

'The UK uses a variety of electoral systems - but fails to provide proportionality where it matters most.' Discuss

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Electoral systems are the different models used in elections within a representative democracy such as ours in the UK. In our democracy we have a range of electoral systems which provide greater and differentiating levels of proportionality. In this essay I plan to discuss the level to which each of the electoral systems in place within the UK provide proportionality and whether proportionality is used “where it matters most”.

Proportionality

Proportionality within a political context means the level to which the number of votes obtained mirrors the seats gained in parliament. A proportional voting system would show an exact reflection of votes to seats, so that if within an election a particular party receives 20% of the vote in order to provide proportional representation they will then receive 20% of the seats.

Proportional voting systems are seen as positive types of electoral systems as they stop the main issues raised by the system of ‘First Past the Post’. This is due to it being a highly disproportional system between numbers of votes in correlation to number of seats cast. An example of this can be reflected in the 2005 election whereby Labour received 35% of the vote yet the hold a dominant majority of 55% seats in parliament. Proportional voting systems would therefore only enable labour in this situation to occupy 35% of seats with other parties filling the remaining seats providing a much more representational system.

However proportionality can also cause issues as it tends to lead to coalition government and thus providing the minority and extremist parties with a magnitude of power. This is due to the fact that due to their being no ‘winners bonus’ awarded in a proportional voting systems, and can be illustrated as follows. For example if Labour obtained 45% of the vote, Conservatives 35% and Liberal Democrats 20% then the majority of power lies within the minority seat holder as they choose which party they would back depending on particular policies. However in most proportional systems it would not be as smooth as this, as it would not just contain three parties as there would be many other minority parties included.

Electoral systems used in the UK

First past the Post

Firstly ‘First Past the Post’ (FPTP) is an electoral system which I feel works as the predominant claim against the statement, ‘The UK uses a variety of electoral systems - but fails to provide proportionality where it matters most’.

'First past the Post' is the voting system used in the House of Commons and local government in England and Wales, used to elect MP's in General elections as well as councilors in local election, and is therefore possibly the most influential voting system used in the UK. FPTP is a constituency system whereby voters select one candidate, occupying the "one person, one vote" principle, and the candidate with the most votes wins meaning they need only to receive a plurality of the votes not a majority.

The system therefore lacks proportionality and can be illustrated by the following example;

If in a general elections the votes were cast as follows;

Labour 32,000 votes

Conservatives, 30,000

Liberal Democrats 16,000

The Labour party would win regardless of the fact that 46,000 votes were cast against them and only 32,000 for them. Labour would then occupy the majority of the seats in parliament reflected in my previous example of the 2005 elections whereby Labour received just 35% of the vote yet held 55% of seats in the House of Commons granting them a significant majority. FPTP therefore fails to ensure a reflective link between proportions of votes won by parties to the proportion of seats they gain.

However there are positive attributes to the FPTP voting system. The first main positive claim to this system is that it allows a strong government and disbands the idea of coalition governments. This is due to the "winners bonus" which is the "winner takes all" mentality, meaning that a party can win majority of seats on a plurality not majority vote, thus allowing the winning party to push the policies and promises set out in its manifesto through parliament, which otherwise would have needed a coalition to do so. This can again be viewed as positive as it doesn't grant power to small/extremist parties that within proportional voting systems will end up holding the power due to this coalition affect.

Another criticism of FPTP relates to its "two party system", which means the systems tendency to be dominated by the two "major" political parties. This then makes politics from the electorate's perspective seem a race between the two major parties, and can therefore encourage apathy. This is because many who support a third party or minority group will view their vote as a "wasted" vote, as the party they vote for has no chance of representation in parliament and therefore there is no point in voting at all. This is also true in the reverse as many who support one of the two major parties will again see their vote as "wasted" as regardless of their vote the outcome will still be the same as the party with the plurality of the votes is often clear. This is then exemplified by the idea of "safe seats" which is the idea that a particular constituency has always voted in a certain way and due to the social and historical factors is very unlikely to change, therefore many feel there is no point in voting in these areas also as the outcome is already decided.

Additional Member System

The first key type of proportional voting system is the Additional Member system (AMS) which is used within the UK in the Scottish parliament elections, Welsh Assembly, Northern Ireland Assembly and the Greater London Assembly. This system consists of a mixed party system with both constituency and party list elements. The system works with a proportion of the seats available being filled by the First Past the Post system (FPTP) and the remaining seats filled using a close list system (an alternate version of the party-list system whereby voters only vote for political parties and have no influence over which individual candidates are elected). This allows the electorate to cast two votes one for a candidate and the other for a party, allowing them more of an input. The use of the party list system is intended to ensure greater levels of proportionality and the mix of this with the 'FPTP' system creates a much fairer balance between representation within the constituency and electoral fairness.

The 'AMS' system has obvious advantages as through allowing greater levels of proportionality and the option for more than one choice the voter is able to make much broader and also considered choices as they get to use the open and closed system when casting their votes. This obviously dispels the "winner's bonus" system and creates multiparty systems through the closed list system whereby voters vote for political parties and have no influence over individual candidates. The multiparty system feature of the AMS voting system allows much greater representation as minority parties can be represented unlike in the FPTP system. This can be reflected in the 2005 elections whereby the Green party received more than a quarter of a million votes however has no representation in parliament whereas through the AMS system they have two members in the Scottish parliament and two in the Greater London Assembly.

However this can also be seen as a criticism against this system as it can lead to extremist parties gaining representation and power however limited.

Another criticism of this system is that for many it may cause confusion, and mistakes will be too easily made with either votes becoming void or votes cast wrongly due to the two types of representatives.

AMS although a more proportional voting system than FPTP is not the most proportional of electoral voting systems mainly due to it keeping the FPTP system to an extent and the keeping of single-member constituencies which will reduce proportionality amplified by the larger sizes of constituencies.

Single Transferable Vote

Single Transferable Vote (STV) is a proportional voting system such as AMS and is used in the Northern Ireland Assembly and local government in Northern Ireland and Scotland. This is a system consisting only of multi member constituencies and political parties are able to put up as many candidates in each constituency as there are seats to fill. The system then works preferentially whereby voters rank the candidates in preferential order, and the candidate is then elected on the principle of gaining a quota of votes

calculated using the droop formula used to achieve greater proportionality, which is as follows;

$$\text{Quota} = \frac{\text{total number of votes cast} + 1}{(\text{Number of seats to be filled} + 1)}$$

The votes are firstly counted according to the first preferences of the electorate, and if the quota is achieved then subsequent votes for this candidate are attributed to their next preference. If seats are still available after this then the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated and votes for that candidate are then re distributed to other candidates depending on the subsequent preferences of that voter.

The first evident advantage of this system is that it will achieve higher levels of proportionality and due to various candidates from the same party standing for election the voter can vote for personality and the best representative not just the party, thus creating more members available to deal with particular issues of their constituency and increasing efficiency.

On the other hand the level of proportionality can vary and it will be extremely unlikely to achieve a strong single party government meaning there is not a clear identity in which to achieve things. This could potentially create a split within the constituency exemplified by the competition among members of the same party.

Regional Party List (RPL)

The Regional party list is another type of proportional voting system and is used in the European parliament. This system contains a number of large multimember constituencies whereby the UK is split into just 12 regions and can have between 3-10 members approximately. The Political parties then compose a list of candidates in descending preferential order but the electors vote for parties not for candidates through the closed list system, which is the concept that voters only vote for political parties and do not have an influence over which candidates are elected. The parties then receive seats directly proportional to the votes they gained in each constituency and thus being a proportional voting system.

The key advantage to this system is that it ensures direct proportionality and is in this respect a mirror of voter wants. This system also creates an easier way for women and minority candidate to be elected providing they are on the party list as it is through a closed list system.

On the other hand the relationship between the constituent and representatives may be severely weakened due to the larger constituencies. A further disadvantage is the parties have a greater level of power than the STV system as they decide the ranking and candidates on the party list, and this removes power from the electorate.

Supplementary vote

Supplementary vote (SV) is used in the London Mayor elections and is based around single, single-member constituencies and is made up of two votes, a preferential vote and then the second is the “supplementary vote.”

The system requires the candidate to receive at least 50% of all votes cast in order to win, and in this respect ensures that there are less “wasted” votes as with FPTP. However votes are initially counted according to first preferences and then if no candidate reaches the over 50% margin then all but the top two candidates are eliminated and their votes are redistributed depending on their “supplementary” vote, like the single Transferrable vote system.

However this system can also be seen to lack proportionality as candidates below a certain margin get knocked after the initial first vote and therefore votes for minor parties end up being wasted, which could again encourage apathy.

Where does proportionality matter most?

Through studying each voting system used in the UK and the differing levels of proportionality I believe that it can be strongly argued that no, proportionality is not used where it matters most. This is because although yes we do adopt many proportional voting systems for significant elections it is within Westminster where the most influential and important decisions for the UK are made.

However it could be argued that other elections may be more important, such as the European elections, however currently I do not believe this is the case.

Therefore I feel that the general elections which decide who the MP's making these decisions are must be of the most paramount importance and therefore the FPTP system reflects the claim that 'The UK uses a variety of electoral systems - but fails to provide proportionality where it matters most'. I believe this because surely in the general elections within a representative democracy where the electorate is voting for which party, policies and ideas are needed in order to govern our country, everybody's voice should be heard. I fail to see how regardless of the positives of a strong government this provides representation in a representative democracy but instead allows the majority government to completely over ride and ignore the ideas and opinions of other parties.

Conclusion

To conclude I feel that the statement 'The UK uses a variety of electoral systems - but fails to provide proportionality where it matters most' is definitely true as Westminster which adopts the First Past the Post system is where proportionality does and should

matter most, yet does not. I think that due to the succession of alternate voting systems there is no other rational reason other than the fact that the current voting system favors the party in power that we will not see electoral reform.