

## What is the fairest system of voting that could be applied to the UK?

### Introduction:

The debate about voting systems in Britain has been one that has been raging throughout the post-war period. Indeed, Pippa Norris (1995) has written that “the debate about electoral reform in Britain has experienced successive waves” which has been “re-energised... with all opposition parties moving towards reform” in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In recent years, it has been argued that First Past the Post, the current voting system for Parliamentary elections in Britain and local elections within England, has become more disproportionate than ever. Patrick Dunleavy and Chris Gilson’s (2010) ‘Deviation from Proportionality index’ certainly suggests this to be the case, as from 1992 to 2005 the disproportionality increased under First Past the Post. They are not alone in this judgement, as several others have also suggested that First Past the Post is no longer a fit system for use in the United Kingdom, such as Jack Blumenau, Simon Hix, and their co-authors (2015) and Andrew Rawnsley (2015).

Some action by major political parties has taken place, such as the Labour Party’s Plant Commission, which “voted by 10 to 6 against keeping the present scheme for electing MPs” in 1993 (Wynn-Davis, 1993), the Jenkins Commission in 1997 and the Alternative Vote Referendum in 2011. However, the voting system is still First Past the Post, which has resulted in a new state of ambivalence for general elections in Britain, as voter turnout has gone from regularly breaching 70% throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century to failing to do this once during the 21<sup>st</sup> (Uberoi, 2023). Consequently, the debate about reforming the electoral system is still ongoing, with the Labour Party’s National Policy Forum pointing out the flaws of First Past the Post, but the Party has avoided committing itself to any specific alternatives. (New Statesman, 2024).

Firstly, to define the terms of the question, voting systems refer to the method by which we elect our representatives, whether that to be Parliament or in local elections. Having to define the word “fair” is slightly more complicated, though I will be using the following main criteria to assess this with regards to voting systems:

1. The proportionality of seats gained in Parliament when compared to the votes received by a party nationally.
2. Balanced or equal representation between small and major parties

A system’s ability to form stable and majority governments will also be taken into account for my final decision, as the political instability caused by a coalition or minority government is certainly something that is not ideal.

To give focus to this report, I will be considering the benefits and caveats of four main voting systems proposed for use in the United Kingdom:

- First Past the Post (FPTP)
- The Alternative Vote (AV)
- The Single Transferable Vote (STV)
- Proportional Representation (PR)

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I will be using a variety of resources, such as voting statistics, academic papers and newspaper articles, as well as practical examples where possible, in order to judge these systems in terms of their proportionality and to ultimately decide which one I believe to be the fairest. Though I will be using objective data, it is important to note that it is my subjective interpretation of this data which will be forming my judgement throughout this report.

### **First Past the Post:**

First Past the Post (FPTP) is the current voting system used in Britain. The system involves 650 Parliamentary constituencies (areas) across the country, with each one of these constituencies electing the candidate with the most votes. Overall, the party who is elected to government, is the party who has won the most constituency seats.

This system is disproportional. As Dunleavy and Gilson (2010) note, FPTP drives people away from voting for smaller parties in general elections as they “they know that doing so risks ‘wasting’ their vote”. This inherently makes general elections unfair, as this system effectively punishes smaller parties such as the Green Party, who won 0.2% of the seats within Parliament in 2015 despite winning 3.8% of the national vote (Electoral Reform Society, 2015). Smaller parties are hence extremely under-represented within Parliament and therefore fail to have any practical influence on major political events within the United Kingdom.

Another one of the main downsides of FPTP is that it allows parties to form governments with less than half the popular vote. Rawnsley (2015) notes this when discussing the 2015 general election writing: “By no normal definition of the word popular were the Conservatives popular at the election. They received 36.9% of the vote... Nearly two-thirds of voters did not put their cross in the Tory box”. Despite winning such a low share of the vote, the Conservatives still won 331 seats out of a possible 650, gaining a Parliamentary majority (BBC, 2015), meaning that they were hence able to pass legislation that less than 40% of the electorate found appealing. Rawnsley (2015) labels this “the most disproportionate result in British election history”, though this suggests that such disproportionality is uncommon under First Past the Post.

This is not the case for this system, rather it is the norm, something that many have noted, such as Stuart Wilks-Heeg and Stephen Crone (2011), who write that First Past the Post has “a tendency... to greatly exaggerate the winner’s bonus”, which can be seen in the results of the 1997 general election, as The Labour Party were able to win 63.4% of the seats in Parliament on only 43.2% of the popular vote (Morgan, 1998). This is an extortionately large number of seats considering that once again, less than half of those who voted, wanted to see the Labour Party take office. The disproportionality of this system is also on display in the results of the 2005 general election, as the Labour Party were again able to take office on only 35.2% of the popular vote, giving them 355 seats in Parliament or 54.95% of the 646 seats available (Mellows-Facer, 2006). This in itself is a vast exaggeration of the result, though it is made even worse by the fact that the Conservatives won 32.4% of the vote and won only 198 seats in the House of Commons or 30.65% of the 646 seats available (Mellows-Facer, 2006). Despite winning less than 3% fewer votes, the Conservatives gained 157 less seats than the Labour Party. This shows that exaggerated majorities and results are unfortunately commonplace for FPTP, meaning that it is not a fair or proportional system, as it does not reflect what voters want. Indeed, the Liberal Democrats won only 62 seats or 9.59% seats available, despite gaining 22% of the popular vote, meaning that the vast majority of those that voted for them were ignored (Mellows-Facer, 2006).

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There are, however, some relatively convincing arguments in favour of retaining First Past the Post. As mentioned in the Institute for Government's paper on electoral reform (Sargeant et al., 2023) First Past the Post produces "clear election outcomes and stable majority governments", rather than weak coalitions or hung Parliaments. In Britain, it has also created a system of three main political parties, which allows there to be a degree of stability within politics. Though, as this same paper notes, "Since 2010, the UK has spent more time under coalition or minority government (7 years and 6 months) than single party majority government (5 years and 7 months)" (Sargeant et al., 2023). This is in reference to the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition of 2010-15 and the minority Conservative government that was formed in 2017, with the Democratic Unionist Party's support keeping them in power in a confidence and supply agreement. Thus, the delivery of stable, majority governments can no longer be regarded as a benefit of First Past the Post and this argument is no longer convincing, as FPTP has delivered minority governments or hung Parliaments in 3 out of the 4 most recent general elections.

The main benefit of First Past the Post is that it allows for the maintenance of the constituency link. As the Institute for Government's paper on electoral reform notes, "The number of constituencies mean that MPs in the UK have a close connection with constituents and are able to hold a 'surgery' in their constituencies to allow those they represent to come to them with their issues in person" (Sargeant et al., 2023). This is certainly a positive regarding this system, as it allows constituents to hold their representatives in Parliament to account. Despite this, however, I am ultimately judging these voting systems in terms of fairness, or proportionality, and though this is a benefit of the system, FPTP is far too disproportional for it to be retained in the UK.

Therefore, it is clear that First Past the Post is not, in any sense, a fair voting system in the UK, as it effectively punishes smaller parties and vastly exaggerates majorities within Parliament. This system should certainly be replaced by one that is far more proportional.

### **The Alternative Vote:**

The Alternative Vote (AV) is a voting system that uses preferential ranking in order to decide who gains a seat or wins an election. Voters rank a list of candidates in order of preference, and if a candidate receives over 50% of first preference votes, they are elected. If none of the candidates achieve 50% or above of first preference votes, then the candidate with the lowest amount of first preference votes is eliminated and their second preference votes are reallocated to other candidates. This process continues until there is only one candidate remaining, and they are declared the winner.

AV has one main benefit with regard to proportionality, as this system allows candidates to be ranked in order of preference by voters, unlike First Past the Post which only gives voters a single choice. Indeed, a variation of this system was recommended by the Jenkins Report (Gay, 1998), which stated that "80-85 per cent of the Commons" should "be elected by the Alternative Vote in individual constituencies", albeit paired with a Top-Up member system.

This is not to say that there are no problems with the Alternative Vote. Alan Renwick (2011) identifies several problems with this system, chiefly that "It can exaggerate the over-representation of the largest party. Like FPTP, it can produce biased election results, where two parties with the same vote shares secure very different numbers of seats" and that "**AV tends to exaggerate landslides.** This is because of the boost it can give to a party with a large national lead". This is something that others have noted, with the Electoral Reform Society (ERS) (2015) projecting that the Conservatives would

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have won 51.8% of the seats within Parliament, a slightly higher proportion of seats than the 50.9% that they won under First Past the Post. Indeed, the Jenkins Report (Gay, 1998) also identified problems with the Alternative Vote, despite recommending a variation of this system, stating that without the addition of the Top-Up member system “AV on its own was not proportional” and that it “would be unacceptable because of the danger that in anything like present circumstances it might increase rather than reduce disproportionality” within general elections. This increased disproportionality can be seen in the 2022 Australian Federal Election, where the Alternative Vote is used to elect the 151 members of the House of Representatives. As a result of this election, the Australian Labor Party won 77 seats (Sydney Morning Herald, 2022). This is in spite of the fact that they gained only 32.58% of the popular vote, and the second largest party after the election, the Liberal National Coalition gained 35.7% (Sydney Morning Herald, 2022). The Australian Labor Party therefore won 50.99% of the seats on less than two-thirds of the popular vote, showing that it suffers from the same problems as First Past the Post, in that a party can win an election with a relatively low share of the vote, meaning that is a similarly disproportional system.

As well as this, Renwick (2011) notes that AV “does not generally help small parties win seats.” He is not the only person to make this judgement with regard to the introduction of AV, as Wilkes-Heeg and Crone (2011) write that “Under AV, it is likely that neither of the major parties will lose significant numbers of seats” and “Neither will AV alter the tendency for the electoral system to suppress the emergence of multi-party representation in the House of Commons.” Indeed, the Electoral Reform Society projected that the Liberal Democrats would have won 1.3% of the seats within Parliament, despite winning 7.9% of the national vote, whilst the Green Party would have won 0.2% of the seats within Parliament on 3.8% of the national vote. This is essentially the same results that these parties gained under FPTP, as after general election the Liberal Democrats gained 1.2% of the seats in Parliament and the Green Party gained the same amount that the ERS projected they would have gained if AV was used in this election. Therefore, the introduction of the Alternative Vote would continue to punish smaller parties, drastically decreasing the proportionality and fairness of this system.

AV also suffers from unique problems created by the system of preferential party ranking it employs. This is something that Monica Threlfall (2011) notes when discussing such a system, writing that “In most cases, our second and subsequent preferences will not be counted towards the outcome. Labour and Conservative voters will not be able to transfer their second choice to the Liberal Democrats (to prevent each other’s rivals from winning) unless the Liberal Democrat has already beaten the Conservative or the Labour candidate by coming top or runner-up. In sum, a majority of voters will never have their second choices counted.” This suggests that the preferential ranking element of the system will be of next to no use most of the time, a viewpoint that is highly convincing, as Conservative and Labour candidates generally beat Liberal Democrat candidates within constituencies. This counts against the system’s proportionality in a major way, as it does not reflect the views of those who hypothetically choose to put the Liberal Democrats, or any smaller party, in a lower position than a major party, as the major party will likely win the most first preference votes and hence the constituency, regardless.

Thus, it is clear that the Alternative Vote does not have any practical benefits. It has many of the same problems that FPTP does, in that it over-represents larger parties within Parliament, and would continue to under-represent smaller parties due to the preferential ranking of parties rather than candidates. Therefore, it is not a fair or proportional system, and the UK would certainly not benefit from the introduction of such a system.

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### Proportional Representation:

Proportional Representation (PR) is a rather different voting system, in which the distribution of seats corresponds closely with the proportion of the total votes cast for each party. For instance, if a party were to receive 45% of the national vote in a general election, then they would gain 45% of the seats within Parliament.

Several people have suggested such a system for use in the UK, notably Ian Stewart (2010), who argues that “Such a system is undoubtedly fairer in a mathematical sense than either plurality or preferential voting”. The statement that Proportional Representation is “fairer in a mathematical sense” is accurate, as we can see from simulated elections that have taken place using such a system. Blumenau (et al., 2015) estimated that if such a system were used in the 2015 general election, then “The Liberal Democrats’ seat count would increase from the 25 predicted by the election forecast model of FPTP to 46 seats under this form of PR. UKIP would win 44 seats, up from 1 in the latest FPTP forecast”. This shows that smaller parties would gain many seats under this system, therefore removing one of the most substantial problems with First Past the Post, in that smaller parties are effectively punished. This clearly would not be the case if such a system were to be introduced in the UK, as it would instead lead to a decreased number of seats for the Conservative and Labour parties, with Blumenau (et al., 2015) predicting that both “would win fewer seats under the PR system described here, with 255 and 250 respectively”, far less than the “279 and 270 seats” that they were predicted to win (this article was written before the election took place). Indeed, the ERS (2015) projected that if Proportional Representation were used in the 2015 general election, the result of the election would have been far more proportional, as the Conservatives would have won 37.2% of the seats within Parliament. This is far closer to the percentage of the national vote that they received (36.9%) than the 50.9% of the seats that they gained within Parliament after the general election.

This is not to say that there are no problems with Proportional Representation. An example of some of the problems with PR can be found in Germany, where the system is used in general elections. After the most recent general election in 2021, the process of forming a coalition government “took three months” (The Week, 2022). This is because an outcome that occurs often in countries that use Proportional Representation is a lack of a majority government or clear winner after a general election. This has been seen several times in the recent past, in the aforementioned Germany, as well as in Belgium where there was a “a record-breaking 653 days without a government or prime minister” after the 2019 general election. (The Week, 2022).

This gives the impression that PR causes governmental chaos, and under pure Proportional Representation, this can certainly happen. However, Blumenau (et al., 2015) recommended ‘low-magnitude Proportional Representation’ system would combat this, as they state that it “would still lead to higher seat-shares than vote-shares for the two largest parties, would restrict further party system fragmentation, and as a result would make coalition-formation simpler than if a pure form of PR were applied.” Coalitions are of course, not an ideal form of government, as they are likely to create a large degree of instability within national politics, and various compromises must be made by all the participating parties. However, this can be solved through the use of Blumenau and his co-author's proposed system, as it has been designed to prevent political and governmental instability and fragmentation of the major parties. This is not at the cost of proportionality, though. Indeed, Hix and John Carey (2009) write that “Electoral systems that use low-magnitude multi-member districts produce disproportionality indices almost on par with those of pure PR systems”, showing that the

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proportionality of the system has essentially been kept intact while the more troublesome areas of Proportional Representation have been removed.

Some may find issue with the proposed constituencies within such a system, as *The Week* (2022) notes that the introduction of PR could “possibly leading to local issues being overlooked”. This is also a problem with the system that was recommended by Blumenau (et al., 2015) and his co-authors as they state that there would be “114 constituencies, each electing between 3 and 8 MPs” under their proposed ‘low-magnitude’ version of Proportional Representation. Despite stating that “PR allows for a constituency-link to be maintained” they conceded that this would only be the case “in the larger of the constituencies”. This may be a problem for many, as if 8 Members of Parliament are sitting in one constituency, then they cannot fully be held to account by those that have elected them. This is not a huge problem with the ‘low-magnitude’ PR that Blumenau and his co-authors recommend, though, as these voting systems are being evaluated in terms of proportionality, not necessarily regarding the maintenance of the link between constituents and their Members of Parliament. Indeed, First Past the Post has been retained as the voting system for general elections precisely due to the perception that the maintenance of the constituency link is one of the most crucial elements of a voting system, rather than how proportional a system is. The problem of the maintenance of the constituency link does not mean that such a system will not work, nor does it mean it is not proportional. Rather, it is something that should be amended slightly, by having slightly larger constituencies than the ones that Blumenau and his co-authors propose, with less MPs representing them, before the system comes into practical use.

As this report is evaluating voting systems regarding their proportionality, this system is the most proportional system available for use within the United Kingdom.

### **The Single Transferable Vote:**

The Single Transferable Vote (STV) is similar to the Alternative Vote, in that it is a ranked system of voting. Voters rank candidates in order of preference or can vote for only one candidate. Each candidate needs to reach a quota, which is determined by the number of votes cast and the total number of voters. The main difference between this system and the Alternative Vote is that it allows voters to rank different candidates from the same party, leading to a more candidate-based system rather than the party-based system that the Alternative Vote creates.

There are several advantages to such a system. The ranking of candidates rather than parties immediately makes it more advantageous to smaller parties than the Alternative Vote, as fewer voter preferences are essentially wasted. Indeed, Nicolaus Tideman (1995) writes that “The deficiencies of” other voting systems “compared to STV are that they presuppose that what voters care about is captured in party definitions, and they give tremendous power to party officials” which the Single Transferable Vote effectively removes, transferring strength away from political parties and giving it to individual candidates. This has several advantages, such as strengthening the link between constituents and their political representatives, as representatives would be able to campaign about affecting local change, rather than national change. This is perhaps why it was recommended for use in the Scottish Parliamentary elections by the Arbuthnott Report in 2007, as the report states that if judged necessary “consideration should be given... to introducing the single transferable vote for Scottish Parliament elections” (White, 2007) and has been used in the Scottish local elections for some time, as well as the Welsh local elections since 2022.

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This system has also shown itself to be very proportional in national elections. This can be seen within the results for the Northern Irish Assembly elections of 2022, in which there was ostensibly no clear winner, as Sinn Féin won the most seats but did not manage to obtain a clear majority within the Assembly, as they won only 27 seats out of a possible 90 (Burton, 2022). Despite this being quite a low number regarding the number of seats needed for a majority within the Assembly, it is nonetheless an extremely proportional result, as they managed to gain 29% of the first preference votes nationally and therefore gained 30% of the seats within the Assembly. As well as this, the smaller Alliance Party was able to secure 17 seats, or 19% of the seats within the Assembly, though were slightly over-represented, as they only gained 13.5% of first preference votes nationally (Burton, 2022).

Indeed, the ERS (2015) projected that in the 2015 general election, the smaller parties would have benefitted from the use of the Single Transferable Vote. In the case of the Liberal Democrats, it was projected that they would have won about 4% of the seats in Parliament. Though this is still far less than the 7.9% of votes that they received nationally, it is still closer to this number than the 1.2% of seats in Parliament that they won in the election. The ERS also projected that the UK Independence Party (UKIP) would have won 8.3% of the seats in Parliament, much closer to the 12.3% of the national vote than the 0.2% seats that they ended up winning. It does also show that majorities can be exaggerated, as they predicted that the Conservatives would have won 42.5% of the seats under the STV system. Whilst this slightly exaggerates their majority, this number is far closer to the 36.9% of the national vote that they received than the 50.9% of seats in Parliament that they eventually gained after the general election.

The STV system is therefore more proportional than the Alternative Vote or First Past the Post, as it clearly does not exaggerate majorities within legislatures to the same extent that these systems do and is more proportional with regard to smaller parties. The Jenkins Report (Gay, 1998) had a rather different opinion about this, implying that such a system would not be suitable because it “gives weight to minority opinion and as such its impact on national politics is likely to produce more coalition-type government”. Whilst the argument about coalition governments here is certainly valid, seeing as they can cause unstable governments, the allusion to it giving weight to “minority opinion” is not, as it assumes that somehow or another a representative that constituents don’t want will gain office. There is no reason to think such a thing possible, as candidates must receive a large share of the First Preference votes in order to be elected.

The Jenkins Report also criticised STV “for its large constituencies, complex counting system and a tendency towards parochial politics” (Gay, 1998). There is valid criticism of STV within this, such as the allusion to localism becoming dominant, which is a by-product of allowing candidates to be ranked rather than parties, thus allowing local issues to be campaigned on. However, the most convincing argument against the STV system that should be considered, and isn’t by the Jenkins Report, is that it is confusing to voters. Judith Duffy (2022) writes that “the proportion of ballots rejected under STV in Scotland is more than under the previous first past the post system”, noting that in the 2017 Scottish local elections, “a total of 37,491 ballot papers were rejected at the count... representing 1.95% of all votes cast”. Duffy is not the only one to take note of this as the Arbunthrott Report states that after the introduction of STV in the Scottish local elections, “it was apparent that there had been a substantial number of spoilt ballot papers” (White, 2007). This aspect of the system decreases its proportionality, as it means that the preferences made by these nearly 40,000 voters in 2017 were not allowed to be followed through on. This element of the system is not unique to just Scotland, though, as Duffy (2022) notes that in the aforementioned Northern Ireland, the number of

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spoilt ballots in general elections are “generally just over 1%”. Despite STV being used since 1973 in Northern Ireland, there are still a sizeable number of spoilt ballots, showing that the failures of this system cannot be blamed on its relatively recent introduction to Scotland and that it causes confusion amongst voters where-ever it is introduced.

Whilst such the Single Transferable Vote is clearly more proportional than the Alternative Vote and First Past the Post, Proportional Representation is certainly fairer. This is because STV still exaggerates majorities within Parliament. As this report is evaluating these systems in terms of their proportionality, this is something that cannot be ignored. As PR does not do this, it must therefore be judged that it is more proportional than STV.

### **Conclusion:**

Hence, First Past the Post and the Alternative Vote are clearly unfit for use in the United Kingdom, as they are both unfair and disproportional systems. This is because they both exaggerate majorities to a large degree and punish smaller parties, stopping them gaining enough seats in Parliament to influence the government in any way, despite them often receiving high numbers of votes.

The Single Transferable Vote also exaggerates majorities, though to a much lesser extent, but it benefits smaller parties more than either FPTP or AV do, meaning that is more proportional. Though this system has been used in elections in Northern Ireland for some time, voter confusion remains an issue, as it does in Scotland. This, combined with the tendency to exaggerate majorities slightly and the failure to properly represent smaller parties, means that it cannot be judged to be fair system of voting and therefore cannot be recommended for use in general elections in the UK.

Proportional Representation, specifically the low-magnitude variation proposed by Blumenau and his co-authors is certainly the fairest of these systems, as it allows for smaller parties to be better represented and encourages the formation of strong, majority governments, with no adverse change to the proportionality of the system. Though there is a slight problem with the maintenance of the constituency link, this can be solved by revising the constituencies proposed by Blumenau and his co-authors. Therefore, this is the fairest system of voting that can be implemented in the UK, as it meets the majority of the criteria that I evaluated these systems by.



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