



# Does the current method of electing MPs need replacing?

## The debate over first-past-the-post

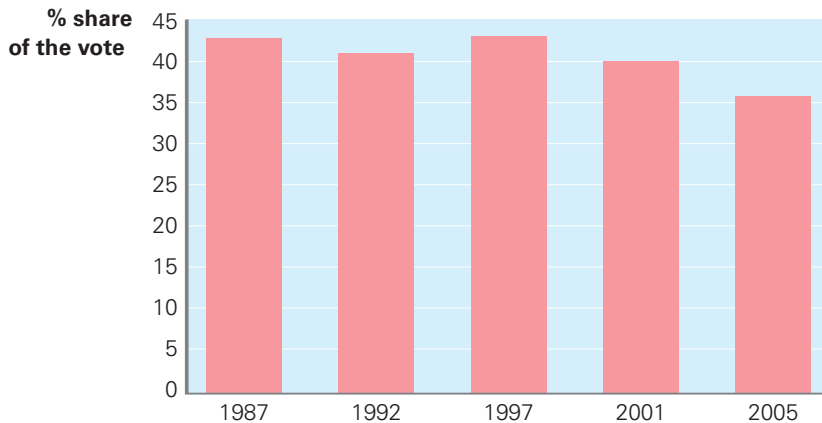
According to supporters of FPTP, one of the system's virtues is the fact that it has proved durable and effective over a long period of time. However, it is arguably only due to reforms of the system during the last 150 years that it has survived at all. For example, until 1885, most constituencies elected several MPs — a practice that was only completely ended after the removal of the 12 university seats in 1950. All 12 of these MPs were elected not under FPTP, but under the single transferable vote (STV).

The debate over the continued merits of FPTP is not a new one. For example, the 1917 all-party Speaker's Conference recommended a switch to STV in the towns and to AV (alternative vote) in the counties. However, many of the arguments surrounding the continued use of FPTP for general elections have remained the same during the last few decades.

## What are the main arguments in favour of reforming the current system for electing MPs?

The principal arguments in favour of **electoral reform** are as follows:

- The party that wins a majority of the seats in parliament rarely wins an overall majority of votes cast (see Figure 2.1).
- The percentage vote that a party receives is not accurately reflected in its percentage share of the seats in the House of Commons. For example, 35% of the electorate voted for Labour in 2005, yet it received 55% of the seats. This is a **deviation from proportionality (DV)** of +20. Labour actually received fewer votes than in 1979 — an election that the party lost.



**Figure 2.1** Winning party's share of the vote in general elections, 1987–2005

- By way of contrast, smaller parties tend to lose out under FPTP. In 2005, the Liberal Democrats gained only 9% of the seats even after gaining 22% of the votes — a DV of  $-13$ .
- In the last three general elections, the electoral system has been biased in favour of Labour. Historically, both main parties have benefited more or less equally from the distorting effect of FPTP, but since 1997 it has clearly worked for Labour (see Box 2.1). As a consequence, some academics believe that the Conservatives would have required 43% of the vote to have won an overall majority in 2001, while Labour would have required only 36%. In 2005, there was only 2.9% difference in their share of the popular vote, yet Labour enjoyed a massive 25% advantage in the number of seats won.
- The system tends to favour large parties that enjoy support which is evenly spread throughout the country. One factor that has contributed to Labour's electoral dominance since 1997 is the party's ability to win seats throughout the UK. By contrast, Scotland and Wales have been virtual electoral deserts for the Conservative Party, while the Liberal Democrats have traditionally found it difficult to win seats in Wales, the South East and the North East.
- FPTP tends to support a two-party system. No other party has held office apart from Labour and Conservative

#### Box 2.1

##### Factors that swing the system Labour's way

- Labour-held seats tend to have fewer constituents than Conservative-held seats; therefore require fewer voters to win a seat.
- Voters are increasingly prepared to vote tactically and negatively to keep their most disliked party out. Historically, this has hit the Conservatives hardest, with Labour voters switching to the Liberal Democrats either to unseat Conservatives or to keep them out.

since 1929, while at least 70% of the electorate has voted for the two main parties since the Second World War. In 2005, 80% of the seats were won by Labour and Conservative candidates.

- On occasions, FPTP fails in one of its primary purposes: to produce a government formed by the party receiving a plurality of votes. In 1951 and February 1974, the party with the second highest number of votes was the one that won the most seats and formed the government (see Table 2.1). Other countries that use FPTP have also experienced this.

Table 2.1 Winner takes all? Occasions when the party with a plurality of votes did not win the most seats

Election	Country	% votes	% seats	
1951	UK	Labour	48.8	47.20
		Conservative	48	51.36
1974 (Feb)	UK	Labour	37.2	47.40
		Conservative	37.8	46.77
1981	New Zealand	National Party	47.0	38.8
		Labour	43.0	39.0

## What are the arguments in favour of retaining the existing system?

Despite its disadvantages, several arguments can be made in favour of FPTP:

- It is easy to understand and operate. A single 'X' by the name of the preferred candidate is sufficient to indicate your choice. The number of crosses is added up and the result is obtained — usually within a few hours of the polling stations closing. Since 1992, Sunderland South has delivered its result faster than any other constituency, and by 2005 it had refined its counting procedures to the extent that it was able to announce the result at 10.41 p.m., just 41 minutes after the polls had closed.
- It has stood the test of time. It has arguably been the mainstay of our moderate, evolutionary political culture, and compares favourably with the experience of other countries in Europe that have experimented with different systems.
- FPTP generally secures strong and stable government. Each of the governments elected since October 1974 has been able to last at least 4 years without the need for a further general election. All but two of those governments have also enjoyed a very comfortable majority in the House of Commons. This has made it easier for them to carry out their manifesto promises.



MPs sitting in the House of Commons

- Conversely, FPTP makes it relatively easy to get rid of unpopular governments. As the elections of 1979 and 1997 demonstrate, the two-party system enables voters to switch allegiances if they want to replace the governing party with an alternative. By way of comparison, governments elected under proportional representation (PR) are more often than not removed by one or more coalition partners switching allegiances rather than as a result of changes in voter preference.
- Defenders of the system point to the strong links that exist between an MP and his or her constituency. Voters know the identity of each candidate and in most cases have contributed to the selection process. Constituents can therefore contact their MP directly should they wish to raise a particular issue. Most importantly, they can hold their own MP to account for his or her record in parliament at the next general election, and, if necessary, vote him or her out.
- FPTP encourages political moderation, as parties know that they have to maintain a broad appeal to win elections. This not only discourages the formation of extremist parties, but also allows more independently minded figures to find a home in the major parties, where their political extravagances can be safely indulged.
- It has allowed both major political parties an even share of power. During the last 16 elections, the Conservatives narrowly shade Labour in terms of election victories.

# The alternatives to first-past-the-post

Having explored the workings of each system in the previous chapter, it is necessary to examine their effects if we are to discover a viable alternative to FPTP.

## Majoritarian systems

### Supplementary vote

The SV system has the following effects:

- The overall winner can claim to have won the support of the broad majority of voters.
- In order to achieve this, parties have to reach out to a broad spectrum of voters.
- However, it is rare for a candidate to achieve an overall majority of votes in the first round, and he or she may even struggle to gain sufficient second-preference votes to gain an overall majority.
- Votes can be 'wasted' if people don't vote for either of the two most popular candidates as first or second preferences.
- Critics of SV argue that it is too complicated for some voters to understand, and therefore results in a significant number of unintentionally spoiled ballot papers. In the October 2005 mayoral election in Torbay, 1,750 of 24,500 ballot papers issued were spoiled. According to the Electoral Reform Society, this was either through a failure to understand the system, or because some voters did not nominate a second-preference candidate.

### Alternative vote

The main effects of the AV system are as follows:

- It encourages voters to cross party lines and base their preferences on the personalities of the various candidates. In the process, it offers voters a greater choice of candidates: in the UK, voters would not be forced to choose between expressing their genuine ideological preference, on the one hand, and exercising a realistic vote according to the situation in their particular constituency, on the other.
- Critics of the system argue that it leads to an over-representation of centre parties because they are often the second choice of most voters. This could lead to one party suffering disproportionately if it is not popular with the voters. If AV had been used in 1997 and 2001, the Conservatives would have received even fewer seats than they did under FPTP.



- In his submission to the Independent Commission on the Voting System (also known as the Jenkins Commission), David Butler argued that AV had too much potential to produce a random result. He pointed out that the result in a constituency could depend not on who gets the highest number of first-preference votes, but on which party came second. To illustrate this, consider the example in Table 2.2, where in the first scenario the Liberal Democrat candidate finishes third and distribution of the Liberal Democrats' second preferences results in a win for the Conservative, who also topped the first-preference vote. However, if the positions of the Labour and Liberal Democrat candidates are reversed (scenario 2), and the Labour preferences favour the Liberal Democrat 20–9, then the Liberal Democrat wins.

Table 2.2 Potential randomness in the AV system

Party	First-preference votes (%)	Second-preference votes (%)	Result (%)
<b>Scenario 1</b>			
Conservative	40	14	54
Labour	31	15	46
Liberal Democrat	29		
<b>Scenario 2</b>			
Conservative	40	9	49
Liberal Democrat	31	20	51
Labour	29		

- AV can benefit candidates placed at the top of the ballot paper. In response to the profusion of candidates standing in each constituency, some voters have resorted to numbering the candidates 1 to 10 (or whatever is the number of candidates on the ballot paper) from top to bottom. This is known as the 'donkey vote' (see Box 2.2).

### Box 2.2

#### The donkey vote

In Australian elections, it is estimated that the donkey vote makes up 2% of the total vote. Until 1984, this had a partial impact on the final result as candidates were listed alphabetically, so parties might have benefited by selecting candidates whose surnames began with letters at the start of the alphabet.

- Like other majoritarian systems, AV can penalise smaller parties. Under simulations of the 1992 general election, the Liberal Democrats in the UK would have won only 4.8% of the seats; in Australia, the Democratic Labor Party and the Democrats have never won a seat under AV.

## Second ballot system

The effects of the second ballot system are as follows:

- The winning candidate can claim majority support.
- It allows voters to reconsider their original choices, if necessary.
- It creates strong and stable government.
- Critics argue that it restricts choice in the second round. In the 2002 French presidential election, left-wing voters were faced in the second round with a choice between the conservative Jacques Chirac and the National Front leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen.

## Proportional systems

### Single transferable vote

The STV system has the following effects:

- There are far fewer wasted votes, as most of the votes ultimately help elect a candidate.
- In common with most forms of PR, STV usually leads to greater diversity among elected representatives. As this system allows voters to place candidates in rank order, for example, they can express a clear preference for a woman candidate, should they want to see more women in the legislature. Equally, they could use the rank order to increase the likelihood of minority parties gaining representation.
- It generally results in a multi-party system, where there is an average of five parties winning more than 3% of the seats each.
- It can result in a different kind of politics being practised, with closer co-operation between parties before and after the election. During the 1998 Northern Ireland Assembly elections, the SDLP encouraged its supporters to deploy their second-preference votes in favour of parties that supported the Good Friday Agreement.
- While the voting is reasonably straightforward, the counting process is complicated and can take a long time. This is one of the reasons why STV is found only in countries with relatively small populations, such as Australia (the Senate), Malta and the Republic of Ireland.



- The need to secure a high ranking can lead to infighting between candidates from the same party, and elected representatives giving undue attention to local issues, at the expense of national considerations.

## Closed list

The effects of closed list PR are as follows:

- The most obvious one is that a greater number of parties are able to win seats. Compared to FPTP, which averages around three parties winning over 3% of the seats, in list systems almost five parties are able to achieve this total. Of the 78 UK seats available at the 2004 European Parliament election, UKIP was able to win 12 seats and the Greens won two.
- As this is the purest form of PR, it features many of the general advantages of other proportional systems. Therefore, voting tends to be fairer and there are fewer 'wasted' votes.

## Additional member system

AMS has the following effects:

- One of its advantages is that it offers greater voter choice. By 'splitting the ticket', voters can select a different party for their constituency and list votes. However, as Table 2.3 illustrates, the extent to which voters take full advantage of this opportunity is surprisingly limited.

Table 2.3 Split-ticket voting in Scotland, Wales, Germany and New Zealand

Election	% ticket splitters
Scotland 1999	20
Scotland 2003	28
Wales 1999	23
Wales 2003	17
London 2000	21
Germany 1998	23
Germany 2002	20
New Zealand 1999	35
New Zealand 2002	37

Source: ICPR, *Changed Voting Changed Politics: Lessons of Britain's Experience of PR since 1997 — Final Report of the Independent Commission to Review Britain's Experience of PR Voting Systems*, The Constitution Unit (2003).

- AMS generally increases the number of parties gaining representation. The 2003 elections to the Scottish Parliament illustrate this perfectly (see Table 2.4). In total there are nine parties with Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs), a figure that includes two independents and five parties that are not represented at Westminster.

Table 2.4 Scottish Parliament election, 1 May 2003 (turnout: 49.4%)

Party	% of constituency vote	No. of FPP seats	% of FPP seats	% of regional vote	No. of regional seats	Total no. of seats	% of total no. of seats
Con	16.8	3	4.1	15.5	15	18	14.0
Labour	35.1	46	63.0	29.3	4	50	38.8
Lib Dem	15.6	13	17.8	11.8	4	17	13.2
SNP	24.1	9	12.3	20.9	18	27	20.9
Green	—	—	—	6.9	7	7	5.4
SSP	6.3	—	—	6.7	6	6	4.7
Others	3.5	2	2.7	8.7	2	4	3.1
Total	100	73	100	100	56	129	100

Source: the Electoral Commission

- It has also led to greater representation of women. The Welsh Assembly became the first legislature in the world to have 50% women members after the elections in 2003.
- From a governing point of view, the proportional nature of AMS invariably leads to coalitions having to be formed. In Scotland, Labour holds power with the Liberal Democrats, while in Germany the SPD shares power with the Greens. However, the need to share power depends entirely on the balance between the number of constituency and list seats. Where there is a significant bias towards constituency seats, as is the case in Wales, it is more likely that a party can govern alone. After the 2003 Welsh Assembly elections, Labour decided it could do without a coalition partner as it had won 50% of the assembly seats.
- This can also be considered a criticism of AMS, as it gives disproportionate power to smaller coalition partners. This is best illustrated by reference to the behaviour of the FDP in Germany. Despite averaging approximately 9.5% of the vote, it remained in office from 1969 until 1998, holding three or four cabinet posts in the process. It was also responsible for the fall of the SPD administration in 1982, when it decided that it would transfer its loyalties to the conservative CDU/CSU.



### Task 2.1



'The main problem with AMS is that it combines the weaknesses of FPTP with the flaws of list PR.' Discuss.

#### Guidance

To agree with the statement, you could use the following arguments:

- In the German model, half the MPs are not directly accountable to the electorate.
- These same list MPs are thus dependent on the party leadership for their place on the list. This increases the power of the party leadership.
- Meanwhile, the constituency MPs fail to represent their whole constituency because they rarely gain an overall majority of the vote.
- AMS leads to a long delay in the formation of the government and can increase the power of behind-the-scenes elites after the election. Some reference to the interparty manoeuvrings after the 2005 German election would be useful.

To challenge the statement, you should demonstrate the strengths of the system:

- The use of two electoral systems allows one to compensate for the other's weaknesses. Where list systems fail to provide a strong constituency link, the FPTP element provides for that perfectly. Whereas FPTP has a natural distorting effect, the list votes act as a 'top-up' for parties that have not been fairly represented by the constituency votes.
- While AMS is normally 100% proportional in Germany, it has also produced the type of stable governments that are the hallmark of political systems where FPTP is used.
- AMS increases voter choice, as voters can differentiate between the constituency and list contests and, if so inclined, 'split the ticket'.

## Attitude of the parties and the public towards reform of the system

### Labour Party

Historically, the Labour Party has been sceptical about the issue of **electoral reform**. Believing that FPTP worked to its advantage, the party paid little attention to it until the late 1980s when the Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform received a surge in support. After a fourth successive general election defeat in 1992, the party leadership commissioned Lord Plant to investigate alternatives to FPTP for general elections and the elections that would accompany the party's proposed constitutional changes. Although his recommendations were not wholly adopted by the party leadership, his commission did provide an ideological impetus to the campaign for reform among Labour Party members.

## Learning point

### *Plant Report*

The recommendations of the Plant Commission included:

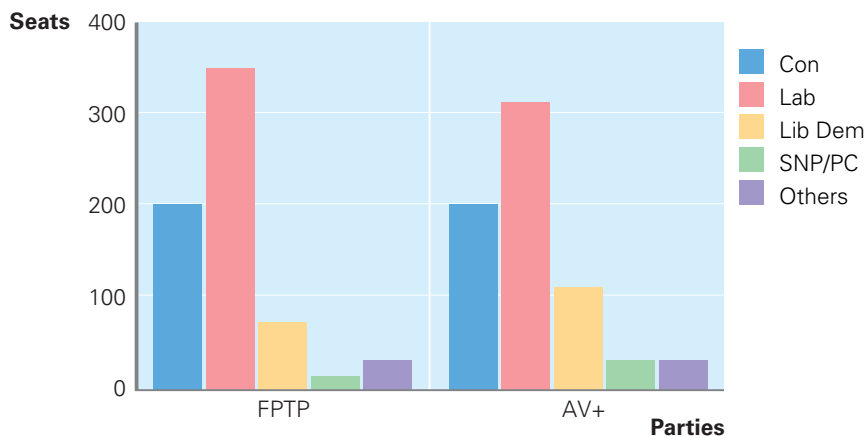
- general elections: supplementary vote
- European Parliament: regional list
- House of Lords: regional list

Why were these particular systems recommended for the different elections?

It was not until the election of Tony Blair that supporters of reform got the breakthrough they wanted, as he included a promise in Labour's 1997 manifesto to introduce a commission to investigate alternatives to FPTP, and to hold a referendum on the issue within the lifetime of that parliament.

The multi-party commission, under the chairmanship of Lord Jenkins of Hillhead, eventually recommended replacing FPTP with a completely original electoral system. Influenced by the popularity of mixed systems among countries adopting new electoral systems — such as New Zealand and Japan — the commission created a variant of AMS called **alternative vote plus (AV+)**.

In order to achieve fairer representation and a more proportional result, between 15 and 20% of MPs would be elected by list PR. These would be the top-up representatives from the regions. However, stable government and a strong MP–constituency link would be maintained by the majority of MPs being elected from single-member constituencies using the alternative vote. Figure 2.2 shows how the use of Jenkins's system would have changed the result of the 2005 general election, and Figure 2.3 shows what an AV+ ballot paper might look like.



**Figure 2.2** How using AV+ would have affected the general election of 2005



<b>Constituency vote</b>	<b>Regional vote</b>
<p>This vote will help to decide who the constituency MP for Hoggborough East is. Rank the candidates in order of preference (1 for your preferred candidate, then 2, 3 etc.). Rank as many candidates as you wish.</p>	<p>This vote will help to decide the total number of seats for each party in the county of Rochefolk. You may vote either for one party or for one of the listed candidates. A vote for a listed candidate will also be counted as a vote for that candidate's party.</p>
<p><b>Sam Beard</b> Liberal Democrat</p>	<p>EITHER Put an X by the party of your choice OR Put an X by the candidate of your choice</p>
<p><b>Stephen Blake</b> Green</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Liberal Democrat</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Alison Marks <input type="checkbox"/> Barry Russell <input type="checkbox"/> Marie White</p>
<p><b>Rebecca Nuttall</b> Conservative</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Green</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Malcolm Goate <input type="checkbox"/> Louise Jones <input type="checkbox"/> Alice Smith</p>
<p><b>Bruce Oute</b> UKIP</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Conservative</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Peter Fox <input type="checkbox"/> Akhil Kara <input type="checkbox"/> Jo Nell</p>
<p><b>Lyn Wheen</b> Labour</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> <b>UKIP</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Peter Boss <input type="checkbox"/> Richard Charles <input type="checkbox"/> Ian Lacey</p>
<p><b>Henry Kiernan</b> Independent</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Labour</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Monica Aluwahlia <input type="checkbox"/> Olive Bear <input type="checkbox"/> Tom Bernard</p>

**Figure 2.3** How an AV+ ballot paper might look

The government's response to the Jenkins Report was lukewarm. The prime minister expressed his approval of the hard work and thought that had gone into the process, but he did not endorse the proposed system itself. Tellingly, the official response of the government was provided by the home secretary, Jack Straw, a renowned opponent of PR, who was not slow to voice his own scepticism about any alternative to FPTP.

Two general elections later, no referendum on the method of electing representatives to Westminster has yet been held. Several reasons have been put forward for this:

- Blair was never really interested in electoral reform in the first place: it was a legacy of John Smith's period as Labour Party leader. Sceptics claim that Blair only agreed to look at the issue again when he thought that he might need to form a coalition with the Liberal Democrats after the 1997 election.
- The success of Labour in the last three general elections has restored the party's faith in FPTP.
- Meanwhile, Labour's experience of PR in London, Welsh, Scottish and European elections has not been a happy one.
- In order to support reform publicly, Blair would need the support of his cabinet and his MPs. There is little evidence to suggest that there is majority support for PR in either cabinet or parliament.

## Conservative Party

Given Tory hostility to most aspects of constitutional reform, it should be no surprise to discover that the Conservatives oppose any move away from FPTP. Like Labour, they believe that FPTP works in their favour, with periods out of office being more than matched by the number of times that the system has secured them power. They also reject reform on the grounds that it leads to weak and unstable coalition governments, which depend heavily on the acquiescence of minor coalition partners.

Proportional representation prevents voters from kicking out an unpopular government and leads to extremist and minority parties being elected with as little as 5% of the vote.

Oliver Heald, Shadow Secretary of State for Constitutional Affairs, June 2005

In its contribution to the debate on the workings of FPTP after the 2005 election, the party emphasised its resistance to reform, relying instead on calling for fixed-size constituencies to prevent the discrepancy in value between Conservative and Labour votes recurring.

The Conservatives also strongly support the view of Michael Pinto-Duschinsky that a prime function of an electoral system is to give the voters the means to remove an ineffective government. Pinto-Duschinsky argues that FPTP performs this role better than any other variant. Boris Johnson agrees:

I say: to hell with PR, long live first-past-the-post, and safeguard, for the people, the right to kick into outer space a government they dislike.

Boris Johnson, Conservative MP



Boris Johnson, Conservative MP

However, there are periods when prominent members of the party have advocated replacing FPTP. After the two election defeats of 1974, the Conservative Action for Electoral Reform was established, including such luminaries as Douglas Hurd and Chris Patten as members. The return of a Conservative government in 1979, however, diminished the group's impact. It remains to be seen whether the success of the Conservatives in PR elections since 1997, and their failure to win power under FPTP since that date, will prompt a radical rethink in the party's approach to the issue.

In the aftermath of the 2005 defeat, the Electoral Reform Society published a pamphlet entitled 'The Conservatives and the Electoral System', which made a strong case for the Conservatives to embrace the cause of electoral reform. It failed to make an impact on either of the two contenders for the party leadership, however, and the prospect of change in the near future looks slim.

## Task 2.2



In the light of three successive general election defeats, do you agree with the view that the Conservatives should look more favourably at electoral reform?

### Guidance

Arguments that suggest the Conservatives should look favourably at reform might include:

- In each of the last three elections, the system has been biased against them. It is estimated that, even if they and Labour had polled 33.8% in 2005, Labour would still have obtained over 100 seats more than them.
- A future Conservative victory could be prevented by the kind of **tactical voting** that cost them seats in 1997 and 2001. This would be more difficult to do under PR.
- Labour's share of the vote was artificially depressed in the last two elections due to low turnout among its traditional voters. They might be more inclined to vote in a close contest in order to prevent a Conservative victory.
- In elections where some form of PR has been used in the UK, the Conservatives have performed creditably; they even 'won' the 2004 European Parliament elections.

Arguments that suggest they should reject the idea might include:

- The party most likely to benefit from electoral reform is the Liberal Democrats, who might be more inclined to work in government with Labour than the Conservatives.

**Task 2.2 (continued)**

- PR would actually see the Conservatives shed voters to right-wing minor parties such as UKIP and the BNP, or even the Liberal Democrats. It might also see the emergence of a breakaway pro/anti-European party, which would also take votes away from the Conservatives.
- Historically, FPTP has served the party well, and will do so again in future. The wave of anti-Conservative tactical voting appeared to subside in 2005, and Labour's majority was severely dented in the 2005 election.

## Liberal Democrat Party

The Liberal Democrats have had the longest commitment to PR of all the major parties, with a sustained advocacy of the merits of STV since the nineteenth century. In their eyes, it offers greater voter choice and ensures the fairest result. Their position can be explained partially by self-interest — FPTP has done them no favours since the First World War — but their belief in the role of the individual, and limiting the power of elites, also makes STV appear a more attractive proposition.

### Learning point

#### *Liberal Democrats and electoral reform*

Liberal Democrat leader Charles Kennedy wrote to the prime minister on 25 May 2005 on the topic of electoral reform:

I have repeatedly made clear that I would welcome constructive engagement with any serious political party about introducing proportional representation. I believe it would strengthen our democracy by making parliament more directly accountable to individual voters. A government elected by proportional representation would have a clearer and more authoritative mandate. Tactical voting would become a thing of the past.

- (a)** Would a government elected under PR enjoy a greater mandate?
- (b)** How would tactical voting become 'a thing of the past'?

## Minor parties

Most of the prominent minor parties support reform of the electoral system. The Greens advocate the introduction of AMS, while at the last election the SNP and Plaid Cymru argued for a more proportional system. Even an apparently conservative party such as UKIP also follows this line, highlighting its success under the regional list system used for European Parliament elections as one reason for its rejection of FPTP.



## Public opinion

Opponents of reform often dismiss the issue as something that the majority of the population have little interest in and even less knowledge about. What most voters are concerned about, they argue, is whether the government that is returned after an election is both strong and stable.

To an extent, opinion poll evidence supports this view, with relatively few people expressing support for the introduction of PR in polls conducted between 1992 and 2003. Indeed, in an NOP poll conducted for *The Independent* in May 2005, 57% of respondents expressed support for the view that 'It is right that Labour have an overall majority because they won more votes than anyone else'.

However, in the same poll, 62% of people stated that they supported the introduction of a proportional system of electing MPs. This figure corroborates the views of some academics who argue that people's own experience of elections has a direct impact on their attitude to electoral systems. For example, levels of support for the use of AMS are far higher in Scotland, where it has been used for elections to the Scottish Parliament, than in England, which has had no such experience, and has therefore not had the opportunity to enjoy the benefits of PR.

## Conclusion: is reform of the electoral system desirable?

It is almost impossible to provide an objective response to this question. The answer one could provide depends entirely on the criteria being deployed to make a judgement. The Jenkins Commission was provided with four specific criteria upon which to reach its verdict. They were:

- maintenance of the constituency link
- broad proportionality
- voter choice
- stable government

If we take recent electoral history as a guide, FPTP still successfully performs its core function of electing a stable government, while maintaining a strong MP–constituency link. Even with under 25% of the electorate voting for the Labour Party, few people seriously questioned its right to form a government after the 2005 election.

However, as previously stated, FPTP fails either to deliver broad proportionality or to provide real voter choice. Previously, neither of these points would have attracted much attention, but with the system so clearly working to

Labour's advantage on a consistent basis, and with a steady increase in the number of parties enjoying electoral success under other systems in the UK, a growing number of people are starting to question the suitability of FPTP for Westminster elections.

But what are the chances of FPTP being replaced in the near future? Politicians of all parties are aware of the fact that electoral systems, like constitutions, are not neutral. They are designed to serve a specific purpose, usually that of the party which designed them. While Labour continues to gain such clear advantages from FPTP, it is unlikely to ditch a system that has served it so well since 1997. The likelihood of reform in the near future, therefore, is undoubtedly slim. Although newspapers such as *The Independent* have launched an energetic campaign to galvanise interest and support for PR, the leaderships of both major parties are implacably wedded to FPTP.

While not publicly participating in the debate since the election, Tony Blair has allowed the deputy prime minister, John Prescott, and Lord Falconer to act as his mouthpieces. Both have offered a clear rejection of any move to implement Labour's 1997 manifesto pledge to hold a referendum on the system used for general elections. For the moment, then, the prospect of electoral reform in the UK remains hidden in the long grass.

### Task 2.3



As a result of last week's election, demands for proportional representation to be used for electing MPs — just as it is, in one way or another, for Euro MPs, members of the Scottish Parliament or Welsh Assembly, or even mayors — are once again rustling the political undergrowth. Two newspapers have come out in favour of it, and at the weekend a member of the original Jenkins Commission that looked into the whole question of voting systems back in 1997–98 was even to be heard denouncing last week's general election as 'a travesty of democracy'. According to the Labour peer Lord Lipsey, it is high time the Tories woke up to just how far the present system of electing MPs is 'viciously biased' against them.

*The Times*, 10 May 2005

- (a) What do you understand by the term 'electoral reform'?
- (b) Outline a case for reforming the electoral system used for general elections in the UK.

#### Guidance

- (a) Refer to a movement that aims to change the mechanism by which people vote in elections. Perhaps include examples of the perceived flaws of FPTP and a group that supports reform, such as the Electoral Reform Society.



## Task 2.3 (continued)



### Guidance

- (b) Remember to make your points clear and precise. Where possible, provide a relevant recent example to illustrate your argument. Make sure that you are familiar with how the 2005 general election strengthened the case for reform. Your range of arguments should include the following observations:
- The system is heavily biased in favour of the Labour Party.
  - It under-represents minority interests such as the Greens.
  - No government since the Second World War has obtained an overall majority of votes, yet the system creates an 'elective dictatorship' that allows the governing party to do as it pleases.
  - Even though it polled only 3% less than Labour in 2005, the Conservative Party will need to increase its share of the vote by at least 11% simply to win an overall Commons majority at the next election.
  - Not all votes are equal — most elections are really decided by the preferences of about 1 million voters living in marginal seats.

## Useful websites

- **The Electoral Reform Society**  
[www.electoral-reform.org.uk/](http://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/)
- **The Electoral Commission**  
[www.electoralcommission.org.uk](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk)
- **Make Votes Count**  
[www.makemyvotecount.org.uk](http://www.makemyvotecount.org.uk)
- **Electoral Reform Coalition New Zealand**  
[www.mmp.org.nz](http://www.mmp.org.nz)

## Further reading

- Denver, D. (2003) 'Whatever happened to electoral reform?' *Politics Review*, vol. 13, no. 1.
- Electoral Reform Society (2005) 'The Conservatives and the Electoral System'.