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# First-past-the-post

## What impact does it have on the UK's democracy?

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This article looks at the case for and against the UK's current voting system

### EXAM LINKS

- **Edexcel** Component 1 Topic 3: UK electoral systems
  - **AQA** Paper 1 Topic 3.1.2.2: Elections and referendums.
- Plus synoptic links to many other topics in both specifications, such as democracy and participation.

**F**irst-past-the-post (FPTP) underpins many aspects of the UK's government and politics, from participation and voting behaviour to party systems and the ease with which a government can enact constitutional change. Critics of the system argue that its removal would make the UK more democratic, while defenders praise its tendency to produce strong governments that are accountable to the electorate. Removing FPTP would undoubtedly transform many features of our democracy.

### The case for FPTP

Supporters of FPTP argue that its simplicity strengthens UK democracy. First, voters have a simple choice between individual candidates, as they only pick their first preference. In contrast, in proportional systems such as single transferable vote (STV), voters are required to rank candidates in order of preference. Counting FPTP votes and declaring the result is quick and efficient, and the whole process is easily understood by voters. It does not require complex systems such as STV's Droop quota and reallocation of excess votes. FPTP's accessibility should promote participation, which is essential for a healthy democracy.

Second, FPTP delivers simple representation, as each MP represents a single constituency. Constituents know who represents their local area, whereas proportional systems use larger

### Box 1 Electoral systems used in the UK

**First-past-the-post** (plurality system): UK general elections, English local elections

**Additional member system** (mixed system): elections to Scottish and Welsh assemblies, and the London Assembly

**Single transferable vote** (proportional system): elections to Northern Ireland Assembly and Scottish local councils

**Supplementary vote** (majoritarian, preferential voting system): London mayoral elections

multi-member constituencies where responsibility is shared by a number of representatives. FPTP's strong MP-constituency link allows representative democracy to function effectively.

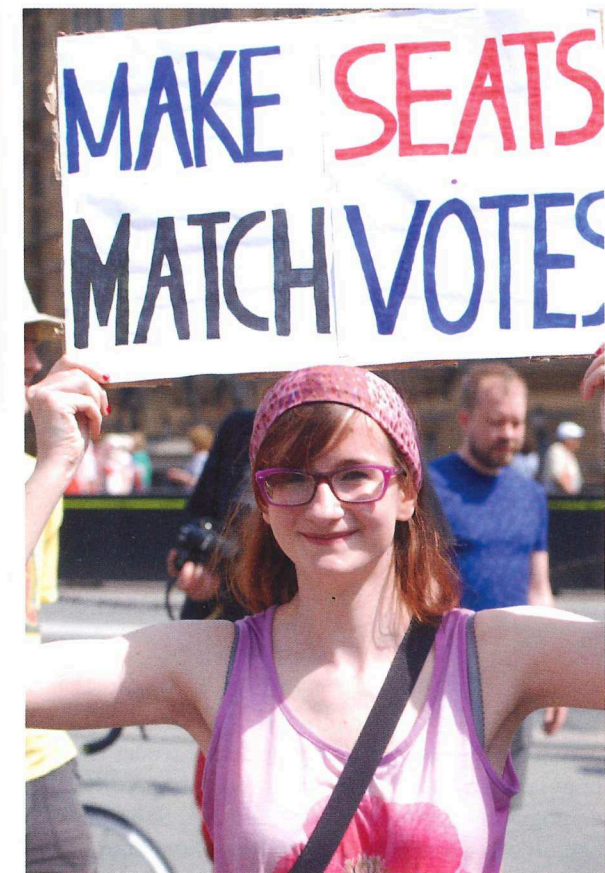
A third advantage of FPTP is its tendency to deliver a straightforward form of government. FPTP usually produces majority governments, operating within a two-party system. Voters therefore have a simple choice to make in general elections: which of the two main parties do they wish to govern? Whichever party is elected will have the opportunity to implement its manifesto, and can then be held accountable by the electorate at the next election.

### Messy alternatives?

This is much simpler than the messy business of coalition-building that usually results from proportional representation (PR) systems. When forming coalitions, parties inevitably diverge from the manifestos for which they have a mandate from the electorate, and create bilateral or multilateral agreements behind closed doors, often emerging with policies that lack a specific mandate. We saw an example of this in 2010, when the Liberal Democrats joined the Conservatives in government and negotiated a referendum on electoral reform as part of their coalition agreement. They offered the alternative vote (AV) system to the electorate, although the Conservatives did not support electoral reform and the Lib Dems' manifesto had promoted STV, a far more proportional system than AV.

### A barrier to extremism?

Some adherents of FPTP claim that it protects democracy from existential threat. Small parties tend to lack concentrated support and they therefore struggle to win seats, meaning that extremist parties are unlikely to achieve much of a presence in the House of Commons. The British National Party's failure to win a seat in Parliament is an example of this. Extremist parties are also unlikely to be invited into government because the 'winner's bonus' usually gives the ruling party a healthy majority, so coalitions are rare.



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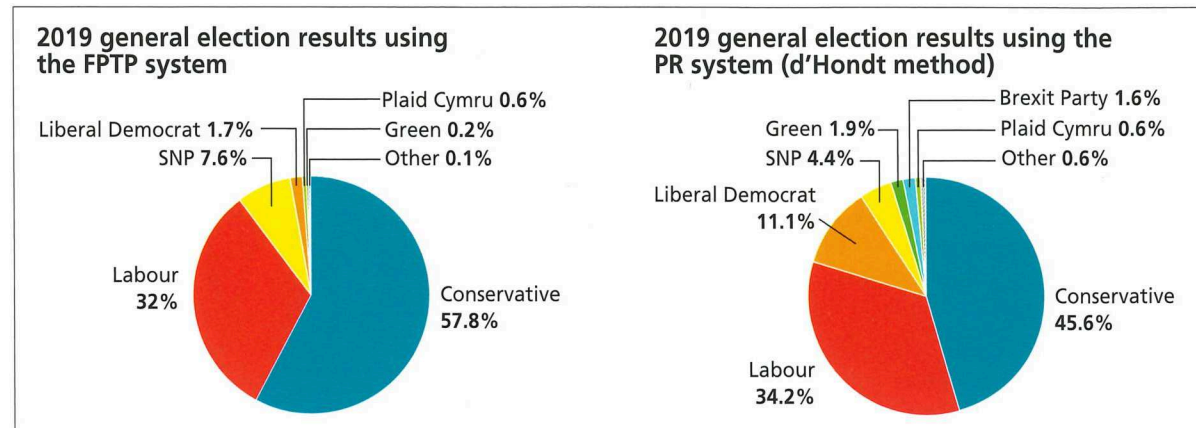
### The case against FPTP

Critics of FPTP categorically reject the notion that it is a simple voting system. Unless a voter lives in a marginal seat where their chosen party has a realistic chance of winning, they face a challenging series of decisions. First, should they vote at all? Many potential voters in 'safe seats' or supporters of minor parties may decide there is little point in voting. Turnout in the 2019 general election was 67%, and it had fallen as low as 59% in 2001 (an election where another Labour majority was widely expected). In contrast, turnout in recent referendums on important constitutional issues has been higher (72% in the 2016 EU referendum, 84% in the 2014 Scottish independence referendum), perhaps because every vote really did count.

### Tactical voting

Assuming that they do decide to vote, many voters need to make complex strategic calculations about how to do so effectively. YouGov polling found that 32% of voters used tactical voting in 2019, meaning that FPTP prevented them from voting for the party that they actually wanted to win, pushing them instead to vote for whichever party closest to their preference had a realistic chance of winning in their constituency. Tactical voting further entrenches the advantages of the two main parties, as they are most likely to have a chance of winning a seat.





**Figure 1** Comparison of 2019 general election results under FPTP and a PR system

### Broader representation

The two-party system makes it harder for small or new parties, and the ideas and political talent contained within them, to break into government. The fact that nearly 25% of voters chose a party other than the Conservatives or Labour in 2019, even within a system that heavily encourages voting for the two main parties, demonstrates the popular demand for broader representation. Broader demographic representation would also be a likely benefit of a move to proportional representation (PR): female candidates are more likely to be elected in a proportional system, and probably candidates from minority ethnic groups too.

### Democratic mandates and constitutional implications

FPTP has an impact on the quality of the democratic mandate held by MPs and governments. In 2019, 35% of MPs were elected without a majority of votes in their constituency (Figure 1). Furthermore, the 'winner's bonus' typically enjoyed by the winning party results in disproportionately large 'landslide' majorities. In Tony Blair's 1997 victory, Labour won 43% of votes but 63% of seats, giving it a 179-seat majority. In the most extreme examples of the 1951 and 1974 elections, the party that won the most seats did not actually win the popular vote.

FPTP also has potential constitutional implications. Unlike in USA, the UK does not have an

entrenched constitution, so our sovereign parliament can make constitutional changes via a simple majority vote in Parliament. The fusion of the executive and the legislature allows a government with a large majority to dominate Parliament in the manner of an 'elective dictatorship', potentially enacting significant constitutional change with ease, but without the same degree of democratic mandate as a Parliament elected via a more proportional voting system.

### Political perspectives

Many political experts and politicians support the status quo.

#### Conservative Party

For the Conservative Party, there is a pragmatic reason to keep FPTP: it benefits more from it than any other political party. The two-party system gives only the Conservative and Labour parties a realistic chance of heading a government, but only 38,264 votes were needed on average to elect a Conservative MP in 2019, compared to 50,837 for a Labour MP. Labour votes tend to be more tightly concentrated, leading to a greater proportion of 'wasted votes'. (The boundary changes introduced in 2023 are predicted to increase the Conservative advantage slightly, possibly by about 5 seats, but are a response to demographic changes, rather than a partisan form of 'gerrymandering' as occurs in the USA.)

#### Labour Party

Despite its relative disadvantage, the Labour Party is ambiguous about electoral reform. The 2022 Labour conference voted to include proportional representation in its manifesto, but leader Keir Starmer dismissed the reform as 'not a priority'. Perhaps the prospect of coalition with potential partners such as the Liberal Democrats or the Scottish National Party explains Starmer's reluctance to prioritise electoral reform, along with the view that it is not a key issue for the public. When the electorate was asked about electoral reform in the 2011 AV



Exit poll projections on the night of the 2019 general election

referendum, it voted to keep FPTP by a majority in every region of the UK, and a decisive 67.9% of voters overall (albeit on a markedly low turnout of 42%).

#### Smaller parties

The Electoral Reform Society pressure group has campaigned for proportional representation since the 1880s. Many smaller political parties also support voting reform. In most cases, this makes rational sense, as they would gain from a more proportional system. In 2015, UKIP won 3.9 million votes, which was 12.6% of the total vote, but only one seat – a sharp contrast to the 80 seats it would have been allocated under a proportional system. Similarly, the Lib Dems lack concentrated support, so they only won 1.7% of seats in the Commons in 2019, for 11.5% of the votes. On average 336,038 votes were required to elect each Liberal Democrat MP. For the Green Party the position was even worse, as it only won one seat in 2019 for its 866,435 votes.

#### The SNP

Interestingly, the Scottish National Party (SNP) supports proportional representation despite its concentrated support in Scotland, meaning that it needed the fewest votes on average to elect an MP in 2019 (25,883). However, in the 2000s the SNP benefited from the proportional representation regional list aspect of the additional member system (AMS), before developing to dominate the FPTP aspect of AMS and UK general elections. The SNP's left-of-centre ideology also provides a motive for the party to support electoral reform, as FPTP makes it easier for the Conservatives to form a government in Westminster.

### Conclusion

Public attitudes to electoral reform appear to be changing. The 2022 British Social Attitudes survey found that 51% wanted PR versus 44% who preferred FPTP. This is the first time since the survey began in the 1980s that the majority of the British public has supported electoral reform. Debates over the impact of electoral reform on the UK's democracy will surely continue.

### RESOURCES

House of Commons Library: General Election 2019: results and analysis: [CBP-8749.pdf \(parliament.uk\)](#)  
Electoral Reform Society: 'The 2019 General Election: Voters Left Voiceless': <https://tinyurl.com/2b5x3hty>

### EXAM-STYLE QUESTIONS

- 1 Evaluate the view that the first-past-the-post electoral system provides effective party representation and voter choice. (30 marks, Edexcel-style)
- 2 'The first-past-the-post electoral system has a negative impact on the UK's politics and government.' Analyse and evaluate this statement. (25 marks, AQA-style)

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