

Minority parties in Britain call for electoral reform whereas the two major parties tend to favour retaining the existing system. Do you consider that the strengths of proportional representation outweigh the advantages of simple majority voting?

Electoral reform in Britain is an issue that has dogged politics for many years. The subject was first raised in 1831 and “attracted support throughout the nineteenth century” (Jones & Kavanagh, 1990). In the last century a proposal nearly gained a Parliamentary majority in 1917, and “the Liberals have favoured replacing the simple plurality system by a system of proportional representation” (Birch, 1991) since 1922. Throughout the last century, it has been the Liberals who have suffered the ‘third-party syndrome’ perpetually losing out to either the Conservatives, or the Labour party. However, in more recent years the increasing number of minority parties, and their growing support, has brought the concept of reform to the fore again. Indeed, shortly after the current government came to power in 1997, the Prime Minister commissioned the Jenkins Report to examine the possibility of reform. It should also be noted that in the devolved Scottish Parliament the voting system that was chosen to be used is one of representation.

Before the advantages of a system of proportional representation (PR) can be examined it is necessary to consider the benefits of the current plurality, or First-Past-the-Post (FPTP), system. The first and most obvious benefit is that of simplicity: the voter only has to make a single judgement in choosing their preferred candidate and to mark their ballot paper accordingly with an X (a mark originally conceived when the majority of voters were illiterate). This simplicity is unlike PR systems in which the voter has to rank the candidates in order of preference. The other primary advantages are concerned with the structure of the government. The first is that the current system’s simplicity gives a clear winner, meaning that the resultant government is a strong majority government, unlike a coalition government in which controversial decisions are often postponed, and delays in policy making are common due to the discrepancies in mandates. This leads to another benefit in that voters are currently able to vote for a set of policies, but coalitions mean that the policies may not be made, or are subject to change. With neither party wholly in control, the concept of a responsible government is also diminished.

The FPTP system also prevents extremist minority parties from gaining any seats in Parliament. While this may appear to defeat the idea of giving the voter a choice, it is generally accepted that parties such as the National Front should not have any power in the House of Commons. As such, denying minority parties seats does have this in its favour. However, other countries using proportional representation avoid this potential problem by setting a percentage of votes that a single candidate must achieve in order to validate their nomination. Jones & Kavanagh (1990) suggest that another benefit connected with minority parties is that it reduces the “bargaining or ‘blackmail’ power of a small party” which could be critical in a hanging Parliament.

What is seen to be another important advantage of the FPTP system is that due to it being based on single-member constituencies, whereby the voter chooses a single candidate to represent them, a strong link is ensured between the MP and the voter. Such a link is weakened in a multi-member constituency, or in systems in which the national parties propose the candidates. Under PR systems, constituency boundaries would need redrawing making each constituency at least three times as large, with such expanded physical areas to cover the possibility of retaining such a link can be seen to be clearly diminished. The practicalities of redefining boundaries also present problems in geographical areas such as “the sparsely populated areas of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, or in self-contained areas such as the Isle of Wight” (Smyth, 1992).

There are two further benefits of the FPTP system, which are again results of its simplicity. Firstly, it is possible to determine the results of a FPTP election in a matter of hours, compared to some PR elections in which the result may not be known for days or weeks. Secondly, the cost to run a simpler FPTP election is considerably less than running an election based on a complex, more involved PR system.

This is not to suggest that the FPTP system is without its faults, indeed it is regarded as being grossly unfair as the votes for the party which does not win are, in effect, wasted. When it is considered that there are millions of ‘wasted’ votes, this is surely one of the reasons that voter apathy is so rife in Britain with a

voter turn-out of 76% at the 1997 election, compared with turn-outs over 80% in countries utilising PR systems. The outcome of FPTP elections in Britain are also seen to result in a socially unrepresentational government: for example, if it is assumed that approximately half of the voting population are women, it follows that half of the MPs should be female – this has obviously never been the case.

There are several proportionally representative election systems, all of which share common advantages. The differences can be seen in the way in which voting is carried out, and how voters have to indicate their choice of candidates. The generally accepted major advantage of any PR system is that the resultant make up of the House of Commons would reflect the way in which the country has voted. In October 1974, Labour were able to form a majority government with a minority (only 39%) of the popular vote (Jones & Kavanagh, 1990) due to the anomalies of the FPTP system. Utilising a PR system would mean that Labour would have held 39% of the seats in the House of Commons, with representatives of the other parties making up the other 61% of seats based on the percentage of the votes they each received.

Within a PR system, there are far fewer wasted votes, a fact that would serve to encourage greater participation, as 'safe' seats would be likely to disappear and voters would see that their vote contributed to the government of the country. In the 1997 election, the Liberal Democrats won 17.2% of the total votes cast, but due to the FPTP system they only hold 7% of the seats in the House of Commons. While this is an impressive result for the Liberals, it illustrates both the 'third-party syndrome' they have suffered from throughout the twentieth century, and the number of votes for them that were wasted.

A majority government elected in a PR election, although probably a coalition, would be considered to reflect current public opinion more widely. This would occur as the government would have to have at least 50% of the vote. The instances where a British government elected using the FPTP system has 50% of the popular vote are few and far between. It should be noted though that while a coalition government would be created at the start of a term (if necessary), there is no obligation to maintain it, and "one coalition government may be replaced by another during the life of a Parliament with no opportunity for

the electors to be consulted in the matter” (Birch, 1991). It could be argued that a PR government discourages the “adversary party system” (Jones & Kavanagh, 1990) that is so prevalent in the current system which would result in government by consensus and greater continuity of policies.

Although less prevalent in the 1997 election, a PR system would eliminate the potential for the ‘North-South divide’ that characterised the 1983 and 1987 elections. In the 1987 election, Conservatives won only one out of fifteen seats in South Yorkshire, and Labour only won three seats in the South of the country (Smyth, 1992). It can be seen that representation not only reflects public opinion on a national scale, but also on the more personal constituency level.

An electoral system based on PR can be seen to be fairer to the electorate as it considers all of the opinions, and it would “allow for free and fair competition between all political parties” (Amy). The current system is clearly biased against the minority parties, and it serves to protect the two major parties from any competition. Certainly, a cynic would see this as the reason for a PR system never having been adopted by a reigning government.

Although, fairness appears to be the only principal reason for adopting a PR system, compared to the lengthier list of advantages for a FPTP system, if the FPTP advantages are considered, they cannot be viewed as comparable in terms of importance. As there are several systems based on PR, it must be possible to adopt an existing system, or to develop a system that would both suit Britain, while avoiding many of the objections raised by campaigners for FPTP. Patronising voters by expecting them only to be able to indicate their choice with a cross, and so readily dismissing such a large proportion of the total votes cast can only serve to infuriate the electorate and to indicate that reform of the electoral system in Britain must be considered.

(1512 words)

Bibliography and References

Amy, D (unknown) *What is Proportional Representation and why do we need this reform?*,
<http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/polit/damy/beginningreading/whatispr.htm> [09/03/2001]

Birch, A (1991) *The British System of Government (Eighth Edition)*, London: HarperCollinsAcademic

Jones, B & Kavanagh, D (1990) *British Politics Today*, Manchester: Manchester University Press

McLean, I (1983) *Political Realities: Elections*, Essex: Longman Group

Pyper, R & Robins, L (edited) (1995) *Governing the UK in the 1990s*, Basingstoke: MacMillan Press Ltd.

Smyth, G (edited) (1992) *Refreshing the Parts*, London: Lawrence & Wishart Ltd.