



The Case for UK Electoral Reform

An Industry Forum discussion paper

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Forward

This is a summary of the findings of an Industry Forum research project as to whether proportional representation could be the solution to some of the urgent problems facing UK politics. The study methodology aims to identify fundamental issues and use well established facts from published material as a logical basis for actions. As such it does not represent the opinions of the Industry Forum or the authors. The study research was carried out by Leon Kashdan-Brown working with Rod Dowler.

The background to the research is that the UK has a numerically strong government with over 3 years of its term left, but it is haemorrhaging support. A multiparty system has now emerged, with an unprecedented five national parties with realistic hopes of gaining MPs and councillors, with more competitive parties within the nations of the UK and Your Party also gaining momentum. In 2029, the First Past the Post (FPTP) electoral system could again deliver a sweeping majority government from the support of a small proportion of the electorate, whilst most voters will have voted against the government. Such a result is likely to become the new normal under these new conditions, with election outcomes appearing increasingly arbitrary, and government struggling to maintain public approval in the face of being granted office from such little initial support. For these reasons, this research project examined the present case for UK proportional representation by answering five key questions:

- Is the UK's current FPTP system satisfactory?
- What are the causes of problems with UK FPTP and what are the possible ways to address these?
- What is a feasible way forward?
- What are the potential benefits and drawbacks?
- What are the best next steps to enable proportional representation?

We hope this paper will help stimulate discussion of this important topic.



Rod Dowler
Executive Chair
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Introduction

The Labour Party government is currently facing a distinctly new crisis: their support is dwindling to historic lows, as is that of their traditional opponents, the Conservative Party¹. Trust and approval ratings for these “establishment” parties and their leaders have plummeted, and people are looking to alternative parties for solutions to the long-standing issues the country faces. The polls show that the UK is now clearly a multiparty political system. Yet, even with votes spread thin between parties, Labour enjoyed a sizeable victory in the 2024 general election, winning 63% of the seats in the House of Commons, but with only 34% of the national vote². Projections at the time of writing show that a Reform government could see an equally generous win with even less of the vote share. Politics in the UK has become unpredictable and distant from democratic principles of fairness and representation.

The electoral system means that the public are forced into government by the “largest minority”³. However, this democratic crisis highlights an opportunity: to bring about a change with widespread support⁴, to restore the foundations of democracy in the UK, and to ensure that it is not lost against the will of the nation. Reforming the electoral system to one that incorporates principles of proportional representation has the potential to bring stability to UK politics whilst helping people to feel that their votes count and their voices are heard. Trust in politicians could be recovered and, importantly, it could be ensured that the country is not led by a government that the vast majority do not want.

The case for change is all the more important with the risk that populists could claim absolute power from little support, and enact policies that may irreversibly erode democratic institutions. It is particularly pressing when this could happen as soon as the next election. Politicians now need to ask themselves whether they are willing to risk losing democracy without the consent of the public.

The need for change

The rising multiparty system worsens disproportionate outcomes

The current First-Past-The-Post (FPTP) system used to elect MPs in the UK produces vastly disproportionate outcomes by design, where the share of the national vote that parties achieve can differ drastically from the amount of seats that they are allocated in parliament. This disproportionality increases as more parties reach higher levels of support, a change that has occurred in the UK recently, and is likely to continue.

The 2024 general election was the most disproportionate in history. Labour won 63% of the seats with 34% of the vote, the Conservatives won 19% of seats from 24% of the vote. The Liberal Democrats were the only major party with a similar share of seats and votes (11% and 12% respectively), whilst Reform UK and the Green Party between them only managed 9 seats (just 1.4%) from one fifth of the national vote. Under FPTP, a candidate only needs to secure the most votes (a plurality) in a constituency for them to win the seat, and with 650 of these mini-competitions, small parties that may win a notable amount of votes in many constituencies do not get the opportunity to win a plurality in more than a handful. Simultaneously, the largest parties (usually the largest two) will achieve a plurality in many constituencies, and hence win a large number of seats. However, it is not required that a candidate wins a majority of the vote in their constituency and they usually don't⁵. Such a system allows for a party to win a large majority of the seats even without winning the constituency competitions by a similar margin, giving them disproportionately more power than the public voted for. This is referred to as the "winner's bonus"⁶, and allows small changes in voting behaviour to cause big - and somewhat arbitrary - shifts in results. The system's bias against small parties with widely distributed support means that voters are often encouraged to vote tactically to keep out those that they oppose rather than use their vote to express their honest wishes. Nearly a third of voters in 2024 are believed to have voted tactically⁷. Any votes cast for candidates that don't win in their constituency do not have any influence over the national outcome of elections and are effectively wasted. In 2024, these wasted votes made up 73.7% of all votes cast⁸. FPTP therefore both distorts the preferences of the people and misrepresents their votes within election results.

Disproportionate results become more likely where there are many credible parties, that all enjoy a decent level of electoral support, as the gaps in support between parties become smaller, but the differences in their seat shares could remain the same. Projections at the end of 2025 from the Electoral Calculus suggest the next election could be as disproportionate or worse than the 2024 general election, putting Reform in power with a maximum estimate of 415 seats (and an expected 313) from just 29.1% of the vote⁹.

2024 saw the first British election in which four parties won at least 10% of the vote and five parties won more than 5%¹⁰. Since then, the polls depict consistently falling support for Labour and the Conservatives, with many of these supporters now intending to vote for parties such as the Liberal Democrats, Greens, and Reform¹¹. Many of these changes appear to be more short-term, with a poll finding that 87% of defectors from Labour to Reform say they are unlikely to consider voting for the party again. "Your Party" founded by

Zarah Sultana and Jeremy Corbyn is predicted to claim a further 3 percentage points (pp) from Labour as well as winning support from Green voters¹². Now, more than ever, there are more options on both the left and right of the political spectrum and weak political ties to the establishment parties.

There is support for constitutional reform and examples within and outside of the UK

Public support for electoral reform is now the highest recorded, at 60%¹³. This includes a majority of supporters from the Conservatives, Labour, Reform, the Liberal Democrats, and the Greens. Furthermore, the latter three have all previously committed support for electoral reform, in addition to Plaid Cymru and the Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP) who would likely fare worse under a more proportional system¹⁴. The rest of Western Europe and the majority of democracies around the world use electoral systems that incorporate proportional representation (PR)¹⁵ and Colomer¹⁶ has detected a global trend away from majoritarian electoral systems - like FPTP - towards PR or systems that incorporate elements of both. The UK itself has observed something of this trend as the national assemblies in Scotland and Wales were founded with mixed systems. Likewise, the National Assembly of Northern Ireland, as well as local elections in Scotland, employ the Single-Transferable-Vote (STV) system that is a form of PR¹⁷. 2026 will mark the first Senedd election that will use pure (list) PR to elect members¹⁸.

Populists pose a threat to democratic institutions, and a Reform win is likely in the UK.

Populists have come into power in several countries across the world in recent years, including in the US, Hungary, Greece, and Italy, among others. Populists in government have a record of eroding democratic checks and balances and a tendency towards authoritarian politics¹⁹. The US saw a decline in congressional willingness to check presidential abuses of power during Trump's first term²⁰ in office, during which he was impeached twice²¹ but acquitted by the Senate on both occasions. Trump used techniques to circumvent accountability to Congress whilst the judiciary failed to enforce strict limits on his executive authority. Questions have been raised over his appointments to the Supreme Court and their potential bias²². Meanwhile, Viktor Orbán in Hungary has overseen the censoring of the media, the gerrymandering of boundaries to gain an electoral advantage, and the appointment of biased judges to the judiciary²³. He is understood to have undermined accountability, the rule of law, and democratic representation in Hungary²⁴. The Tony Blair Institute for Change finds that populist governments are four times more likely to harm democratic institutions than non-populists, whilst over 50% of populist leaders amend or rewrite their country's constitution²⁵. Many populist parties and leaders, including Reform, support sweeping reforms with extensive and largely irreversible consequences. Commitments to scrap net zero goals, reduce or abolish subsidies and spending in the name of sustainability, reduce rights and protections for certain groups in society - namely immigrants and members of the LGBTQ+ community - and to stop diversity-based hiring,

are common themes in populist manifestos²⁶. Additionally, Trump's administration proves as an example that extreme protective fiscal policy can create instability both within a country and internationally²⁷.

Reform represent a legitimate platform of populism in the UK, which has recently increased rapidly in support. General election projections and bookmakers pit Reform as the favourites to win the next general election²⁸. All opinion polls since March 2025 have named Reform and Labour as the top two parties in the UK²⁹. The Electoral Calculus predicts that Reform will most likely win 313 seats in the next election from just 29.1% of the vote and puts their chance of being the largest party in parliament at 84%³⁰. Polls and predictions now cannot encompass political or party-based changes over the years leading up to the next election. They can be inaccurate based on the groups sampled, and people may vote differently when actually at the polling booth to how they respond in polls. However, polls should not be disregarded, especially when the outcome is consistent for a long period of time. Trust in Labour and the Conservatives has been seriously damaged in recent years, and Reform offers an alternative for disheartened voters³¹. Since the 1990s, governments have only rarely been able to increase their rating in the opinion polls towards the next election, with the only two instances being the Conservative governments of 2015-2017 and 2017-2019. These governments saw increases of 5 and 3 percentage points respectively. From one year in, they managed to increase their ratings by 9 and 4 points³². An average from the last ten UK opinion polls puts Reform 9.3 percentage points ahead of Labour, meaning that even the impressive effort from Theresa May's government in recovering support would not be enough to put them back on top.

The UK's democracy may be undermined without the consent of the public

Reform is likely to win the next election. Whilst their victory would be carried out by democratic means and they would be able to claim a larger mandate than any other party, they may only need to convince less than one third of the British public. This means that they could enact sweeping, irreversible changes - characteristic of populist parties - by enjoying a majority of parliamentary seats. According to democratic principles, this is not an issue if it is the will of the people, however by no legitimate means could this be the case if they won their majority on the back of such a small proportion of national support. It can be argued that it is democratic to revoke democracy where it is what the majority want. In the likely case that populists come to absolute power in the UK from a small minority of votes, it is not the case that they can claim any such a mandate, despite the fact that they would have the formal ability to erode democratic institutions. Allowing democracy to backslide may be bad, but it would be worse if the decision did not have the consent of a majority of the electorate

Conclusions

A true democracy is one that correctly identifies the wishes of the majority of people, and seeks to enact it. The British system allows for leaders to come to power when large majorities do not support them; an issue that has proven difficult for the current Labour government. Good democracy requires good democratic institutions, and in the case of the UK, a good electoral system. This should be reliable and popular, but equally uphold the principle of fairness. Elections are the foundations of democracy. Therefore, electoral systems must form a parliament and government that represents the diverse views of the public. FPTP in the UK is juxtaposed to the multiparty system that is now in full effect. It will create unstable election results where a large bonus could be handed to the winning party with minimal support, or even when they have lost support. This runs the risk of enabling a populist majority government from a small minority of votes, which could threaten democratic institutions, the economy, the environment, and individual liberties.

Causes of the problems

Why has the political landscape changed?

Labour and the Conservatives have been haemorrhaging support since before the last election. Most recent polls suggest that their combined support only consists of between 33-35% of voters³³ and the 2024 general election saw them achieve their lowest combined vote share (57.4%) since 1910 (53%), before Labour had yet to become the official opposition. People are shifting their support towards Reform, the Greens, the Liberal Democrats, and (in Wales) Plaid Cymru. Reform claimed an estimated 25% of previously-Conservative voters in 2024³⁴. Labour has lost 12 percentage points in the polls since they won the election. A number of factors are driving these shifts with common feelings across the political spectrum being that the government has broken their promises and not done enough to reduce the cost of living³⁵. Defectors from the establishment parties are split on what other issues are driving their shifting support, influencing where they are moving to: new Green voters cite the government's stance on Gaza, transgender policy, and changes to disability benefits; they also agree with new Liberal Democrat voters that the government is too right-wing, and these smaller parties better align with their values. Those defecting to Reform tend to prioritise concerns over high immigration as reasons for their shifting support. Independent of party-specific concerns, movements away from the establishment parties can be broadly explained through four key areas:

1. Falling trust in Labour and the Conservatives.

Trust in the two main parties has plummeted to a 50-year low. Roughly 48% of the public “almost never” trust the government to place the needs of the nation above those of their party, whilst less than 15% say that they do most of the time³⁶. These figures are the inverse of what they were in the late 20th century and have become especially worse since 2020. The process and consequences of Brexit have disappointed leave and remain voters alike. Many leave voters now would rather the UK had stayed part of the EU, and some feel betrayed or lied to by those that led the campaign³⁷. Partygate: the office parties held by government officials and politicians during the pandemic, also worked to destroy voter trust in the government, with the disastrous mini-budget of Liz Truss and frequent changing hands of the office of Prime Minister not helping to ease the blow. This waning trust appears to have had a knock-on effect for the current Labour government as they have failed to recover levels of trust since coming into office.

2. Establishment party politicians are seen as disconnected from the priorities of the public.

Polls have found that, on average, the public prioritise health, the economy, and immigration and asylum. These are three areas that the government - Conservative or Labour - has struggled to influence effectively in recent decades³⁸. Despite constant discourse about improving the NHS, little positive change has been seen in waiting lists for treatment, which now sit at around 7.5 million people³⁹. The economy has remained unstimulated, and people

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cannot see policies that directly target reducing the cost of living. Meanwhile, despite aggressive rhetoric against immigration from each successive prime minister, net immigration figures have reached all time highs⁴⁰, encouraging supporters of hostile immigration policy towards more extreme political platforms.

3. The economy has stagnated and there is a cost-of-living crisis.

The economy is still managed on the “consensus” principles left behind by Thatcher and Blair. This is leading to years of low economic growth and periods of historically high inflation. Additionally, housing prices have been rising far more quickly than wages, making the real estate market inaccessible to young people - to an extent, regardless of income. Not enough difference is seen between Labour and the Conservatives parties in terms of their approach to the economy and they are held jointly accountable for its stagnation⁴¹.

4. The country is becoming more polarised.

Brexit has led to the UK becoming more polarised by their vote in the 2016 EU referendum. “Leave” and “Remain” voters are much more likely to dislike and distrust each other⁴², causing social segregation. Whilst the smaller parties have attached themselves more firmly to these identities, the establishment parties do not mobilise them as successfully anymore. Additionally, globalisation in recent decades has brought with it a liberalisation of views in the West, as well as rising movements of ecology, feminism, and anti-racism. This cultural shift can also be seen to have a backlash within groups holding more traditional values to heart, causing divides over social issues. Establishment parties are forced into taking a moderate stance on these topics as they try to capture wide support bases, but if the middle-ground is becoming obsolete, this two-party politics approach will lose voters⁴¹.

Why is Reform UK likely to win the next election?

Reform have been given an 84% chance of winning the next election according to the last Electoral Calculus national seat projection in 2025. A large variety of factors have led to the increase in support for the populist right in the UK and there is no one reason for their recent surge. Whilst they have achieved great gains in electoral support and potential votes, they are still polling with one third of the vote at best. They are likely to win the next election in part due to increased support for their party as well as decreased support for Labour and the Conservatives, but more importantly, because the flawed electoral system under which they compete does not require that they reach anywhere close to a majority of public support to claim absolute authority over the country.

Populism offers a platform for authoritarian and socially conservative values, as well as radical approaches to curb immigration. Events in the UK’s political history, such as Brexit and the Syrian Refugee Crisis starting in 2011, created tensions that ultimately led to the increased normalisation of anti-immigration politics and Reform has emerged as a credible party that represents these views⁴³. As previously mentioned, many voters are also disheartened by inaction from the establishment parties on issues perceived as important

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by the public, whilst they have also lost trust of party personnel. The post-industrial period in the UK has also created a level of social isolation in various regions that can drive support for populist anti-establishment sentiment⁴⁴. Additionally, the media - both press and social media - tends to favour sensationalism and radical or extreme political moments. When populists focus on oppositional rhetoric, be it against liberal values, immigrants, or the establishment, the media tends to disproportionately give them a platform. The BBC's coverage of Reform has been brought into question by the Liberal Democrats, who have written to Ofcom in order to "Balance the BBC"⁴⁵.

Whilst Reform may appeal to a broader base than any other single party and can make a rightful appeal to hold the largest stake in parliament, FPTP threatens to turn this minor preference into a substantial outright victory. Using FPTP, if there are 5 candidates running in a constituency, a candidate could win with as little as (one more vote than) 20%. With there now being 5 national parties (omitting Northern Ireland) that are electorally viable, as well as those in Scotland and Wales, it is almost certain that every constituency will have at least 5 candidates running. If this were to happen in every constituency, a party could win every single seat in the country with just over 20% of the vote. The runners up could have only a few thousand votes less but be excluded entirely from parliament. Although this is an odd and extremely unlikely theoretical scenario, it highlights the absurdity and unfairness that is permitted by the UK's current electoral system. This scenario shows that an outright Reform win could happen fairly easily, but also points to exactly why this would be an issue. Democracy implies that the will of the electorate will be upheld, but one fifth of the electorate putting a government into power can hardly be described as such. Beyond the obscure outcomes that FPTP can produce, the incentives for tactical voting also make a Reform win more likely. With the Conservatives losing support and electoral potential, Reform will become the most realistic option for voters on the right of the political spectrum in many constituencies. This can be expected in many rural areas that were Conservative seats before 2024.

What fuels the support for electoral reform?

Over 40% of the electorate voted for parties other than Labour and the Conservatives in the 2024 general election. Since then, polls suggest their combined support has risen to as high as 66%⁴⁶. Parties other than Labour and the Conservatives have been consistently underrepresented since the early 20th century when Labour took up the place of the Liberals in the UK's two-party system. The joint electoral support for the two main parties has only rarely dropped below 70% in this time period, with most such cases being since the year 2000⁴⁷. Increasing support for smaller parties will inevitably lead to a much stronger demand that they be fairly represented in parliament.

Electoral reform has also had a longstanding support from figures across political parties⁴⁸ and academia as well as interest groups such as Make Votes Matter⁴⁹ and the Electoral Reform Society⁵⁰. Fairness, representation, and accountability have long been cited as advantages of a more proportional electoral system in the name of improving the UK's democracy.

The parties on the left of the UK's politics tend to share similarities in policy and approach and many of their supporters have a positive opinion of a left-wing coalition⁵¹. Polling from May 2025 shows that most supporters of the Liberal Democrats, Greens, and Labour, would support a coalition of any combination of the three. Additionally, these coalitions all poll higher than the Labour does alone. Similarly, with two strong parties now on the right, most Conservative and Reform supporters would back a coalition of the two. It is also worth noting that most Conservative voters would support a Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition too. A proportional voting system would reduce the chance of majority governments and encourage coalition politics, which the people of Britain appear to support more than they do not.

Survey data from the BSA has shown that the British public feel the system of governance should be improved, with 79% agreeing that it could be improved by "a lot" or "quite a bit"⁵². This appears to have connections with respondents' trust in politicians, with those who rarely trust politicians being much more likely to want to change the system of governance. Falling trust is connected to demand for institutional change and could therefore be driving rising levels of support for electoral reform.

Prominent figures in the mainstream parties are starting to talk about electoral reform as a possibility now that FPTP has lost many of its benefits for them. Andy Burnham gave a well-received speech⁵³ in the 2025 Labour conference on delivering PR, whilst former Tory MP Nigel Evans has called for a review of the electoral system⁵⁴.

Why has the system not changed yet?

Electoral systems tend to change only when it is advantageous for the party in charge to adopt the system⁵⁵. This is generally the case when:

1. a party that is normally disadvantaged by the system comes to power.

Or

2. when a change in the political landscape causes a new political force to rapidly grow that threatens to push mainstream parties out of the mix.

The second situation arguably resembles the current state of the UK, whilst the first reflects the last time that electoral reform would have appealed to the party in power. In the 1906 election the Liberal party won a landslide. Having previously supported PR as prior elections tended to disadvantage them, the party became split after one outstandingly positive result. They did not change the system when in office and the party proceeded to disappear almost entirely from the political mainstream⁵⁵. Since the vote on the left has generally been split since the mid-1900s, Labour has been at a disadvantage compared to the Conservatives and, although they have sometimes won large majorities, a failure to reform the system has kept them out of power for most of the last 60 years. In order for change to come about, those in office will need to accept the benefit of a greater chance of obtaining partial power,

over a low chance of complete power. They will need to accept this in the interests of the public, and place the value of democracy and fair representation over party and personal interests.

A feasible course of action

The government of today faces an unprecedented case for electoral reform, where the party system now urgently demands institutional change to avoid continued and worsening misrepresentation of the will of the public. They must now make a choice between their potential courses of action:

1. No institutional change, or
2. A change to a fairer proportional system, either
 - a) During this parliament, or
 - b) Committed to for the next parliament.

With the new multiparty equilibrium that has emerged, it appears likely that support will be spread thinly across over 5 parties come the next election. Refusing to change the system before the next election, if no party reaches a strong level of public support, would guarantee an outcome far from representative of how votes were cast. Additionally, with tactical voting and abstentions, the outcome of the election will be very hard to predict as numerous people may vote for those whom they would not express support for in polls. This makes campaigning harder for parties, creates a level of political instability, and distorts the wishes of the public.

A change to a more proportional system would entail either a commitment to change in this parliament or in the next. The system proposed could be one of a number of different forms of proportional representation. Already employed in the UK are two systems of proportional representation that resemble those used in various other countries across Europe and the wider world. The Scottish and Welsh National Assemblies employ the Additional Members System (AMS), whilst Northern Ireland uses the Single-Transferable-Vote (STV). The Welsh assembly is set to change to a closed list PR system in 2026⁵⁶. Each of these systems has its own advantages and it is imperative that the UK enacts the most fitting electoral system. The referendum in 2011 saw the public reject the AV system. This should not be seen as a rejection of any form of PR as AV is a preferential (and arguably a fairer) system, but does not employ any form of proportional representation within its electoral rules⁵⁷.

List PR is the simplest and purest form of proportional representation⁵⁸, in which parties submit an ordered list of candidates and voters cast their votes for a party. The proportion of votes a party receives is then the proportion of seats they are allocated (sometimes with slightly more complicated formulae). This can either be done through one large national election, or within regions, where each region has a list. Although this is the fairest and most proportional method of election, it gives parties complete control over the officials elected to parliament and disposes of constituency representatives. This reduces the accountability of political figures to the public and would therefore do little to help restore trust in politicians. It also risks damaging representation within regions that differ largely in demographics and

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culture, which is a feature necessary in UK politics with variations between region and the separate nations of the country.

AMS uses a combination of constituency elections and a supplementary PR vote for regions, which allows for enhanced fairness in the national result. This system has been successful in Scotland and Wales as well as being the longstanding system employed by countries such as Germany and Italy. However, there are many concerns over the retention of safe seats and tactical voting incentives as there is still a constituency part to the vote, as well as the creation of two tiers of MP, making unclear the jurisdiction of regionally appointed MPs and constituency representatives. Ultimately this creates a disparity in workload and power held by individuals in parliament that would not suit parties with factions and would harm accountability. Therefore, whilst it is much better suited than FPTP, it would not be appropriate in the national UK case where factions run deep within the main parties and the potential wasted votes in safe seats disenfranchise voters.

STV employs a preferential voting system in which voters rank their candidates, with multiple representatives elected for each constituency. Where first preference votes are cast for losing candidates, voters' second and third (and beyond) preferences are taken into account. This favours politicians and parties with broad support even if they are not the favourite candidates of some voters. Using this preferential system, candidates are more likely to be selected on the basis that most people would prefer them, or at least not mind them, in office. This encourages candidates, who are the favourite of some but adamantly disliked by others, to broaden their support and appeal to more constituents. Additionally, tactical voting incentives are minimised and the election of multiple representatives allows constituents to appeal to an MP of their choosing with any concerns, boosting representation of people's voices. Ultimately, STV has the most features for improving trust and accountability, reducing polarising and oppositional political tactics, and producing proportionate outcomes. This would be the best suited system for the UK to adopt nationally. Preferences are not only fairly represented in this system but are considered in much greater detail, fostering a healthy democracy.

PR systems also encourage politics of cooperation over division as parties often need to find suitable coalition candidates and focus on their common ground, pushing them in the direction of the most publicly-backed policies. Coalitions also allow for smoother transitions between governments as one or more partner parties may have the opportunity to stay on until the next term, allowing for more long-term initiatives that are necessary to counter the crises of today. Reducing the incentives for tactical voting and specific constituency targeting can help to make people feel heard through their vote.

Another election under the current circumstances risks producing a highly disproportionate outcome, putting another government in office with very little public support. Waiting to enact change could stop the possibility of it occurring altogether, particularly if a government inclined to erode checks and balances, that benefits from the flaws of FPTP, takes office at the next election. The current government should therefore seek to enact change within this parliament as opposed to committing to future change.

Potential benefits and drawbacks

Changing the UK's electoral system is advantageous on a number of fronts. Already, this study has identified how FPTP misrepresents individual preferences and the overall will of the public, whilst promoting polarising and divisive politics between parties that are losing the nation's trust. Electoral reform can directly benefit voters, politicians, parties, the government, the civil service, business, the environment, and vulnerable or marginalised citizens. It is an initiative that can help ease some of the problems faced by the UK today, and build better foundations to promote and protect positive change.

Benefits

Stronger democracy

The most obvious benefit of electoral reform to a PR system is the intrinsic value gained through using a fair, reliable, and popular system that can bring integrity to democratic institutions in the UK. From a theoretical perspective, democracy must be government for and by the people. This would require that elections ensure people can:

- Accurately convey their preferences.
- Have these views aggregated in a representative way.
- Hold individual candidates to account for their actions in office.
- Be protected against majorities won from very little support.

PR systems, especially STV, use rules that promote all of these basic values more fully than FPTP. STV would allow people to vote for the candidates they actually want, whilst also making use of more nuanced information through additional preferences. All votes will count in some way towards the national result, with a high level of proportionality ensured⁵⁹. Therefore, views will be aggregated accurately. Voters can choose between candidates from the same party, reducing the hold of safe seats and improving accountability. Finally, parties that do not win close to or above half of the national vote, will almost certainly not be given absolute control of the country through a parliamentary majority.

The multiparty system that now exists will be more fairly reflected in parliament and the government will most likely be led by coalitions of parties that have, between them, actually earned the support of a majority of voters. Accountability is further increased as a result, with partner parties able to provide checks and balances for each other, with incentives for ensuring other governing parties are not corrupt or placing personal interests over public interests.

Improved trust and approval

When views and votes of the public are represented fairly, it gives them a more effective political voice. There is an opportunity here to help repair the public's trust in politics. 68% of those that do not trust the government support institutional reforms⁶⁰, simply enacting such a change could please some of this group and give them greater faith in future governments. Considering that many of those that distrust politicians cite that they do not believe politicians

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would prioritise the country over their party or personal interests, the act of adopting a system of PR (a decision that directly puts people in greater control of politics) could address this misconception. The establishment parties have been against electoral reform whilst FPTP has allowed them the opportunity to “win big”, but if they were to set aside this opportunity and accept the need for governments with a real majority backing, they would be putting the country’s needs first. The fact that governments will need to find support in a majority of voters also suggests that they could have much more widespread approval from the public.

Countries that use PR tend to have far greater public trust in their political institutions⁶¹. Whilst the UK and US stand at around 30% public trust in the government, most of the rest of Western Europe, as well as Scandinavia and Oceania all have at least 40%. Some of these countries even manage to reach as much as over 60% public trust. Malta and Ireland both hold elections using an STV system and have 47% and 62% trust levels respectively.

Since the year 1900, only four governments have obtained the majority of the vote (1900, 1931, 1935, 2010), and all of them were coalitions between two or more parties. Even with a firm two-party system for much of the 20th and 21st centuries, no single party has achieved over 50% of support from the public. Approval is generally lower in the UK than in PR-using European countries on a number of metrics⁶². They are believed by the public to be more likely to ignore rules and procedures, act unfairly, and less likely to be well respected, honest, or truthful. Surveys in New Zealand, after they changed their electoral system to a mixed-PR one, shows that voters began to feel that politicians were driven less by self-interest and that they cared more about what the public thought of them⁶³.

Reduced polarisation

FPTP encourages a system in which two main parties oppose each other in parliament, and one will get to lead the country. This creates a political landscape in which the policies of the largest parties will be informed by opposing the other. Although this is not the case for all spheres of policy, it is encouraged if one wants to attract voters retracting their support for the other based on policy preferences. With polarisation on the rise in the UK as it is elsewhere⁶⁴, the main parties risk being pushed further apart on the political spectrum, worsening polarisation further. Parties try to distinguish themselves firmly from others, and to undermine their decisions where possible. Under PR, the party system does not expand the effects of polarisation and functioning multiparty systems can be seen to reduce polarising effects. PR encourages coalitions between parties, which requires finding common ground and making compromises, instead of hardline or extremist politics. Extreme parties will need to moderate some of their stances in order to make themselves attractive coalition partners, and this in turn reduces influences of extremism on people’s views. Under STV, this moderation is further encouraged as extremists will need to appeal to a broader voting base in order to obtain important 2nd, 3rd, 4th, or 5th preference votes. The EU political barometer shows STV-elected Ireland and Malta as having among the lowest rates of polarisation in Europe⁶⁵.

Protected rights and representation for marginalised groups

Given the moderating effect of coalition politics and preferential voting, sweeping or extreme changes to the political status quo are made much harder, and require a high level of (indirect) support from the majority of voters. Were a party to threaten the security or rights of members of the LGBTQ+ community, women, minority ethnic groups, or migrants, they would be met with democratic barriers and other parties would have the opportunity to put a stop to damaging policies. The same can be said for environmental and international policy too. Additionally, it has been found that systems such as AMS or STV can result in better political representation for women and minorities, granted that parties pursue this internally⁶⁶.

Better constituent representation

Whilst some arguments against PR are based on the fact that single representatives no longer represent single constituencies and thus a perceived constituent-MP link would be lost, the inverse of this may be more accurate. Currently, many people are represented in parliament by an MP that they did not personally elect: one that may not have even been their second or third choice. STV would ensure that the vast majority of people have at least one MP representing them that was one of their top three choices, or belongs to a party that was. This provides constituents with MPs closer to their own views, and a slate of representatives to choose from when contacting an MP with a concern. MPs of a certain conviction are unlikely to represent well political concerns from constituents that hold opposing views to them. Meanwhile MPs who are ministers can do very little for anyone concerned with the government's actions since they are sworn to ministerial responsibility. STV would allow for more effective and representative casework from MPs as well as a better sense of representation for constituents.

Political stability

Political instability is a concern for critics of PR. Some believe that catalysing a multiparty system can lead to sweeping coalitions of many parties, reducing the effectiveness of government, particularly their ability to be fast and decisive. Critics may also contest that coalitions may fall apart or reach political deadlock over certain issues. Additionally, larger parties will need to assess their smaller counterparts as potential coalition partners to make up a parliamentary majority. This can, in some cases, grant more authority in negotiations to smaller parties who can hold the "balance of power". However, the evidence overwhelmingly points to the contrary. Countries that employ some form of PR fare better on almost every metric of political stability⁶⁷: parliament is more likely to finish their term, there is less volatility in seat change, prime ministers, ministers, and the cabinet last longer in office, and parties last longer in government. The average party duration in government in PR-using countries is 11.37 years, whilst it is just 7.46 years in non-PR countries. Political stability has its own additional advantages and can be linked to improved economic growth and lower inflation. Small parties holding the balance of power is particularly likely where there are only three competitive parties, with the party that is centrally-placed on the political spectrum made the only likely candidate for coalitions with either of the other parties, giving

them disproportionate influence over coalition-Formation. However, when there are more effective parties, there are more potential coalition partners to choose from and those placed “centrally” will need to make themselves more attractive coalition partners compared to others in the party system.

Drawbacks

As with any change, there are risks to electoral reform as well as risks to employing the specific system of STV. Costs, uptake, logistics, outcomes, and a different national political structure could all cause complications in the process of renewing democratic institutions. However, the benefits of proportional representation far outweigh these risks. Now that the UK has a multiparty system, the risks for maintaining FPTP dwarf those of changing to a system of PR.

As the multiparty system will be effectively represented and smaller parties' shares of the vote will translate directly into seats, the political landscape, party strategy, and inter-party negotiation will all change and there could be a risk that politicians and parties are not yet equipped for such changes. The current parties (and emerging new ones) will need to make campaigning less targeted, be more open to electoral pacts and post-election coalitions, and seek to find common ground with adjacent parties. Although this change incurs a risk, each of these adjustments to the functions of politics creates more beneficial outcomes. Less targeted campaigns lead to better representation for more people because parties will increase campaigning in previously safe seats and supporters of currently unlikely winners will not be abandoned.

Changing the system will require logistical and economic costs. A system of STV would involve either a greater number of volunteers for vote counting in elections, or a high-quality and reliable digital counting system. Volunteers would need better training as vote-counting is more complicated under STV, and the count could take longer than for FPTP. There need not be any change to the national polling station setup. Costs arise both from the transition and additional operational costs per election. Upfront costs can be quite high, including voter education, equipment upgrades, consultancy support, and temporary staff. There may also be additional printing costs and costs for training staff at each election. A study of states in the USA adopting ranked voting systems (similar but not identical to STV) shows that average one-off implementation cost (with outliers removed) is roughly \$40,000 for a state. Considered in terms of cost per person⁶⁸, converted to GBP, and extrapolated to the UK population, this gives an estimated cost of just under £300,000. Whilst this figure is not a perfect estimate, it suggests that the costs involved are acceptable within this parliament.

The actual formulation of a new electoral system should require a special procedure in parliament to include the input of all prominent parties so as to make it a parliamentary project. A qualified majority of 70% or higher would be advisable for such a large constitutional change and therefore parties other than the government will need to feel that the system does not unfairly disadvantage them. As such, it may take a great deal of time and negotiation to reach a system that is widely supported. Ultimately, this requires that the

electoral system is designed for the benefit of all, built on principles of fairness and democracy rather than strategic advantage for any one party.

Voting under STV (or AMS) becomes more complicated for the voter. By ranking candidates instead of just checking one box, voters will have to think in a different way about the process and detach from habit. Spoilt ballots as a result of incorrect responses can therefore be more common. In Northern Ireland, the proportion of ballots spoilt is generally just above 1%, whilst in the 2017 Scottish local elections (using STV) it reached a high of 1.95%⁶⁹. However, this is not much worse than the current level of spoilt ballots that is at just below 1% in UK general elections⁷⁰. The increased perceived importance of national elections may well help avoid results like Scotland's. The government will need to oversee a large national campaign that makes voters aware of the changes, their justifications, and different ways of approaching voting under this system. Increasing the presence of educational material might also help boost turnout.

The net benefit

As with any institutional reform, there are risks to changing the structures that underpin democracy. However, the costs are few and the risks can be mitigated. Monetary costs should be small, whilst the adaptations that parties will need to make may ultimately be beneficial to the public. Spoilt ballots aren't expected to reach a significant level, and with strong educational campaigns led by the government and parties, these could be minimised. The benefits of change are specifically directed at the emerging issues in the UK. PR should promote public trust and approval for governments, make voters feel heard through better representation and the abolition of wasted votes, improve political stability, and protect marginalised groups. This would strengthen democracy in the UK, and could build the foundations needed to protect it from those who would erode checks and balances.

Next steps

The next steps are clear: changing the electoral system to STV and implementing change done in this parliament. A five-point plan would achieve these goals:

1. Electoral reform must be made a parliamentary project. A cross-party working group should be established to decide on the specific electoral rules such as the formula, district magnitudes, and any formal thresholds. This should include MPs from at least the six biggest parties in parliament (perhaps by vote share rather than seats), and all nations of the UK. They should seek to implement a Single Transferable Vote system with the aims of maximising fairness as well as the effective representation of voters and the nations.
2. A vote within this parliament should be required to approve the new system rather than a national referendum. The government may wish to seek a qualifying majority of perhaps 65-70% to capture cross-party and widespread support for electoral reform, making the change a decisive one. Correspondingly, a qualified majority of the same amount should be required to overturn the law so that the electoral system cannot be changed by future governments for strategic purposes.
3. Educational material should be distributed through government media outlets, including videos and step-by-step guides on how to vote and how votes are counted. Educational material should also be present in polling stations at the first national elections under the new system.
4. Parties should have at least 6 months before the next election in order to adapt their campaigns and party structures for the new system.
5. All of these steps should be done within the current parliament based on the democratic principle of fairness and the anti-democratic threat of populism. If the system is not changed within this time then at least step 1 and 2 should be completed so that a comprehensive bill can be formed, with a binding decision (step 2) going into the next parliament, even if it does not come into effect for the next election. The main delay expected with this change is that of negotiation within the working group and voting process in parliament. However, the actual structural changes and costs are few and therefore, once the bill is passed, it should take little time to prepare for a change of system at the next election.

Overall conclusions

The UK's political system is becoming undemocratic in the current multi-party electoral climate. Results are becoming increasingly disproportionate, and sweeping changes could be made to the country from a barely legitimate mandate. It is necessary that the public consent to their government, and it is necessary that they have a real political voice, if not just for a stronger democracy, then to also regain the public's trust in - and approval of - British political institutions.

A change to a system involving PR, especially the STV system, could restore a positive public perception of politics, whilst fostering an environment of cooperation in place of polarisation, and would arguably raise the standards of political stability in the nation. Whilst there will be monetary and administrative costs, as well as necessary changes in party structures and strategy, the benefits that are to be expected far outweigh these costs. Change is recommended in this term of parliament, involving all prominent parties wherever it is possible, whilst comprehensive educational material should be distributed the public and parties to help them adapt to the change.

About this study

The project

This is a summary of the findings of an Industry Forum 2025 research project, investigating the implications of the rapidly changing UK electoral landscape, and whether democracy might best be served by the adoption of a voting system based on proportional representation. The study was carried out by Oxford University undergraduate, Leon Kashdan-Brown, working under the direction of Rod Dowler, Executive Chair of the Industry Forum. It is intended as a framework for discussion, and does not represent the opinions of the Industry Forum, or the author.

The Industry Forum

The Industry Forum was established in 1993, primarily to help businesses talk directly to political policy-makers about key business and economic issues, and discuss practical solutions. It now exists as a well-networked, bipartisan, not-for-profit think tank. Industry Forum members include leading international and FTSE 100 companies, as well as smaller companies, and trade associations. They include many sectors and interests. We work with some of the major embassies, and also invite the participation of a wide range of companies, think tanks and academics.

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He is a board member of AgeneBio a US life sciences, spin-out from Johns Hopkins, which is developing therapeutics to preserve and restore brain function for patients at risk from neurological and psychiatric diseases; the lead, late-stage clinical programme is focussed on Alzheimer's Disease.

After graduation in Physics from Oxford, Rod worked as a software engineer and then in management consultancy. As a consultant, he worked extensively in the financial and technology sectors, and on a range of engagements for the European Commission. He was a partner in KPMG for 15 years, during which he led the rapid expansion of the KPMG European High Technology Practice. At KPMG, he worked with legendary high-tech marketer, Regis McKenna, guru to Steve Jobs at Apple, and Rod managed Regis McKenna Europe for several years. Rod has provided advice and arbitration on a number of large outsourcing deals. He has founded and led start-up technology companies and raised the necessary finance.

He was CEO/Founder of zoomf.com a property search engine which was sold to a media group in 2008. He was an expert witness in a high-profile software patent dispute. Rod works with a number of universities on subjects including corporate governance, the impact of new technologies and financial policy. In the past five years he has worked on public policy projects including the Kerslake Review of the Treasury, and some research work looking at the decline of public trust in politics and business, and strategies to reduce global emissions of greenhouse gases.

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