
from Labour	1	2,307
To Green		
from Labour	1	1,776
Total	**111**	**464,990**

Source: ippr calculations derived from the 2010 Guardian election dataset[10]

The fact that votes count for far more in marginal seats than in safe seats is increasingly recognised by the electorate, as Table 6 demonstrates. More voters (32.39 per cent) living in marginal seats believed that their vote would make a difference than in safe seats (21.45 per cent). More than 50 per cent of voters in safe seats believed that their vote would not make a difference to the election outcome.

Table 6:
Do you think your vote will make a difference?

	Safe seat		Marginal seat	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Not likely	5,228	50.18	1,557	38.98
Somewhat likely	2,957	28.37	1,144	28.63
Very likely	2,235	21.45	1,294	32.39
Total	**10,420**	**100**	**3,995**	**100**

Source: ippr calculations derived from the British Election Study[11]

The disparity in the influence of marginal and safe seats is enhanced further by the differential treatment voters experience both during and between elections. Political parties are naturally incentivised to concentrate their campaign efforts on winnable seats and so tend to neglect those held safely by their opponents. As a result, safe seats have regularly been described as 'democracy deserts' (see Keaney and Rogers 2006). As the Jenkins Commission put it:

> '[Voters in safe seats] were deprived of (or spared from) the visits of party leaders, saw few canvassers, and were generally treated (by both sides) as either irrevocably damned or sufficiently saved as to qualify for being taken for granted.' (Jenkins Commission 1998)

Democratic Audit found that the candidates contesting the three-way marginal of Falmouth and Camborne in 2005 spent eight times more trying to win over local voters than their counterparts did in the highly safe Labour seat of Barnsley East and Mexborough (Wilks-Heeg 2010a). The same research suggested that there was a tendency for safe seats to become 'campaign-free zones', finding that the 10 seats to see the lowest combined candidate spend per elected were all safe Labour seats in the north of England (ibid).

The British Election Study (BES) provides further evidence to demonstrate the differential treatment experienced by voters in marginal/safe seats. It asked respondents whether the political parties had contacted them during the 2010 campaign. Table 7 (following page) shows that there was a 16 per cent gap between voters living in marginal seats and those living in safe seats. Just under half of voters (46 per cent) living in safe seats were ignored by the parties. Looking at super safe seats, the 'voters ignored' figure rose to 57 per cent; meanwhile in marginals and super marginals the positive voter contact rate was just under 70 per cent.

10 These are approximations only, not precise numbers. This is due to the dataset rounding percentages, so very close constituencies are not accounted for. For example, in Bolton West Labour won 38.5% of the vote and Conservatives 38.3% but in the dataset the the difference (0.3%) is rounded to null. The official vote total of 29,691,780 was used for the calculations.

11 See http://www.essex.ac.uk/bes/

Table 7:
Party-voter contact by marginal and safe seats during the 2010 general election campaign

Marginal seats				
	Marginal		Not marginal	
Contacted?	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Yes	2,489	67.54	5,006	51.77
No	1,107	30.03	4,401	45.51
Don't know	89	2.43	263	2.72
Total	3,685	100	9,671	100

Super marginal seats				
	Super marginal		Not super marginal	
Contacted?	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Yes	1,384	68.07	6,112	53.98
No	590	29.01	4,918	43.43
Don't know	59	2.93	293	2.59
Total	2,033	100	11,323	100

Safe seats				
	Safe		Not safe	
Contacted?	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Yes	5,006	51.77	2,489	67.54
No	4,401	45.51	1,107	30.03
Don't know	263	2.72	89	2.43
Total	9,671	100	3,685	100

Super safe seats				
	Super safe		Not super safe	
Contacted?	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Yes	519	40.02	6,977	57.85
No	741	57.2	4,766	39.52
Don't know	36	2.78	317	2.63
Total	1,296	100	12,060	100

Source: 2010 BES (conducted post-election)

* Great Britain only[12]

* Marginal seat defined as having a majority of less than 10%

* Super marginal seat defined as having a majority of less than 5%

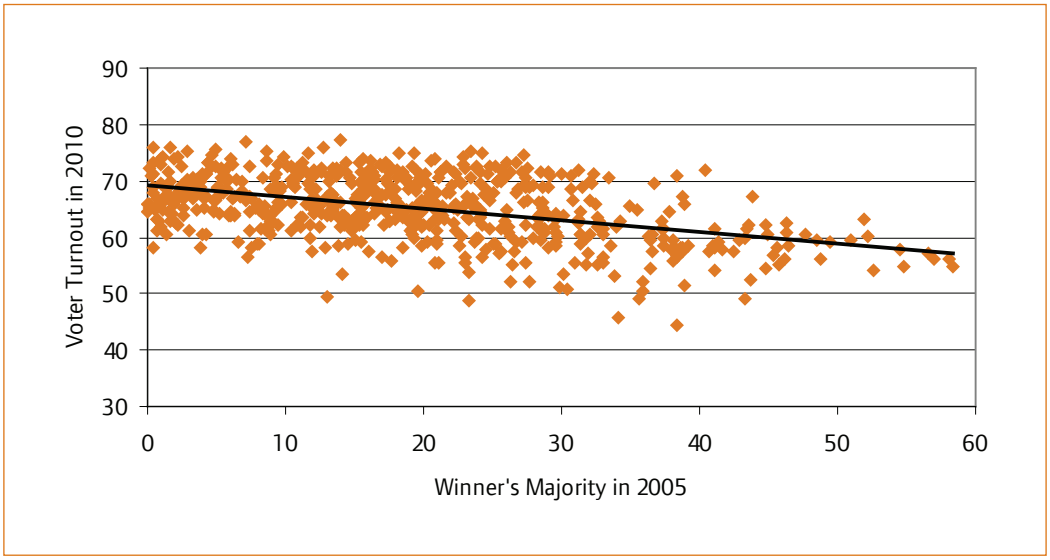
* Safe seat defined as having a majority greater than 10%

* Super safe seat defined as having a majority greater than 35%

There is also clear evidence to suggest a relationship exists between safe seats and voter turnout. Figure 6 on the following page shows a reasonably strong (negative) correlation between the winner's majority in 2005 and voter turnout in 2010. This allows us to test the impact of past results on an individual's decision to vote. As can be seen, voter turnout decreases as the winner's majority becomes larger. This suggests that people are less likely to participate in elections when their vote is less likely to make a difference.

12 Marginal seats determined from 2005 results, because campaigning prior to the 2010 election took place in seats targeted by parties based on 2005 results.

Figure 6:
Safe seats and turnout



Pearson's r = –0.46

Source: BES plus ippr's own calculations

The political inequality that exists between marginal and safe seats is further magnified by the policy process itself and the priority government thereby attaches to the key election battleground seats. Comparative electoral systems research has shown that, under FPTP, parties and governments are incentivised to formulate policies and focus public spending in ways that are 'likely to be more attentive to their own supporters, especially in the constituencies they hold and in particular in the marginal ones where the next election could be won or lost' and to ignore those areas where they have neither support nor the prospect of gaining it (Hix et al 2010). This all flies in the face of the democratic ideal set out by the distinguished political theorist Robert Dahl, who in 1971 wrote: 'I assume that a key characteristic of a democracy is the continued responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals.' (Dahl 1971)

Proponents of FPTP like to argue that it allows voters to 'throw the rascals out', based on a strong measure of accountability between the voter and their MP. Yet the truth is that with the growth in safe seats millions of voters will never have seen their seat change hands. Mark Pack argues that under FPTP substantial numbers of seats have become 'ossified', and shows that, since 1945, one-third of seats have consistently been held by the same party, a figure which rises to half of all seats since 1970 (Pack 2009).

Table 8:
Seats consistently held by the same party, since 1945/1970

	Since 1945 (%)	Since 1970 (%)
England	30	50
Scotland	19	42
Wales	33	43
Total	29	49

Source: Pack 2009

FPTP radically distorts the relationship between votes and seats, creating highly unrepresentative parliaments

FPTP is, as is well known, a highly disproportional voting system generating huge disparities between the proportion of votes gained and the number of seats secured. A glance at the 2010 election results makes this clear: Labour polled six per cent more of the vote than the Liberal Democrats but won 200 more seats.

Table 9:
Vote share and seat numbers, 2010 general election

	Share of vote (%)	Number of seats
Conservative	36.1	306
Labour	29.0	258
Liberal Democrat	23.0	57
Others	11.9	28

Source: BBC website

FPTP still punishes third parties in terms of seats won relative to their seat share. In 2010 it took:

- 33,468 votes to elect a Labour MP
- 35,028 votes to elect a Conservative MP
- 119,780 votes to elect a Liberal Democrat MP

The number of seats a party wins depends less on the number of votes it gets than on the geographic distribution of its support. FPTP penalises parties whose support is spread evenly across the country. UKIP got 900,000 votes, the largest total ever polled by a minority party, but because its vote was geographically spread across the country it failed to win a single seat. In fact, it didn't even come close. However, a number of other parties with lower total vote counts than UKIP did succeed in securing representation precisely because of the geographic concentration of their support: the DUP, Alliance Party of Northern Ireland, SDLP and Sinn Fein in Northern Ireland; the SNP and Plaid Cymru in Scotland and Wales respectively, and a historic first win for the Green Party (who, unlike the other parties listed here, did fight a national campaign).

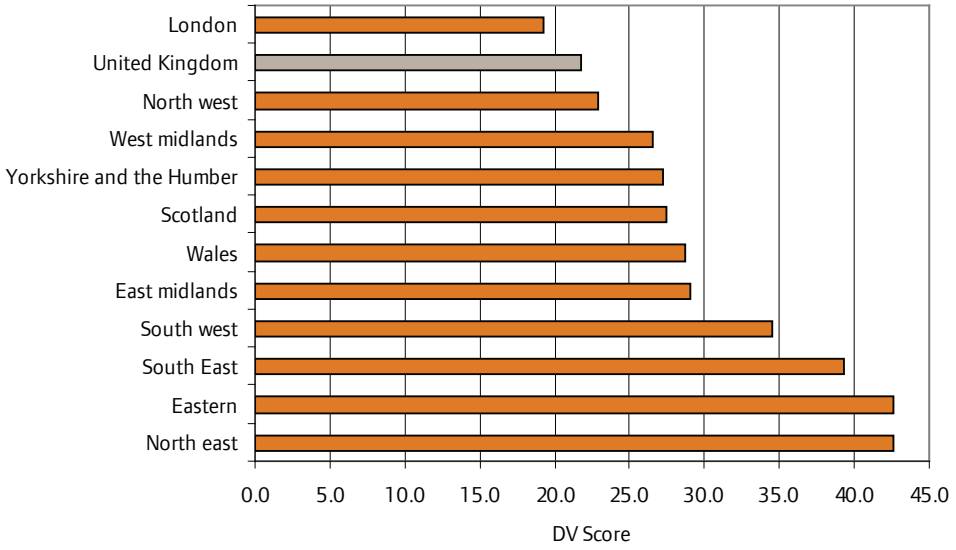
As we have shown, FPTP comes under serious pressure as voters shift to third parties and away from the classic two-party system, meaning we can expect less-decisive results and more hung parliaments. Similarly, greater party competition is also likely to see FPTP produce even less proportional results (Hix et al 2010) and so we can expect future parliaments to be even more unrepresentative.

The traditional measure political scientists use to gauge the disproportionality of voting systems is known as the 'deviation from proportionality' (the DV score) and, according to Dunleavy, it allows us to calculate the percentage of MPs in parliament who 'are not entitled to be there in terms of their party's national vote share' (Dunleavy and Gilson 2010). ippr has calculated the DV score for the 2010 election. In line with previous election result analyses, we have calculated scores for the nations and regions of Britain to enable us to compare the way FPTP works across the UK. The higher the DV score, the less representative the parliament is in terms of the relationship between votes and seats.

In 2010, the general election produced an overall DV score of 21.8. This is far higher than that recorded for the 2009 European Parliament elections – held under PR: DV score 11.7– or the 2007 Scottish Parliament elections – held under a mixed system: DV score 10.2 (see Wilks-Heeg 2010b). It should not surprise us that PR and mixed voting systems are more proportional than FPTP, as the latter is not a proportional system. Of more interest, however, is the DV score for US elections. These are held under FPTP and they typically achieve a DV score of 7 (ibid). There are complex reasons that explain this specific to the US context, but crucially the US operates an almost pure two-party system: this, as we have noted, is a *necessary* condition for FPTP to function effectively, and is a condition that is less prevalent in UK election results.

Figure 7 (following page) reveals the wild geographic variations in the 'fairness' of FPTP results. It suggests that in four regions (North East, Eastern, South East and South West) 35 per cent of MPs elected under FPTP won seats they would not be entitled to hold under a more proportional system.

Figure 7:
'Fairness', 2010 general election



Source: ippr calculations

FPTP is not simply disproportional but also gives parties an unfair bias over their rivals

FPTP is supposed to be 'fair' in one important respect: the winner's bonus (see p7) is awarded to the winning party irrespective of which party that is. Should the Conservatives win 60 per cent of seats on 40 per cent of the vote then, in theory, Labour should, given the same circumstances, be treated equally, securing the same number of seats for the same share of the vote (Hix et al 2010; Curtice 2010a). Yet historically FPTP has regularly failed this test, instead generating biased outcomes that favour one party or another. The degree of this bias is measured by the difference in the number of seats the two main parties would obtain if they had equal shares of the vote (Johnston et al 2005). At different points throughout the 20th century, FPTP has favoured each of the three main parties. In 1906, it exaggerated the Liberal landslide,[13] and then throughout the post-war period up until the 1980s, but especially in the 1950s, it favoured the Conservatives. It now significantly favours Labour. It is one thing to defend disproportional results under FPTP – on the grounds that it allows for the formation of single-party government – but it is quite another to defend electoral bias. The 2005 and 2010 general election results visibly highlight the bias to Labour. In 2005, Labour secured a comfortable overall majority of 67 seats on just 35.2 per cent of the vote. However, in 2010, the Conservatives were denied a majority despite receiving 36.1 per cent of the vote and a 6.9 per cent lead over Labour.

A number of factors explain how FPTP can generate such a bias. The first concerns the relative size of constituencies. On average, the seats Labour wins contain fewer voters than the seats that the Conservatives win. Consequently, it takes more votes to return a Conservative MP. Secondly, turnout is higher in seats the Conservatives win than in Labour seats: in 2010 the turnout in the average seat won by the Conservatives was 68.4 per cent, seven points higher than the turnout in the average seat Labour won (Curtice 2010a).

A third factor relates to the 'efficiency' of the distribution of a party's vote (Hix et al 2010). Under FPTP, when you lose it is best to lose badly, thereby limiting the number of wasted votes, and when you win to win narrowly, with a minimum number of surplus votes over and above that of the second-place party. Since the 1990s, Labour's vote has become more efficiently distributed: Labour receives fewer surplus votes than the Conservatives in the seats that it wins, and fewer wasted votes in seats that it doesn't. Another advantage Labour enjoys is that the average size of English constituencies (71,882) is greater than those in Scotland (65,498) and, significantly so, in Wales (56,545), both places where Labour performs much better than the Conservatives (Balinski et al 2010).

13 It is probably more accurate to say that 1906 provided the Liberal Party with a very generous winner's bonus.

As noted above, FPTP is now so heavily weighted in Labour's favour that the Conservatives need an 11-point lead to secure an outright majority, compared to the 3-point margin Labour would need to govern alone. Electoral bias throws up the possibility of the 'wrong winner' scenario: under FPTP, it is possible for a party to win more seats than another party even if they have come second in terms of the share of the vote. This has occurred twice since 1945. In 1951, the Conservatives won more seats than Labour on a lower proportion of the vote; then, in February 1974, the situation was reversed as Labour formed a government on a lower proportion of the popular vote than the Conservatives.[14] Given the direction and magnitude of the present bias, it is possible that Labour could in the future be elected as a wrong winner. From a democratic point of view, this surely would raise serious questions about the future of FPTP. The wrong winner scenario also dilutes a central claim of FPTP: that voters determine the formation of governments directly through the ballot box (Curtice 2010a).

The Coalition government plans to iron out some of the bias by equalizing the size of constituencies across the UK. This will certainly help reduce the bias – on some forecasts, it would see Labour lose around 35 MPs[15] but it will not eliminate it, since it does nothing to address the issue of differential turnout.

FPTP weakens the constituency link between representatives and voters

In parallel with the national trends, the rise of third parties contesting seats in the UK has, over time, made it more difficult for an MP to be elected with majority support in their constituency. To win a seat under FPTP you simply need to win one more vote than the second-placed candidate. Logically, if more parties are competing for each seat then it becomes possible to win the seat with fewer votes than would be the case where only two parties are fighting it out. In the 1950s, during the golden age of the two-party system when the vast majority of seats offered a straight run-off between Labour and the Conservative, most MPs were elected with more than 50 per cent of the vote. Only 14 per cent failed to secure a majority of the local vote during this period. The situation, set out in Table 10, could not be more different today:

Table 10: Seats with absolute majorities, 1992–2010

Year	Seats	Percentage of seats	Total seats
1992	353	56.21	628
1997	296	47.13	628
2001	311	49.52	628
2005	210	33.44	628
2010	211	33.44	631

Source: BES (made available from Pippa Norris at www.hks.harvard.edu/fs/pnorris/Data/Data.htm)

* Great Britain only

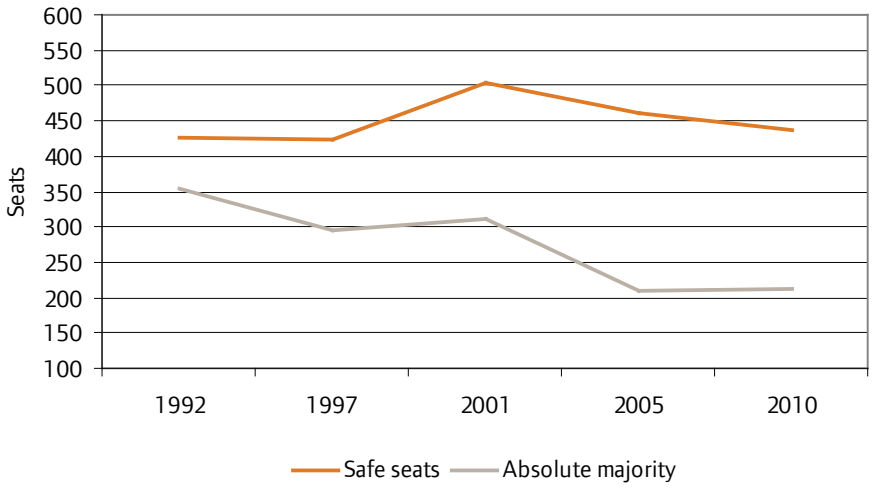
In 2005 and 2010, two-thirds of MPs returned to Westminster did not have majority support from local voters. Given declining voter turnout, the situation is even more dramatic: if you include all eligible voters then in 2005 not a single MP was returned with a majority. Put another way, this means that the majority of voters are left without their preferred political representation in two-thirds of seats. As Lewis Baston has forcefully argued 'a constituency link established on such a feeble mandate does not look that strong from the voters' point of view' (Baston 2008). Advocates of FPTP strongly defend the system on the strength of the constituency link, but how can an MP elected on less than 50 per cent of the vote be said to credibly represent their constituents? Dunleavy believes that the flourishing of multi-party competition will reach an end point where virtually 'no MPs have majority support' (Dunleavy 2010a).

Figure 8 shows the widening gap between the number of safe seats and the number of seats with absolute majorities. In 1992 it was 72 but this had more than trebled to 227 by 2010.

14 In 1951, Labour won 295 seats on 48.8% of the vote, while the Conservatives won 321 seats on 48%. In February 1974, the Conservatives won 297 seats on 37.9% of the vote, when Labour won 301 seats on 37.1%.

15 Email exchange between the author and Professor Ron Johnston, University of Bristol.

Figure 8:
Safe seats and seats with majorities, 1992–2010



Source: ippr calculations based on the BES

FPTP wastes votes and denies voters political choice

No electoral system guarantees that all votes count. Nevertheless, under FPTP millions of votes cast each election count for nothing. FPTP wastes votes in two ways: the votes for losing candidates in each constituency do not get represented in parliament, while surplus votes for winning candidates have no impact on the result either. In the 2010 general election, around 15.7 million votes were cast for losing candidates, comprising approximately 53 per cent of all voters (by ippr's calculation). Additionally, there were around 5.4 million surplus votes cast. Taken together, this amounts to over 21 million wasted votes, or 71 per cent of all votes.

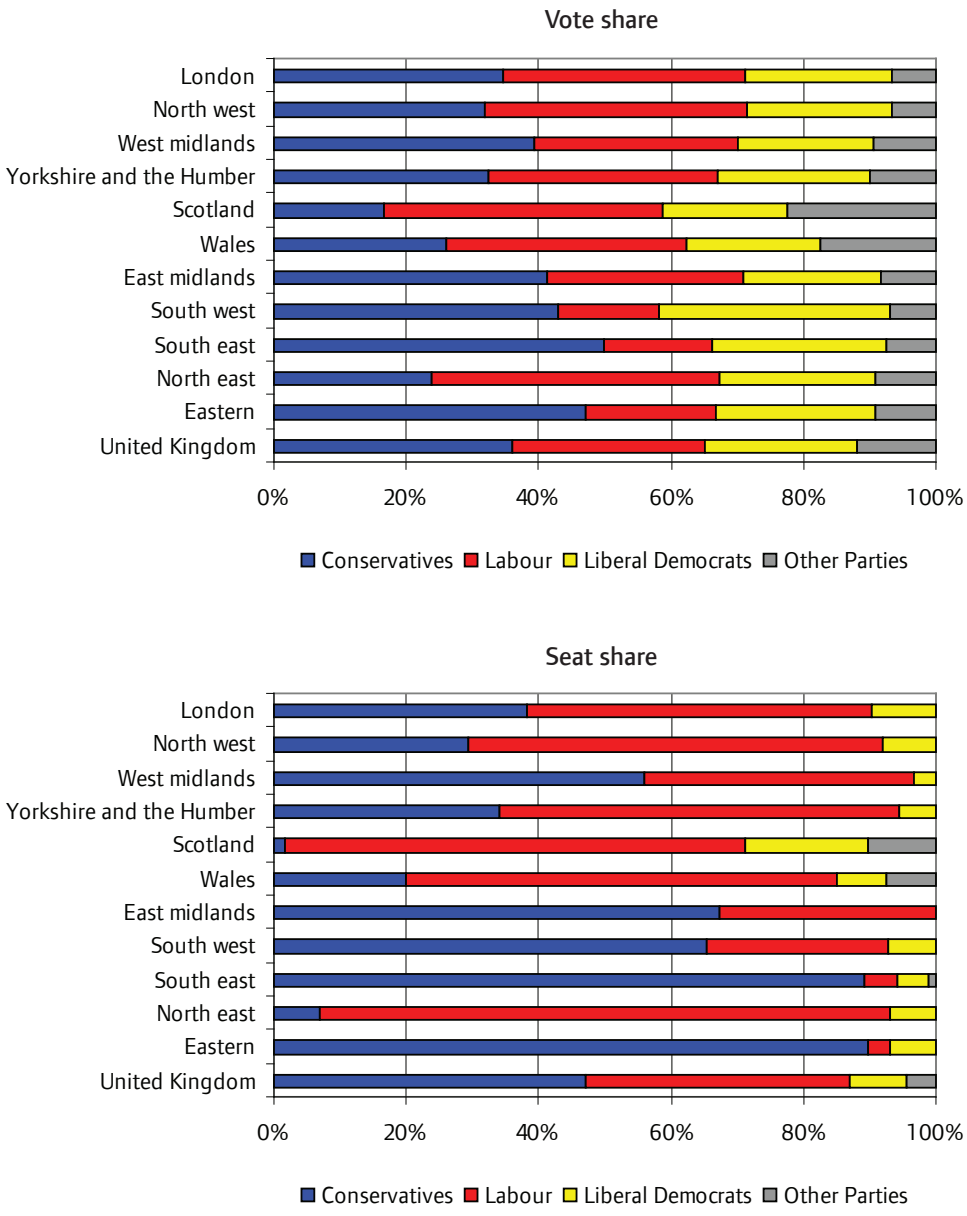
FPTP also undermines political choice by discouraging people from voting for their preferred candidate because they are bound to lose (or, indeed, bound to win). Why vote Labour in a strong Tory safe seat? In such circumstances, voters may decide not to vote at all (see p12) or alternatively they may vote for a party other than their first choice – in 2005 approximately 15 per cent of voters did this (Hix et al 2010).

FPTP makes Britain appear more divided than she is

Over the last 60 years, Britain has become electorally polarised, with Labour support concentrated in the north, urban areas, Scotland and Wales, and Conservative support increasingly confined to the south and south east of England. More than any other recent election, the 2010 general election starkly demonstrated the political diversity of the UK. A glance at a political map of England shows a sharp divide: only 10 of Labour's 191 seats in England can be found in the East, South East or South West regions, and only 42 of the Conservatives' 277 and 11 of the Liberal Democrats' 43 English seats can be found in the North region. The Conservatives have no seats at all in Birmingham, Bradford, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Leeds, Leicester, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham or Sheffield. The Coalition as a whole has only six (Bogdanor forthcoming). This raises important questions about the nature of the government's mandate in the areas where it lacks political representation. In an era of public spending cuts, these questions are particularly acute. Indeed, before the election Nick Clegg declared that if a Conservative government imposed cuts on the inner cities, the result could be 'social chaos'.

However, as the charts below demonstrate, FPTP exaggerates the territorial imbalances across the nations and regions of the UK and make it appear more divided than it actually is. The Conservatives received 20–30 per cent of the vote in the three northern regions but this was barely translated into seats. In Scotland, the Conservatives won 17 per cent of the vote but just one seat. As Vernon Bogdanor argues, while it is well known that FPTP punishes third parties, 'it is less well noticed that it also discriminates against second parties in areas where that party is weak' (Bogdanor forthcoming). Owing to the geographical split of the popular vote, FPTP may in the future spark a territorial constitutional crisis, where Labour forms a UK government without a majority within England or the Conservatives do likewise without a mandate outside of England (Lodge 2010).

Figure 9:
Proportion of the vote and number of seats across the nations and regions of the UK, 2010 general election



Source: BBC election results

* Ordered by DV score, lowest to highest

FPTP often does not lead to strong single-party government

As this report has argued, FPTP becomes dysfunctional under the effects of a range of factors, including multi-party competition, the decline of two-party marginal seats, and electoral bias. As a result, history is littered with examples of when FPTP has failed to do what it says on the tin: create strong single-party government. A survey of the last 100 years demonstrates that hung parliaments are more common than many realize:

- Hung parliaments: 1910 (Jan), 1910 (Nov), 1923, 1929, 1974 (Feb), 1976, 1995–97[16]

Into the mix can be added governments with small majorities, which it would be difficult to describe as either 'strong' or 'stable':

- Small majorities: 1950, 1964, 1974 (Oct), 1992

16 1976 and 1995–97 denote the point at which a government's majority was eroded, for example, by by-election defeats.

Moreover, the previous Labour Government conducted a review of voting systems in the UK which concluded: 'We do not find a difference between PR systems and FPTP in terms of delivering stable and effective government' and that 'In the experience of the UK, coalition governments can be just as stable as single-party governments' (Ministry of Justice 2008).

One of the virtues of FPTP is the claim that it 'enables the electorate sharply and cleanly to rid itself an unwanted government' (Jenkins Commission). There are two propositions underpinning this. The first is that the electorate as a whole can 'throw the rascals out' and the second is that under FPTP it is relatively easy for voters to bring about a transfer in power from one party to the next. Both claims are highly dubious. In terms of the first, it is important to stress that it is only a minority of voters who have a say on whether a government is rewarded for strong performance or chucked out for incompetence. Only one post-war government was elected with a majority of the share of the vote (Conservatives in 1955, with 50 per cent). In 2010, nearly two-thirds of those voting voted against the Conservatives, just as nearly two-thirds of those voting had voted against the majority Labour government of 2005. Historic experience greatly undermines the second proposition, as the Electoral Reform Society has shown: since 1885, there has only been one occasion when a majority government replaced another, and that occurred in 1970 when Ted Heath ousted Harold Wilson from Number 10. All other shifts in power have involved coalitions, minority government, or parliaments with too-narrow a majority to facilitate government for a full term (ERS 2010).

Table 11: Transfers of power in British government, 1945–2010

Year	Transferred from	Governing status	Transferred to	Governing status
1945	Coalition/ caretaker	Coalition	Labour	Working majority
1951	Labour	Inadequate majority	Conservative	Working majority
1964	Conservative	Working majority	Labour	Inadequate majority
1970	Labour	Working majority	Conservative	Working majority
1974	Conservative	Working majority	Labour	Minority
1979	Labour	Minority	Conservative	Working majority
1997	Conservative	Minority	Labour	Working majority
2010	Labour	Working majority	Conservative-Liberal Democrat	Coalition

Source: ERS 2010

There is an international trend among democracies away from FPTP

It is estimated that approximately 47 countries currently use FPTP for elections to the lower house of their legislature (IDEA 2005). Amongst these are 22 established democracies, including large nations such as United States and India, and a similar number of non-democracies (ibid). Perhaps not surprisingly, a number of those states which continue to use FPTP have historical and colonial links to the United Kingdom.

Over the course of the 20th century, a number of states have opted to switch away from FPTP. From Australia in 1913 through to New Zealand in 1993, successions of states have embraced wholesale electoral reform. More tellingly, no major democracy in the modern era has gone the other way and adopted FPTP.[17] Since 1945, only three new democracies have introduced FPTP based on the British model – Albania, Macedonia and Ukraine – and even these countries subsequently decided to switch to a different system (Hix et al 2010).

Table 12 sets out the different electoral systems which are currently used in the UK (excluding general elections) and it reveals that whenever voting systems have been reformed or a new system introduced, policymakers have consistently rejected FPTP in favour of alternative electoral models.

17 There has been pressure to move to FPTP in Italy, and to a lesser extent in Japan.

Table 12:
Electoral systems in the United Kingdom

Institution	Electoral system	Introductory date
Local Authorities – Northern Ireland	Single Transferable Vote	1973
European Parliament (England, Scotland and Wales)	Party List	1979
European Parliament (Northern Ireland)	Single Transferable Vote	1979
Northern Ireland Assembly	Single Transferable Vote	1998
Scottish Parliament	Additional Member System	1999
Welsh Assembly	Additional Member System	1999
Greater London Assembly	Additional Member System	1999
Mayor of London	Supplementary Vote	1999
Elected Mayors (England)	Supplementary Vote	2000
Local Authorities – Scotland	Single Transferable Vote	2004

Source: House of Commons Library

Table 12 clearly indicates that the UK's attachment to FPTP is diminishing. While Westminster elections and those for local authorities in England and Wales continue the historical use of FPTP, all major changes to governance structures within the UK since 1979 have involved the adoption of an alternative electoral system.

Recent developments in particular prompt the question – if FPTP is not good enough for Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and London, why is it still appropriate for Westminster and English and Welsh local authority elections?

Conclusion

Vernon Bogdanor writes that 'the electoral system which a country adopts depends more on its political tradition than upon abstract considerations of electoral justice or good Government' (Bogdanor and Butler 1983). For years, this position has been used to defend FPTP, but it is now clear that such an argument is no longer sufficient precisely because our political tradition no longer tolerates FPTP. Since the 1970s, UK citizens have shown a clear appetite to vote for third parties and to embrace a form of political pluralism which runs directly against the grain of the way FPTP operates. It is breaking down in a new context of multi-party politics. Designed for a world that no longer exists, it looks increasingly anachronistic in 21st century Britain. Electoral trends since the 1970s are eroding FPTP's ability to do what its advocates claim it does. As a result, unless it is reformed we can expect at least some of the following to happen, all of which profoundly undermine the case for its retention.

- Indecisive election outcomes are more likely: we can expect more hung parliaments
- Should majority governments be formed it is likely they will have small and unstable majorities
- Single-party majority governments will also be formed on a declining share of the popular vote and without majority support
- There is an increased chance of the 'wrong winner' being elected (a party which loses on the share of the vote but gains the most seats)
- An increasing number of MPs will be elected *without* majority support in their constituencies
- Election outcomes will continue to be decided by a handful of voters in marginal seats, exacerbating levels of political inequality across the UK
- An increasing number of voters will live in safe seats, cut adrift from political activity and neglected by the main parties
- Britain will become increasingly divided electorally, and governments will be formed that lack widespread support across the country
- The more parties that compete under FPTP the more disproportional results will become, and so the more unrepresentative future parliaments will be.

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