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The United Kingdom: Plurality Rule Under Siege

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The key features of the Westminster model of democracy are well known, not least as the antithesis of Arend Lijphart's recommendation of consociational and consensus models of democracy. All but two of Lijphart's ten principal features of the Westminster model are still in place: for example, executive power is concentrated in the hands of single-party cabinets that dominate parliament, and these majority governments themselves are normally manufactured by the disproportional single-member plurality (SMP) system of election.

While it is tempting to portray Britain in the past as a country in which electoral reform was often talked about but nothing much ever happened, by contrast the contemporary UK has become a very active laboratory for electoral system design and implementation. Before 1997, all elections were by plurality rule, with the exception of Northern Ireland. Following a veritable burst of devolution and institutional engineering since 1997, the UK now uses a formidable array of different electoral systems. The House of Commons still uses SMP. But the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh and London Assemblies use various versions of mixed-member systems. The Northern Ireland Assembly uses proportional representation by the single tranferable vote (PR-STV), as will the Scottish local government elections in 2007. And Britain's elections to the European Parliament have changed from SMP to closed-list proportional representation (CLPR). Thus, the typical voting experience for many parts of the UK electorate is no longer a plurality election. To take one example, Scottish voters use SMP to elect their Westminster MPs, a mixed-member proportional (MMP) system to elect their representatives in the devolved Scottish Parliament, list-PR for their members of the European Parliament (MEPs), and in future PR-STV to elect their local councillors.

It is beyond the scope and main purpose of this chapter to subject all of these new substate systems to a thorough analysis. While we will examine some of them further in the final section on the politics of electoral reform, the principal focus will be on the electoral system for the primary 'national' parliament, in this case the House of Commons.

ORIGINS OF THE ELECTORAL SYSTEM

To the extent that SMP was ever 'chosen' as Britain's electoral system, it is difficult to identify precisely who did the choosing and when. David Butler has noted (Butler 1963: 2–3) that 'the simple plurality system of election has hardly been tampered with since the Middle Ages', an observation that remains true more than forty years after it was made (at least for elections to the Westminster parliament). However, the longevity of the plurality decision rule (or electoral 'formula'), seemingly trailing back into the mists of time, tends to give the impression that the SMP system 'has always been the British system of election'. In reality, it was only in 1885 that single-member districts became the norm, and in 1948 that they became the only type of district. Before 1885 the typical pattern in England was for each constituency to elect two members, though there were also some constituencies with district magnitudes of three and four. The seats in the multimember constituencies were allocated by the block vote system, in which the elector has as many votes as there are seats to be filled (see Section 2.3 of Appendix A).

While electoral laws were much debated during the periods surrounding the great Reform Acts from 1832 to 1918, this mostly concerned not the voting rules per se but rather related matters, such as: franchise extension; plural voting; redistribution ('apportionment'); and the elimination, or at least reduction, of corrupt practices such as the infamous 'rotten boroughs' (in effect, malapportionment), in which some seats were effectively in the gift of landed aristocrats (see Butler 1953/1963; O'Leary 1962; Carstairs 1980; Bogdanor 1981). The pattern that emerges is that successive attempts to extend the franchise and hence allow gradual democratization are associated with established politicians attempting to protect their positions by means of seat redistributions and/or attempts to alter the voting rules.

After a failed attempt to introduce the cumulative vote as an amendment to the 1867 (or 'second') Reform Act, the same act introduced the limited vote. Each voter was provided with a number of votes equal to one less than the district magnitude, thus lowering the threshold compared with the *status quo ante*. Thus, for example, each elector would be entitled to vote for no more than two candidates in the thirteen three-member districts created by the Act. Most early attempts or proposals for electoral reform were motivated by the defensive need for 'minority protection', the 'minority' in question being the propertied educated elite, many of whom feared the enfranchisement of the masses (Hart 1992: 76). The limited vote, however, did not easily achieve the 'minority representation' aims of its supporters, not least since it soon proved to be prone to strategic manipulation, most famously in Birmingham, where Joseph Chamberlain's Liberal caucus demonstrated that it could win all three seats by what these days would be called careful vote management. Thus, highly majoritarian outcomes were possible and the system was prone to being wildly disproportional, and even perverse.

The 1885 Reform Act abolished the limited vote and with it most of the multiseat constituencies. By this time the electoral system of choice for most British advocates

of reform was the more sophisticated system that has subsequently become known as PR-STV. Again, most of the reformers appear to have been motivated by defensive rather than purely democratic considerations: it has been said that the aim of Thomas Hare (one of the inventors of a forerunner of the system) 'was to make universal suffrage tolerable' by facilitating the continued representation of the educated elite (Bogdanor 1981: 107). Be that as it may, the negative experience of the limited vote weakened the case of those who argued for more far-reaching electoral reform.

For a variety of partisan and constitutional reasons the leaders of the largest parties did not see PR as being in their interests. However, the birth of the new Labour Party led to some revision of partisan calculations that had direct significance for electoral reform. For example, as long as the Liberals believed that the threat from Labour was not too severe (essentially before the First World War), the Lib–Lab strategy[1] of 'containing' Labour by restricting their candidatures might seem preferable to adopting the alternative vote (AV), which would have allowed Labour to organize throughout the country without electoral penalty. On the other hand, if Labour broke the pact and proved stronger than the Liberals anticipated, then the Liberals might fare better under AV or ultimately a form of PR, by reason of logic similar to the adoption of PR in many other European countries around this period. In comparative terms it is surprising that the nascent Labour Party, like its European sister parties, did not advocate PR. While Labour was also internally divided on electoral reform, it decisively rejected PR at its 1914 conference, mainly due to the forceful views of its leader Ramsay McDonald, who believed (correctly) that Labour would eventually benefit from the SMP system.

The wartime coalition government composed of the Liberals, Conservatives, and Labour, realizing that a post-war government would need to be based on a new electoral register, agreed to set up a 'Speaker's Conference' to consider matters of registration, franchise extension, and the electoral system. In addition to proposals to extend the franchise, the Speaker's Conference recommended PR-STV for urban districts (about one-third of constituencies) and AV for all other districts.[2] However, the leaders of the Conservative and Liberal parties were not in favour of reforming the electoral system, and withdrew their support for the proposal by allowing a free vote. The House of Commons rejected PR-STV on five occasions during 1917–18, on the first occasion by only seven votes, but subsequently by larger margins. While all parties were internally divided on the adoption of PR, across the five votes in the House of Commons, on average 72 per cent of Conservatives (of those voting) cast their vote against PR, whereas the Liberals and Labour were evenly divided (51 per cent and 50 per cent, respectively, voted against PR) (calculated from figures in Bogdanor 1981: 130–1).

[1] In 1903 the Liberals and Labour had agreed to a 'Lib–Lab' pact; this was designed to avoid splitting the 'progressive' vote by means of reciprocal candidate withdrawals in selected constituencies.

[2] In a sense this would have been an early forebear of a mixed-member system with simultaneous use of both majoritarian and proportional electoral formulae.

Thus, the plurality system was retained.[3] Unlike its sister parties in other European countries, the British Conservative Party calculated that it could continue to compete successfully with its rivals even under a regime of universal suffrage. Indeed given that the proposal to introduce AV was also defeated, the Conservatives could look forward to profiting from divisions between the Liberals and Labour. By contrast, the position of the Liberal Party proved less far-sighted: if the party's members of parliament (MPs) had voted more consistently for PR in the divisions of 1917–18 it may well have been introduced. However, when they were in government successive leaders of the Liberal Party tended to equate democracy with majority rule and opposed the introduction of PR. Bogdanor (1981: 134) describes this opposition as the Liberal Party's 'most disastrous' decision of the twentieth century, since shortly afterwards the Liberals became the main losers of the decision to retain plurality rule, and were transformed from being a leading party of government to a minor party in the 1920s. Thereafter, Labour and the Conservatives defended the plurality electoral system from which they mutually benefited.

THE WESTMINSTER ELECTORAL SYSTEM

While the proportionality of votes cast to seats awarded to parties is a common performance indicator of the functioning of electoral systems, there is a fundamental sense in which the SMP electoral system is in no sense designed to be 'proportional'. At the 2005 election, for example, there were 646 separate constituencies. Voters cast a single 'X' vote against the name of one candidate in the single constituency in which they were entitled to be registered. The candidate with the most votes wins, irrespective of the percentage of the vote that this constitutes.[4] Thus votes cast for losing candidates and votes for the winning candidate that are 'surplus' to the bare amount needed to win, are 'wasted votes' in the sense that they cannot contribute to the election of a party colleague. The SMP system has no mechanisms (for example, transferring 'wasted' votes, or higher-tier compensatory seat allocations) to ensure that there is a predictable relationship between votes cast and seats won across the country. A proportional national outcome would be fortuitous rather than part of the system's design.

In addition to the under-representation of non-geographically concentrated third and minor parties, and the over-representation of the two leading parties, the SMP system can have other exaggerative effects. In the UK the most noted of these in recent decades have been territorial disparities in the vote distributions of the two main parties. Back in the 1950s the UK had a much more accurately labelled two-party system[5]: indeed, part of the predictability of the vote–seat relationship

[3] One irony of the 1918–1922 period is that the House of Commons did vote for PR-STV *but* only for other places, such as Ireland, India, and Malta.

[4] British MPs are increasingly plurality rather than majority winners. Since 1974, 48 per cent of MPs have been elected without achieving a majority in their constituency; the corresponding figure in the 1950s was 13 per cent. And extreme results are possible: in 1992 the winning candidate in Inverness had 26 per cent of the vote. Thus 74 per cent of those who voted did not vote for the 'winner' (Farrell 2001*a*: 25–7).

[5] Collectively Labour and the Conservatives attracted, on average, 94 per cent of the votes and won 98 per cent of the seats at the four elections held during the 1950s.

stemmed from the fact that Britain had a two-party system, in which the entire country tended to move from one major party to the other to a fairly similar extent—the postulate of 'uniform swing'. By the 1960s the leading parties were clearly losing this geographically aggregative character, as the 'north' and urban constituencies became progressively more likely to be won by Labour, and the 'south' and rural areas more likely to be represented by Conservative MPs. Part of this trend reflected changes in voting behaviour as a result of socio-economic and territorial cleavages, but 'the greater part of the difference in the composition of the Conservative and Labour parliamentary parties is an artificial product of the electoral system' (Curtice and Steed 1982: 285). The regional distribution of seats was most dramatically highlighted at the 1997 election, in which the Conservative Party failed to win a single seat in either Scotland or Wales, despite attracting 18 per cent and 20 per cent respectively of the votes in those countries. In characteristically colourful language, the Jenkins Commission described such outcomes as a form of geographical 'apartheid in electoral outcome' (Independent Commission on the Voting System 1998: 8). Thus, the SMP electoral system can have the disadvantage of creating 'electoral deserts' for parties in particular areas.[6]

Part of the traditional normative defence of the operation of SMP in Britain has been, that even if one discounts the inflated seat shares of the two leading parties (and the 'punishment' of the third party), each of the 'big two' should have an equal chance of forming a government. This in a sense allows voters to choose between two alternative governing teams and then subsequently to hold them accountable. However, research in recent years has highlighted a matter that had mostly been overlooked: the operation of SMP in Britain has produced lengthy periods in which the 'electoral system' has seemed to be systematically 'biased' against one or other of the major parties.

SMP districting and electoral bias

How many seats a party wins depends not only, and sometimes not primarily, on how many votes it attracts, but crucially on where these votes are located. Recent findings suggest that due to the interaction of the geography of party support and the geography of constituency boundaries, UK electoral outcomes are biased, not only in the traditional sense of being disproportional against all third and minor parties, but also biased in the sense that the same share of the vote for each of two main parties can translate into dramatically different seat totals (see Johnston et al. 2001; Rossiter et al., 'Changing Biases' 1999).

Electoral bias[7] is defined as the difference in the number of seats that the two main parties would receive if they had had the same share of the vote at a particular

[6] Thus disproportionality in certain regions can be much higher than the average figure. For example Dunleavy et al. (1998: 12) calculate that in 1997 UK disproportionality was 21 per cent (Loosemore–Hanby index), yet it was 42 in Central Scotland and 35 in South Wales (see also Appendix C).

[7] Literature on the USA usually refers to it as 'partisan bias' (for example, Grofman et al. 1997).

election.[8] Figure 8.1 reproduces the findings of Johnston and his colleagues; in the graph a negative number indicates a pro-Conservative bias and a positive figure a pro-Labour bias.

In the 1950s and early 1960s the Conservatives benefited by around 40–50 seats, whereas from 1966 to 1987 there was some oscillation but no major advantage to one party over the other. Since 1992, however, Labour's advantage has increased at a very steep rate: on an equal national share of the vote, Labour would have won 38 extra seats in 1992, 82 in 1997, and a massive 141 in 2001. This has led to many commentators and leading psephologists concluding that, for example, Labour's 'landslide' victory in 2001 occurred because 'the system is now significantly biased in its favour' (Curtice 2001: 807).

The principal sources of partisan bias in two-party systems using SMP are malapportionment, turnout differences or third party interventions that alter the number of votes needed for victory, and systematic differences in the distribution of party votes shares (the 'efficiency' of a party's vote) (Grofman et al. 1997). Johnston and his colleagues have decomposed bias into these three main categories, though they have

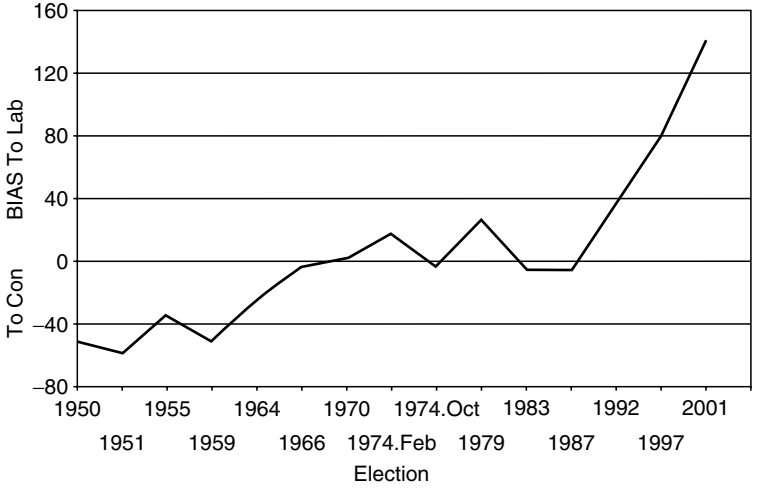

Figure 8.1 Bias with equal vote shares, 1950–2001

Source: Reproduced based on data in Rossiter et al. (1999), Johnston et al. (2001), and Johnston et al. (2002).

[8] It is a counterfactual procedure that focuses only on the two leading parties and calculates what would have happened had there been a uniform swing, with the votes of all other parties remaining the same. For example, if Labour won 43.3 per cent of the votes and the Conservatives 30.7 per cent, then an equal national vote share (37 per cent) involves Labour losing 6.3 per cent, and the Conservatives gaining the same amount in each constituency. Having applied these uniform additions and subtractions it is straightforward to calculate which party would have won each constituency. If there is no partisan bias the parties should win the same number of seats. Thus bias is measured by a convenient metric: the number of extra seats won on a equal national vote share (Rossiter et al.,'Changing Biases' 1999: 138).

sometimes used different labels. In the UK context there are two main types of malapportionment. First, some 'size'-related bias has been deliberately built into the system through the over-representation at Westminster of Scotland and Wales. Thus, the average seat in these two countries has only about 80 per cent of the number of electors that the average English constituency has. Given that Scotland and Wales have increasingly become areas of strength for the Labour Party, this malapportionment at recent elections has been worth ten to twelve seats to Labour (Johnston et al. 2001: 96).[9] The second constituency size component of bias results from the inevitably imperfect districting performed by the Boundary Commissions and the 'ageing' of constituencies between reviews ('creeping malapportionment', in Johnston et al.'s evocative label). Essentially, the urban constituencies in which Labour has traditionally been strongest tend to lose electors, and the rural constituencies get larger, thus requiring the Conservatives to win more votes in their stronger constituencies. Putting these size elements together, in 2001 the average seat won by Labour contained 65,748 electors, whereas the average seat won by the Conservatives had 72,140 (Curtice 2001: 808–9). In other words, Labour-won seats contained on average 9 per cent fewer electors than Conservative seats, a clear advantage to Labour.

Of course, to win seats it is the number of votes rather than electors that is crucial, and since 1955 Labour has benefited from differential turnout. Since turnout is usually lower in the more urban constituencies in which Labour has been strongest, Labour wins these seats with fewer votes (and higher turnouts would mostly lead to more 'wasted' surplus votes).[10] To be more accurate, under SMP it is both the number of votes and their location that is decisive. One of the principal sources of partisan bias is differences in the distribution of each party's voting strength across constituencies that may result in their having different proportions of 'wasted' votes. This relates to the efficiency of a party's vote distribution—a party will tend to win more seats if higher proportions of its votes are 'effective' votes. In other words, a party can receive a better 'return on its votes' if they are concentrated in the marginal constituencies where they are needed most, and less concentrated in constituencies in which it is certain to either lose or win.

The 'efficiency' of party vote distributions has often been the largest single component of overall partisan bias, and traditionally Labour has suffered because it tended to pile up large surplus votes in safe constituencies. Thus before 1997 the Conservatives almost always benefited from a more efficient vote distribution. However, this began to change in 1992, and subsequently more dramatically, so that by 2001 Labour's more efficient management of its vote was projected to be worth seventy-two seats (Johnston et al. 2002: 150). Labour achieved this more efficient outcome by means of carefully targeted campaigning, and tactical anti-Conservative voting with the Liberal Democrats, matters to which we turn in subsequent sections.

[9] This form of malapportionment will be less important in the future since, for example, the number of Scottish seats at Westminster was reduced from seventy-two in 2001 to fifty-nine in 2005.

[10] The intervention of third and minor parties also changes the number of votes that are required for victory by one of the two major parties. For details see Johnston et al. (2001).

For now, one final note of qualification is in order. Presentation of this type of evidence needs to be careful, since otherwise there is a temptation to conclude that the electoral system per se is biased.[11] The point though is that such 'biases' are contingent and reversible, and in any case are mostly not a direct mechanical effect of the SMP electoral system. While malapportionment is a fairly integral component of most SMP electoral systems, most of the other sources of partisan bias—differential turnout and the efficiency of party vote distributions (influenced by targeted party campaigning and tactical voting)—are not so much direct mechanical effects of the electoral system as political variables, components of ongoing party competition. For example, whether or not extensive tactical voting occurs at any given election depends on the desire and ability of parties to organize it. These are largely behavioural rather than mechanical matters, so that it is more accurate to say that SMP, rather than directly creating these biases, facilitates this kind of strategic behaviour.

POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES OF THE ELECTORAL SYSTEM

Impact on the party system

The search for a direct, obvious, and substantial mechanical effect of the SMP system need go no further than the size of the party system. It is well known that SMP tends to produce a two-party system in parliament. The UK largely conforms to this supposition, even though, for example in 2001, nine parties won seats (see Table 8.1). However, six of these parties are specific to the local party systems in Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. Only three parties, the Conservatives, Labour, and the Liberal Democrats,[12] contest seats throughout Great Britain.

It has become conventional to divide discussion of the British party system into the periods before and after 1974, and one can easily see why from Figure 8.2. While the precise definition of what counts as 'a two-party system' has varied, few would dispute that Britain in the earlier period (1945–70) had a classic two-party system. The top two lines in Figure 8.2 show the combined two-party vote and seat shares. In the earlier period the Conservatives and Labour combined attracted an average of 91 per cent of all votes cast and won almost all the seats (98 per cent on average). The election of February 1974 was a genuine watershed for the UK party system since it can be seen that the dominance of the 'big two' was seriously challenged by a surge in support for the third party, the Liberals. In 1974 the two-party vote suddenly dropped to 75 per cent and never really recovered (the average for 1974–2001 is 74.6 per cent). The cause of the change is clearly the resurgence of the Liberal vote, which

[11] For example in an article entitled 'The Electoral System: Biased to Blair?' John Curtice (2001: 811) concludes: 'So the electoral system was so heavily biased in Labour's favour in 2001 because the party benefited from both potential sources of bias' (the relative size of constituencies and efficiency).

[12] For ease of exposition the third party will be referred to by its current name of the Liberal Democrats (or occasionally just as the 'Liberals'), even though in the 1980s it was known as the Liberal–SDP Alliance, and prior to that as the Liberal Party. All figures for the 'Liberal Democrats' refer to the 1945–2001 period, unless specified otherwise.

Table 8.1 UK election results—Westminster parliament

Party	2001				1997			
	Votes	Vote %	Seats	Seats %	Votes	Vote %	Seats	Seats %
Labour	10,724,953	40.7	412	62.5	13,517,911	43.2	418	63.4
Conservative	8,357,615	31.7	166	25.2	9,600,940	30.7	165	25.0
Liberal Democrat	4,814,321	18.3	52	7.9	5,243,440	16.8	46	7.0
Scottish National Party	464,314	1.8	5	0.8	622,260	2.0	6	0.9
UK Independence Party	390,910	1.5	—	—	106,001	0.3	—	—
Ulster Unionist Party	216,839	0.8	6	0.9	258,349	0.8	10	1.5
Plaid Cymru	195,893	0.7	4	0.6	161,030	0.5	4	0.6
Democratic Unionist Party	181,999	0.7	5	0.8	107,348	0.3	2	0.3
Sinn Fein	175,933	0.7	4	0.6	127,144	0.4	2	0.3
Social Democratic and Labour Party	169,865	0.6	3	0.5	190,814	0.6	3	0.5
Green Party	161,926	0.6	—	—	64,452	0.2	—	—
Referendum Party	—	—	—	—	811,829	2.6	—	—
Others	512,815	1.9	2	0.3	476,590	1.5	3	0.5
Total	26,367,383		659		31,288,108		659	
Turnout (%)	59.4				71.5			
Disproportionality (GI)	17.7				16.5			
Effective number of elective parties	3.33				3.22			
Effective number of legislative parties	2.17				2.13			

Note: 'Others' aggregates forty-six other small parties and independents (in 2001) and thirty-nine (in 1997), none of which secured more than 0.5% of the vote. Given that the 'others' at both elections accounted for less than 2% of the vote total, they are excluded from the calculations of the effective number of parties and disproportionality.

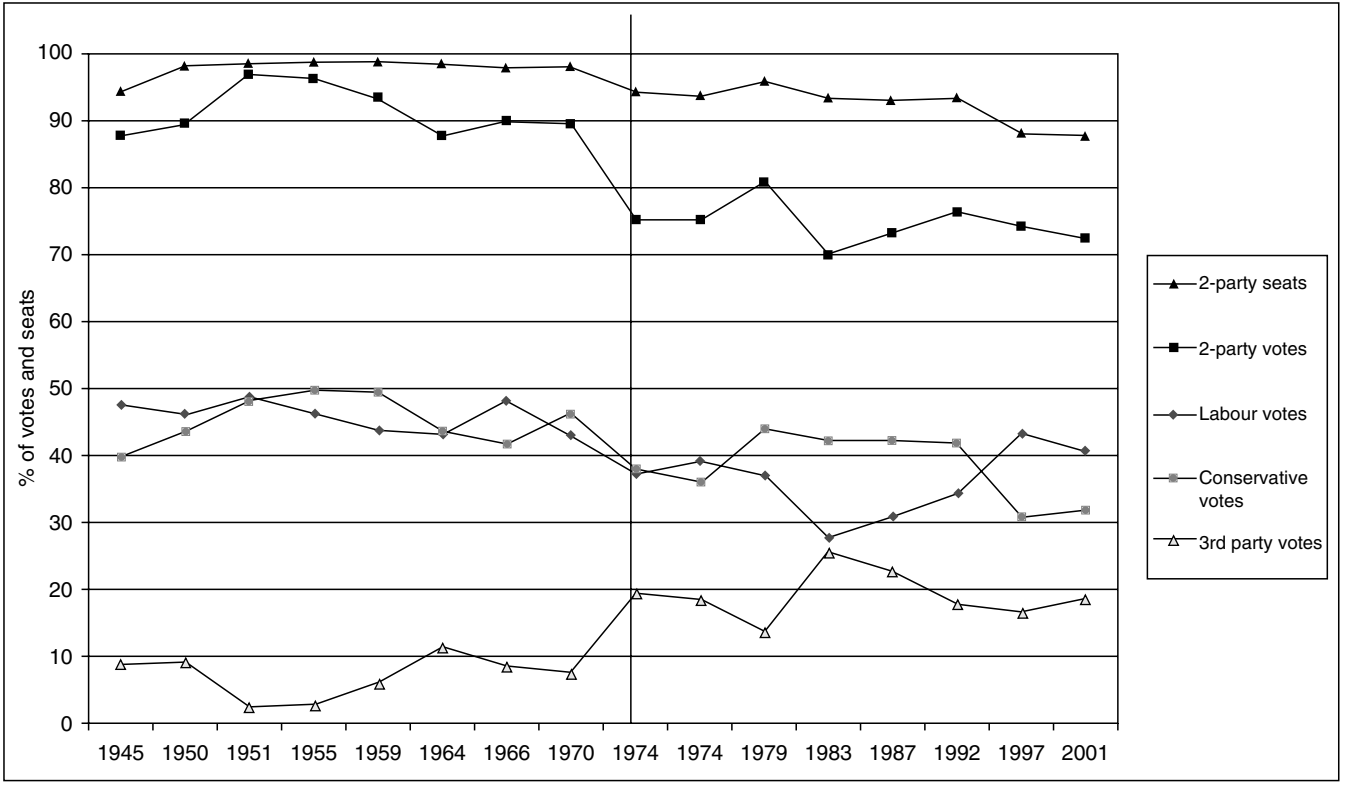

Figure 8.2 Party Support in the UK, 1945–2001

averaged 7 per cent before 1974 and 19 per cent afterwards.[13] One consequence of this is that constituency campaigning is no longer as dominated by the two major parties as it once was. For example, in 1964 Labour and Conservative candidates shared the first and second places in 89 per cent of constituency contests, whereas in 1987 this was the case in only 52 per cent of constituencies (Heath et al. 1991: 52).

This growth in the size of the party system is shown in Figure 8.3 which plots the standard method of summarizing fractionalization, the effective number of parties (see Appendix B). The effective number of elective parties (ENEP) has clearly been rising,[14] reflecting the move from a classic two-party system to what Webb (2000: 8) has characterized as 'latent moderate pluralism'. Webb advisedly inserts the word 'latent' since clearly the SMP electoral system is doing its job of acting as a straitjacket on the attempted expansion of the British party system. We can see from Figure 8.3 that the trend in the effective number of legislative parties (ENLP) (based on seat shares) is 'flat lining' at around two.[15] By imposing a very high effective threshold the SMP electoral system is protecting the dominant parliamentary positions of Labour and the Conservatives and preventing even the moderate pluralism that currently exists in the electoral-level party system from fully flourishing.

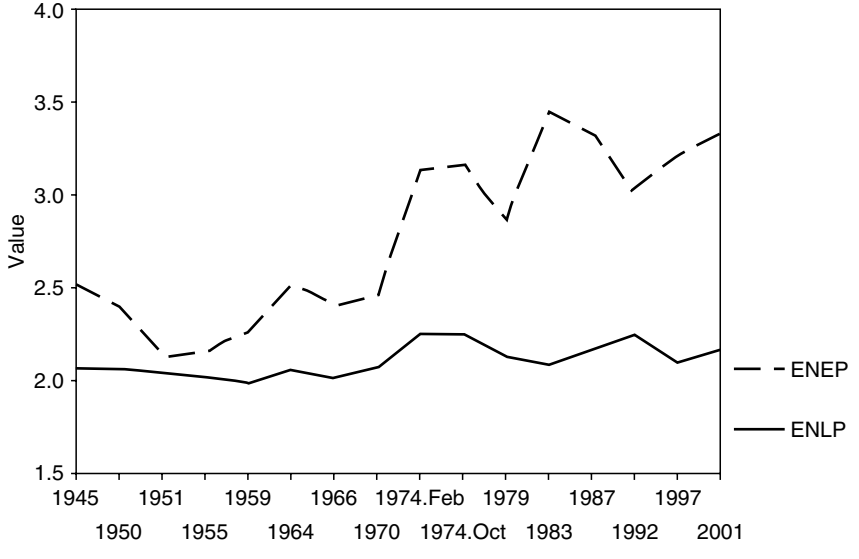

Figure 8.3 Effective number of elective and legislative parties, 1945–2001

[13] Scottish and Welsh nationalist parties also attracted many more votes and won more seats in the latter period.

[14] ENEP increased from 2.4 to 3.2 (period averages 1945–70 and 1974–2001, respectively).

[15] ENLP has increased over time by only a tiny amount. For the entire period 1945–2001 it averages 2.1 with a standard deviation of only 0.08.

Levels of disproportionality are normally expected to be higher in plurality systems than under PR, and here the UK does not disappoint. The average for the entire period is 11.6 (see Figure 8.4 which uses the Gallagher index), but this mean clearly hides the fact that disproportionality has been increasing, from a low point of only 2.8 in 1951 to a high point of 20.6 in 1983.[16] If a 'fair' representation in parliament of the votes cast in general elections is considered important, then the UK's electoral system has clearly been performing extremely poorly since 1974. Most obviously, the Liberals, having failed to change the electoral system when they had the chance in 1917–18, have been the main victims. While the Liberal Democrat parliamentary party can no longer all squeeze into the back of a taxi as was the case in 1951, 1955, 1959, and even as late as 1970 (they emerged from each of these contests with six MPs), it is still much smaller than a proportional outcome would provide: since 1974 their 19 per cent of vote has won them just less than 4 per cent of the seats (period averages).

One consequence of the resurgence of the Liberals after 1974 is that most constituencies throughout Great Britain are contested by (at least) the three main parties. And of course three (or more) parties contesting single-member districts opens up the possibility of strategic behaviour—tactical voting. The basic idea is that given that only one candidate can be elected in a given constituency, 'rationally

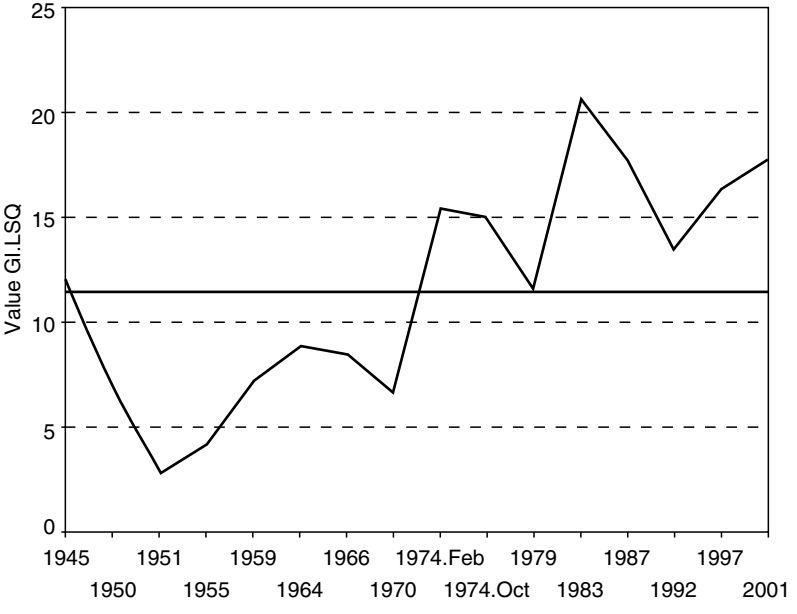

Figure 8.4 Disproportionality, 1945–2001 (Gallagher Index)

[16] Using the same periods as before, the average level of disproportionality increased from 7.1 before 1974 to 16.0 afterwards.

oriented' electors should take some account of the competitive status of the parties before deciding how to vote. The electoral system may thus encourage some voters to vote insincerely, since to vote for one's preferred candidate in a situation in which he has no possibility of being elected is tantamount to wasting one's vote. In these situations it may make sense to vote for the 'least bad' candidate among those who are competitive. Cox (1997: 83) reports that 'the literature on strategic voting in Britain is by far the largest in the world', and was first stimulated by the third-party surge in 1983 and later by Labour's landslide victory in 1997. In 1992, the overall proportion of tactical voters had increased substantially to 9 per cent, but the patterns of such voting 'were not particularly beneficial to Labour' (Evans 1994: 72).

Matters changed somewhat in 1997. Using survey evidence it was estimated that the number of tactical voters increased slightly to 10 per cent,[17] but the pattern changed so that there was some evidence of a 'small rise in anti-Conservative tactical voting' (Evans et al. 1998: 69–71). Curtice and Steed (1997) and Norris (1997) suggest that about 25 seats were lost by the Conservatives because of tactical voting between supporters of Labour and the Liberal Democrats. While Labour Party supporters have in the past been willing to switch to the Liberals when their own candidate was not competitive, what changed in 1997 was the behaviour of Liberal Democrat voters, who became much more favourably disposed towards Labour (Evans et al. 1998: 75). The most plausible explanation for this change is a political one. By the time of the 1997 election the Conservative government was the most unpopular in the history of opinion polling in Britain (Norris 1997). At the same time, Labour and the Liberal Democrats had moved closer in ideological terms and were cooperating on a proposed constitutional reform agenda. Clearly, Labour would have won in 1997 even without tactical voting; nevertheless, when the conditions are right, the electoral system does allow parties to attempt to coordinate their voters, in order to win more seats than they would with wholly independent strategies.

Impact on the parties and parliament

'The tendency of English voters to vote for parties rather than men appears to be a permanent feature of English politics from 1868 onward' (Cox 1987: 92).

The double-member constituencies that existed at that time meant that it was possible to measure to what extent electors based their choice primarily on partisan preference by examining the percentage who split their votes between the two major parties. Furthermore, the more that an MP's election had depended on split voting, the more likely he was to rebel from his party's position in parliament. Cox (1987: 92–3) shows that there was a 'permanent and large' reduction in split voting by 1868 and that 'the decline in split voting in the electorate . . . suggests an electoral side to

[17] In 2001 Clarke et al. (2004: 83) report that the number of tactical voters increased to 14 per cent. In other countries using SMP, such as the USA and Canada, the number of tactical voters has been estimated as normally around 5 per cent (Blais and Massicotte 2002: 57).

the development of party discipline in parliament'. Of course such split voting is not possible under SMP and party discipline has generally been very high, although there has been some growth in intraparty dissent since the 1970s (Norton 1980; Whiteley and Seyd 1999; Baker et al. 1999). Even though 'party voting' remains high, individual MPs in single-member districts may have incentives to believe that they can build up a 'personal vote', either by assiduous constituency service or by taking up distinctive (and possibly rebellious) policy positions. By such means they may be able to cushion themselves from adverse national swings against their party, or even provide themselves with some autonomy with which they can defy their party's 'whip' in parliament.

The election of MPs in single-member districts is likely to encourage the belief, especially in marginal districts, that there must be some effort that they can personally make to secure their position. However, MPs' lack of a position in the administrative structure, combined with party dominance of the legislature, means that they have few real opportunities 'to deliver particularized benefits' to their constituents. Mostly they can act as intermediaries and guides through the complex layers of local and central government. Still, while MPs have fewer resources than members of the US Congress, they are likely to draw a similar behavioural conclusion: 'how much particularised benefits count for at the polls is extraordinarily difficult to say. But it would be hard to find a congressman who thinks he can afford to wait around until precise information is available' (Mayhew 1974: 57). Certainly MPs do engage in a great deal of constituency service. Nevertheless, the limited evidence that does exist suggests that where there is a 'personal vote', it is fairly small, typically in the 1–2 per cent range (Cain et al. 1987; Norris and Lovenduski 1995). Thus while a personal vote may make a difference in a few very marginal seats, 'for the vast majority of MPs good works do not save—and waywardness does not damn' (Crewe 1985: 58).

Of course, before an aspirant politician can hope to build up any kind of vote he or she has to be selected as a party candidate.[18] Obviously, each party selects only one candidate in each constituency so, once selected, candidates face no direct intraparty competition (short of attempts to 'deselect' the candidate), as for example, is usually the case with multimember districts.[19] Nevertheless, given that electoral systems with single-member districts are more likely to have decentralized candidate selection in the local constituencies, the party leadership may have some difficulty in enforcing party discipline if it lacks the ultimate power to sanction its MPs. Although local constituency parties value their roles in candidate selection highly, this has not traditionally been a source of indiscipline in British parties.

Partly because levels of cohesion declined somewhat in the 1970s, the party centres took steps increasingly to involve themselves in candidate selection, and at the same time rendered it somewhat more professional and meritocratic. For ex-

[18] Non-party candidates almost always have no prospect of election, although one independent was elected at each of the 1997 and 2001 elections.

[19] Thus, in an SMP system without primaries, loyal party voters effectively have no choice of candidate except at the high cost of deserting the party.

ample, the Conservatives in 1980 introduced weekend selection boards—'managerial boot-camps'—for prospective candidates, as one of the stages of compiling a national 'approved list' of prospective candidates. Thus, local Conservative constituency parties are only free to choose among people that are already on this pre-approved list. By contrast the Labour Party central leadership had less control over candidate selection: there was no pre-approved national list of eligible candidates. Instead Labour's National Executive Committee (NEC) had the power to veto candidates after they had been selected locally. Norris and Lovenduski (1995: 76) point out that the Conservatives' approach was more conducive to party unity, whereas 'the use of veto power by the Labour National Executive, after constituencies have already selected their candidate, is a perfect recipe for conflict'. In 1992 Labour's leadership reduced the ability of local activists to select suboptimal candidates (from the centre's point of view) by introducing one-member-one-vote (OMOV)—a move widely interpreted as an internal power game rather than a great democratic initiative (for example, see Norris and Lovenduski 1995; Webb 1994; Hopkin 2001). Labour completed the move towards greater central involvement in candidate selection in 1997 when it introduced a single national list of approved candidates (Peele 2004: 298–9).

Former cabinet minister Richard Crossman noted in 1972 that 'the British cabinet's concern is not for its majority over the opposition, because that is almost automatic, but for its majority inside its own party. The key to power is inside the party' (Crossman 1972: 32, quoted in Norton 1998: 24). While there have always been some government MPs who are willing to vote against their party,[20] a former prime minister (Harold Wilson) is said to have formulated the 'iron law of back-bench rebellions', which essentially states that the maximum number of rebels in any vote of no confidence in the government is one less than would be needed to terminate it (Baker et al. 1999: 73). Wilson was more or less correct, though somewhat ironically, of the twenty-seven no confidence votes held since 1945 (Saalfeld 2003: 630), the only one that was successful was the one that defeated the Labour government in 1979, after Wilson had stepped aside in mid-parliament to make way for a successor.

Turning to the composition of parliament, on average fifty MPs are defeated at general elections, and 91 per cent of those seeking re-election are successful. Given that other members will also retire, from one parliament to the next about three-quarters of all MPs are re-elected (Norris and Lovenduski 1995: 29–31). As in most other parliaments the social backgrounds of MPs are not an accurate descriptive reflection of society at large, although the profiles of the major parties have homogenized to some extent, as most MPs became career politicians. Nevertheless, by the 2001 election there was still some social patterning to the backgrounds of MPs. For example, 48 per cent of Conservative MPs were company directors, executives, or lawyers, compared with 11 per cent of Labour MPs. By contrast Labour MPs are

[20] The average number of rebellions by government MPs (1945–2001) in a full parliament was 140, though this figure hides a wide range of variation across parliaments (standard deviation of 86), from a low of only 11 in 1951 to 309 in 1974. Figures calculated from data in Cowley and Stuart (2003).

much more likely than Conservatives to have backgrounds in education or local government: 31 per cent versus 5 per cent. The most notable change in recent years has been in the proportion of women MPs. By the early 1990s only 9 per cent of MPs were women, placing Britain only eighteenth in a league table of twenty-five countries (Norris and Lovenduski 1995: 187). The number of women MPs dramatically jumped at the 1997 election (and this was sustained in 2001) to 18 per cent, due entirely to the decision of the Labour Party to increase its number of women candidates by introducing all-women shortlists in 1997. Thus, for example, of the 120 women MPs elected in 1997, 102 were from Labour, and the number of Conservatives actually declined to 13.[21]

Government formation

The House of Commons should think as the nation thinks; but it should think so rather more strongly, and with somewhat less of wavering. (Bagehot)

Bagehot would have grounds to be pleased with the operation of the UK electoral system, since whatever its faults, there has not been a lot of 'wavering'. While no UK government has been based on a majority of votes in the post-1945 period,[22] all but one have at least begun with a majority of seats (February 1974 being the exception). In an apparent feat of alchemy the electoral system has transformed the average UK government's vote share of 44 per cent into an average seat share of 55 per cent (1945–2001), thus facilitating (mostly) stable governments.

Those who take the view that elections are more about choosing a government than electing a representative parliament, tend to see the 'bonus seats' that accrue to the leading party as one of the principal merits of the system. The transformation of pluralities into majorities facilitates stable single-party governments. It is also said to provide a clear accountability chain between voters and governments, since any vote swing against the incumbent party will also be exaggerated into a larger loss of seats than if the outcome was proportional.[23] Actually, rather than exclusively benefiting the first-placed party and hence providing the 'decisive edge' that allows it to form a single-party government, the system has tended to provide seat bonuses to both of the UK's leading parties. The average seat bonus to the Conservatives from 1945–2001 was 5.1 per cent and the Labour party has been even more handsomely rewarded with an average seat bonus of 7.1 per cent. Indeed it is quite striking that even during the long period of Conservative governments

[21] The number of ethnic minority MPs has grown from none before 1987 to twelve in 2001 (1.8 per cent of all MPs), and all of them are Labour MPs (Peele 2004: 205). However, ethnic minority communities themselves account for 7.8 per cent of the UK population (figures from the UK Office for National Statistics 2003; reproduced in Peele 2004: 6).

[22] The Conservatives came closest in 1955 and 1959 when they attracted 49.7 per cent and 49.4 per cent of the vote, respectively. Since 1974 no government has been based on more than 44 per cent of the popular vote. Indeed, the last single-party government with a majority of the votes was in 1931.

[23] It used to be popular to examine the exaggerative potential of the SMP system in terms of the so-called Cube Law—a proposition that if the votes of the two main parties are divided in the proportion A:B,

(1979–97) Labour received significant seat bonuses at each of the four elections that it lost. Of course these seat bonuses to the 'big two' have to be paid for somewhere else in the system, and it is clear that the main losers have been the Liberal Democrats, the third party in Britain. The Liberals have never received a seat bonus in the post-1945 period: indeed on average they have won 9.2 per cent fewer seats than their share of the votes, a figure that rises to 15.2 per cent when only the eight elections from 1974–2001 are considered.[24]

While Bagehot favoured the electoral system's creation of secure governing majorities, he also believed that the leading party ought to 'win'. Unfortunately, SMP cannot guarantee this, and occasionally produces 'perverse' results (in which the party that wins the most votes nationwide does not win the highest seat total), as it did in 1951 and February 1974. Again, 'perverse' outcomes are possible because SMP elections are fought solely in hundreds of separate constituencies, rather than being contests to secure the highest 'national vote'. Nevertheless, it is normally the case that the party winning the most votes will also win the most seats (as has occurred at fourteen of the sixteen elections since 1945).

At the national level the UK has no experience of coalition government since 1945. Thanks to the electoral system one party has emerged as the majority winner at fifteen of the sixteen elections, and has always chosen to form a single-party government. The exception was the election of February 1974 at which no party secured a majority. Labour, with only four MPs more than the Conservatives, formed a minority single-party government, and then called a second election later that year. At the October 1974 contest, Labour won a bare majority (50.2 per cent of the seats), but increased its lead over the Conservatives to forty-two seats. There have also been two other occasions when governments with small majorities became minority governments, due to deaths and defections.[25]

Eighteen years of Conservative rule (1979–97) based on four consecutive electoral victories, led some commentators to speak of Britain having a 'dominant party system' (King 1993). But since then there have been two landslide victories for Labour, so that it becomes tempting to think, in Dunleavy's phrase, of an 'alternating dominant party system'. Reflecting on the Conservative period of 'dominance', Webb (2000: 15) points out that 'it was in fact a surprisingly shallow kind of dominance and proved transient'. Clearly, to the extent that there is any kind of

the seats will be divided in the proportion A^3: B^3. But rather than being a law (no causal mechanism was ever specified or proved) it was really a behavioural regularity—which, rather quickly upon its rediscovery, stopped behaving regularly! Research into the 'Cube Law' showed that the operation of SMP does not necessarily take place in this mechanical fashion but depends crucially on the spatial distribution of voting patterns (Gudgin and Taylor 1979; Curtice and Steed 1982).

[24] The reason of course is that the Liberals have been a small-to-medium-sized party with fairly evenly spread support.

[25] The first was the most interesting, in that the Labour government formed in October 1974 lost its majority in late 1976 and responded to this by negotiating with the Liberals a legislative (but not executive) coalition that held between March 1977 and August 1978. John Major's Conservative government also, at least technically, lost its majority between November 1994 and April 1995 when eight Eurosceptic MPs had the whip removed (Webb 2000: 8).

dominance it is almost entirely manufactured by the plurality electoral system. A combination of third and minor party challenges, combined with partisan electoral biases, means that UK governments have progressively smaller popular mandates. The average vote share of governments elected in our earlier period (1945–70) was 47.4 per cent. Since 1974 Britain's single-party governments have been based on only 41.4 per cent of the popular vote—hardly landslides of popular opinion.

THE POLITICS OF ELECTORAL REFORM

There tends to be an inverse relationship between having the *will* and the *power* to change an electoral system: when a party has the will it does not have the power, and when it has the power it does not have the will. Reform of the plurality electoral system was first raised for discussion in parliament in 1831 (Bogdanor 1981: 97). Since then all attempts at fundamental electoral reform have failed, so that by the early twenty-first century the House of Commons is still elected by plurality rule. Nevertheless, the election of a Labour government in 1997 ushered in an unprecedented period of frenetic debate about electoral reform, and introduced new electoral systems to a wide range of other second-order assemblies and parliaments, so that the Westminster SMP system is now the exception rather than the rule in electing UK politicians, at all levels above local government.[26]

The expansion of the elective (if not the legislative) party system since 1974 has challenged the classic two-party system and led to much more disproportional outcomes. But electoral reform cannot happen unless a government breaks its historic (if implicit) pact with its main rival; namely, to resist all pleas by third and minor parties for electoral reform. The Labour government elected in 1997 broke this pact by introducing PR elections for the new Scottish, Welsh, and London Assemblies, and for the elections to the European Parliament. While we do not have space to review in detail the history and constellations of factors that led to this change in direction,[27] it is clear that Labour's long period of eighteen years in opposition (1979–97) led, by the mid-1990s, to some strategic repositioning which among other things resulted in Labour increasingly cooperating with the Liberal Democrats. It was widely perceived that divisions between Labour and the Liberal Democrats had helped sustain the Conservative Party in power for so long, and Tony Blair in particular (after he became Labour leader in 1994) was determined to coordinate the anti-Conservative vote, in order to maximize the probability of a Labour victory at the 1997 election. This is not to say that all movement in the direction of electoral reform should be interpreted in the narrow context of Labour's need to win the 1997 election. Indeed a working party was set up in 1990, chaired by an academic, Raymond Plant: the Plant reports proposed that PR should be intro-

[26] Prior to the 1998–9 period, the only regular PR elections in the UK were confined to Northern Ireland. On STV, generally, see Chapter 25 (this volume) and on its specific application in Northern Ireland, see Mitchell and Gillespie (1999). To be more accurate, the SMP system is also used for elections to local government.

[27] See Farrell (2001*b*), and Dunleavy and Margetts (1999; 2001) for good overviews.

duced for elections to the European Parliament and for new assemblies in Scotland and Wales (should these be established). The Plant committee also proposed that the House of Commons should move from the plurality system to the majoritarian supplementary vote (SV),[28] but a Labour Party conference voted against this latter proposal (Plant Report 2003).

The Scottish Constitutional Convention (SCC), formed after Labour's 'third defeat' (of the Thatcher years) at the 1987 Westminster elections, has in retrospect played an important role in framing some of Britain's new electoral systems. While all parties and other interest groups were invited, the SCC was dominated by Labour and the Liberal Democrats. An independent commission, set up by the SCC, reported in October 1995 and recommended a mixed-member system, which in Britain still tends to be known by the older name of 'additional-member system' (AMS). The proposal was to retain the seemingly much cherished 'constituency link' by electing single members in the seventy-three Westminster constituencies, but to balance this with greater proportionality by introducing eight multimember constituencies (using the constituencies that elect MEPs), that would each elect seven 'top-up' members in a manner that would compensate for some of the disproportionality introduced in the single-member seats. In other words, an MMP system was proposed (see Table 8.2). The proposed Scottish electoral system 'had a profound impact in Wales' (Dunleavy and Margetts 2001: 301) and helped the then Welsh secretary, Ron Davies, to persuade his Labour colleagues in Wales to overcome their preference for retaining plurality rule and accept a 'watered-down' version of the Scottish system, which would see a third of the members elected on PR lists. Dunleavy and Margetts (2001: 301) argue that 'its sole rationale was to maintain Labour's ability to win an outright majority in the Assembly in most years', while avoiding the accusation that retaining SMP would lead to permanent Labour dominance of the devolved assemblies, an argument that, just as in Scotland, was believed to have contributed to the failed devolution proposals of the 1970s.

Just before the 1997 Westminster election Labour and the Liberal Democrats issued a joint statement on constitutional reform, which among other things promised devolution for Scotland and Wales (as well as a London area assembly) using varieties of mixed-member electoral systems, agreed to introduce list-PR for the European Parliament elections, and promised to hold a referendum on reform of the Westminster system. After its victory the Labour government implemented all of these promises in the 1997–9 period, with the single but important exception that no referendum on reform of the Westminster system has been held. While this is not the place for a detailed review of the performance of these devolved electoral systems,[29] in general they appear to have worked quite well. For example, stable coalition

[28] The British version of SV is a truncated alternative vote (AV) in which electors may indicate only their first and second preferences. It is currently used to elect the Mayor of London.

[29] For a very useful report that does precisely this, see *Changed Voting Changed Politics: Final Report of the Independent Commission to review Britain's Experience of PR Voting Systems*, chaired by David Butler and Peter Riddell. The full report is available online at http://www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/files/108_icpr_final.pdf

Table 8.2 Variety of UK electoral systems

	System	No. of seats	District: List seats (%)	DM	Formula	Ballot structure	Candidate choice within party
Westminster	SMP	646	NA	1	Plurality	Categorical	No
Jenkins 'AV+' proposal	Mixed-member	646	82.5 : 17.5	1/1.45[a]	Majority / D'Hondt[b]	Dividual	Yes; semi-open lists
Scottish Parliament	Mixed-member	129	57 : 43	1/7	Plurality / D'Hondt	Dividual	No; closed list
Welsh Assembly	Mixed-member	60	67 : 33	1/4	Plurality / D'Hondt	Dividual	No; closed list
European Parliament	PR-List[c]	78	NA	6.5	D'Hondt	Categorical	No; closed list
Northern Ireland Assembly	PR-STV	108	NA	6	Droop	Ordinal	Yes
London Assembly	Mixed-member	25	56 : 44	1/11	Plurality / D'Hondt	Dividual	No; closed list

[a] Under the Jenkins commission's 'middle' proposal the 17.5% list seats would be allocated in eighty constituencies. Forty-four of them would elect a single list member, and thirty-six would elect two MPs.

[b] The Jenkins report does not actually mention the formula to be used for list allocation, but it was widely assumed that it would be the D'Hondt highest average system, especially since this was the system to be used in Scotland and Wales.

[c] The seventy-five MEPs in Great Britain are elected by closed-list PR. Northern Ireland's three MEPs are elected by PR-STV.

governments have formed after the 1999 and 2003 elections to the Scottish Parliament, and the PR system has facilitated some modest growth in the size of the party system. In 1997 the four largest parties in Scotland (Labour, SNP, the Conservatives, and the Liberal Democrats) had won all but three seats, whereas in 2003, seventeen seats were won by other parties or individuals, mostly the Greens and the Scottish Socialists. Levels of disproportionality are relatively high for PR systems, largely because the number of higher-tier seats and the district magnitudes in the regional list elections are too low to compensate for the large seat bonuses achieved by Labour in the SMP tier. Disproportionality has averaged 7.4 in Scotland (Gallagher index). The problem is more acute in Wales, where the two factors just mentioned, combined with the much smaller assembly size, leads to quite pronounced disproportionality, which in 2003 reached 10.4 (this compares quite unfavourably to about 3.4 in Northern Ireland's Assembly elections using STV). Dunleavy and Margetts (2004) in reviewing this problem have suggested increasing the size of the Welsh Assembly by ten seats, and increasing the proportion of list members.[30]

Important as these developments undoubtedly are, the biggest question of all remained possible reform of the electoral system for the House of Commons. The joint statement agreed upon by Labour and the Liberal Democrats prior to the 1997 election committed the incoming government to hold a referendum on electoral reform within the first term of the new parliament. The referendum would be a straight choice between the current SMP system and one alternative electoral system, as yet to be chosen. The plan was that the government would set up an independent commission to advise on which system would go head-to-head with SMP in the referendum. The Labour government quickly fulfilled the first part of this commitment by setting up a five-person Independent Commission on the Voting System (ICVS: 'the Jenkins Commission') in December 1997, which was chaired by a prominent Liberal Democrat, (Lord) Roy Jenkins. The Commission was given a difficult brief in that its four terms of reference were partially contradictory, and signalled different partisan preferences. They were instructed to find a system that maintained a 'link between MPs and geographical constituencies' and reflected 'the need for stable government' (both widely interpreted as Labour concerns), while at the same time extending 'voter choice' and ensuring 'broad proportionality' (closer to the concerns of the Liberal Democrats). Given this twin requirement of retaining constituency links whilst ensuring a greater measure of proportionality (and especially in the context of the systems proposed for Scotland and Wales), it is hardly surprising that the Jenkins Commission settled on a mixed-member proposal for Westminster.

While the commission was 'independent', its members wanted to try to anticipate what the prime minister and cabinet would accept, since otherwise the recommendations would join the historic list of reports on electoral reform that simply gathered dust. It has been reported that Jenkins met Blair in the spring of

[30] Much more radically, an independent cross-party commission in Wales (chaired by Lord Richards) reported in April 2004 and recommended increasing the size of the Assembly from sixty to eighty members, and electing them by PR-STV (see *Guardian*, 1 April 2004, p. 11).

1998 and recommended a mixed-member system with a 67:33 balance of local to list seats. Apparently this proposal was vetoed and the Commission was encouraged to work on a mixed system with a much higher proportion of single-member seats (Dunleavy and Margetts 2001: 17). The Commission also felt the need to avoid recommending an electoral system that would almost automatically guarantee that the Liberal Democrats would become a 'pivot' party. The trick as the Commission saw it was to recommend enough list members to ensure 'broad proportionality' 'without imposing a coalition habit on the country' (ICVS 1998: 51). Thus, the proposed system attempted to make it possible for a party to win an election and form a single-party government, but without the extreme seat bonuses that can accrue under SMP, which simultaneously contribute to 'overkill victories' for the winner, and may lead to the creation of geographical 'electoral deserts' for other parties, as indeed happened in 1997 to the Conservatives.

The Jenkins proposals, which became known as 'AV+',[31] attempted to achieve this feat by restricting the proportion of list seats to somewhere between only 15 and 20 per cent, as well as by the decision to allocate these list seats, not in large multimember constituencies, but rather in eighty small constituencies that would each have only one or two top-up MPs to allocate. Simulations (using the 1997 election and survey results), suggest that the Jenkins electoral system would have had a disproportionality score (Loosemore–Hanby index) of 12.9, certainly better than the 21 of the actual 1997 election, but much worse than, for example, a mixed system with a 67:33 mix, which had a projected DV score of 5.6 (Dunleavy and Margetts 2001: 29).[32]

However, it quickly became clear that there was strong opposition to the Jenkins proposals within the Labour Party, and within the cabinet. The commitment to hold a referendum on an alternative electoral system during Labour's first term was not honoured, and it was not repeated in the party's manifesto for the 2001 election. The Labour government has clearly been dampening down any expectations of electoral reform for the House of Commons, so that the 2001 manifesto merely offered to 'review the experience of the new systems [Scotland, Wales, London, EP] to assess whether changes might be made to the electoral system of the House of Commons'. A report by an academic commission designed to inform the government's review was published in 2004 (see footnote 29), but so far there has been no movement from the government.[33]

[31] 'AV+' because Jenkins proposed that the SMD seats should be elected using AV, rather than the SMP system that is more typical in mixed-member designs. Most of the commissioners felt that AV would result in fewer wasted votes than SMP and would help extend voter choice. One member of the commission dissented. The '+' in 'AV+' refers to the 'top-up' (compensatory) list seats.

[32] The Jenkins scheme had other flaws. It was quickly recognized that it was very vulnerable to manipulation and would encourage split-voting. There would be little point in voters of the strongest local party giving their list vote to their party because it would have made a clean sweep of the single-member districts and thus would not qualify for any list seats no matter how many list votes it won.

[33] The Labour Party manifesto for the 2005 general election made no commitment whatsoever to reform of the Westminster electoral system. The only sentence that referred to it read: 'A referendum remains the right way to agree any change for Westminster'. *Britain Forward, Not Back: The Labour Party Manifesto 2005*, p. 110.

Nevertheless, the short-run prospects for an electoral system reform of the House of Commons appear to have receded. If the Blair government ever had the appetite for such a reform—which it probably did not—it would surely have held a referendum earlier during either its first or second term. It appears that UK voters are in for a lengthy period of coexistence between plurality and PR systems.[34] However, while PR for the Commons seems unlikely in the near future, a return to the *status quo ante* of plurality-rule-all-round is even less likely. Whether they really want to or not, UK voters are learning about a wide range of electoral systems.

CONCLUSION

It is well known that plurality rule works best in countries that have two-party systems in voting terms, and in turn that SMP helps to prevent those party systems from expanding. It is clear that since the British electoral-level party system dramatically expanded in 1974, the performance of the SMP system across a wide range of criteria (proportionality, under-representation of medium-sized parties, governments with smaller electoral mandates, the creation of disaggregative 'electoral deserts' for particular parties in specific regions, etc.) has been increasingly poor. The principal positive feature has been the creation of mostly stable governments, though even here critics would say that single-party governments with no more than 44 per cent of the vote did not have popular mandates for some of the radical policy changes implemented by the Thatcher and Blair governments, protected as they were by the artificially created and virtually impregnable majorities in the House of Commons.

Undoubtedly, plurality rule has been under siege in recent years and contemporary Britain has a parliamentary party system that is an increasingly poor reflection of the electoral party system and thus opinion in the country. Electoral reformers in the UK continue to hope for a fairer electoral system, as they have done for over 150 years. Certainly some of the key arguments against PR (like the old chestnut 'PR leads to weak and unstable coalitions') appear less credible than ever before. Now, it is hard to deny that not only can the Germans and the Irish make coalitions work, but so too can the Scots and the Welsh. Thus the concrete demonstration effects of the various PR systems working without major problems in Britain (rather than just in the 'exceptional' and thus too easily dismissed context of Northern Ireland), suggest that eventually the House of Commons will move to a form of PR.

But not all citadels are sacked, even by a lengthy siege. Short of massive popular pressure for electoral reform (which does not seem to exist),[35] the Labour and Conservative parties may quite rationally continue to calculate that their individual

[34] Indeed there are some concerns (and a review in Scotland) about whether voters may become confused by so many simultaneous electoral systems. For an account of what UK voters know and don't know about electoral systems, see Farrell and Gallagher's (1999) focus group research.

[35] Numerous surveys have shown that electoral reform is not a high priority issue for most UK voters. And when pushed to choose between plurality and PR systems, the results appear to be mostly an artefact of how the question is asked.

and joint fortunes are better served by retaining SMP than by any 'fairer' proportional electoral system, whose direct effect would be to give many more seats to the third and smaller parties. In purely partisan terms, what's the point of electoral reform for the 'big two'? The principal advantage would be that one of them would not be sequentially excluded from power for such long periods of time. But of course they currently get all the power when in government.[36] So it essentially comes down to a trade-off between whether one 'takes turns' to have 'all or nothing', or alternatively introduce PR, and claim a share of executive power for longer periods.

EPILOGUE

In 2005 the electoral system repeated the patterns of recent UK elections but did so in more extreme and hence more visible fashions. Many things remained, more or less, the same. The SMP system again manufactured an overall majority of seats for the plurality vote winner. Although its majority was greatly reduced, Labour still won 55 per cent of the seats, thanks to a 20 per cent 'seat bonus' (similar but slightly down on the seat bonuses of 2001 and 1997). The Conservatives gained 32 seats but were still 158 behind Labour despite only trailing by three percentage points in the popular vote (see Table 8.3). The Liberal Democrats won 62 seats (the highest number for a unified Liberal party since 1923), but this remained a meagre return on their 22 per cent of the votes. In summary Labour received another 20 per cent bonus from the electoral system, the Conservatives a modest deficit ('negative bonus'), and the Liberal Democrats another large deficit.

The headline news was that this overall majority (of 66 seats) for Labour was achieved on the basis of only 35 per cent of the votes – the lowest percentage that has ever produced a parliamentary majority for any party in the UK. Indeed Britain's majority government in 2005 was elected on a lower share of the vote than most of Europe's minority governments. Given that turnout was again quite low at 61 per cent (up only two points despite a more competitive contest than had been the case in 2001) much was made of the observation that only 22 per cent of the electorate actually voted for the third consecutive Labour 'majority' government. Some comment also focused on the realization that the Conservatives (narrowly) secured more votes in England than Labour (35.7 per cent to 35.4 per cent respectively, but yet won 93 fewer seats than Labour in England), though this was something of a symbolic debating point, and not of any crucial significance under the SMP electoral system. The combined vote of the two leading parties at only 67.5 per cent was another historic low point. The only somewhat comparable post-1945 result was in February 1974 in the sense that Labour and the Conservatives *both* polled under 40 per cent of the votes, with the crucial difference that the electoral system did not then deliver a majority for either party. Overall disproportionality remained high at 16.8 on the Gallagher index, but the somewhat more even distribution of votes between the three main parties in 2005, compared to 2001, resulted in increased party fragmentation (see the indices in Table 8.3) with the effective number of legislative parties rising to almost two and a half, easily the highest in the post-1945 period.

Partisan electoral bias clearly continues to be a major factor in creating very uneven prospects for Britain's main parties. While we do not have space to examine this in detail

[36] Some argue that at least with respect to the two largest parties there is a kind of rough justice over the longer term. For example, between 1945 and 2004 the Conservatives were in office 57 per cent of the time and Labour 43 per cent—not all that far from their shares of the two-party vote, which gives the Conservatives 51 per cent and Labour 49 per cent (*Changed Voting Changed Politics: Final Report of the Independent Commission to review Britain's Experience of PR Voting Systems*, p. 20). However, comparative data do not support the proposition that SMP is more likely than PR to lead to proportional tenure of government (Vowles 2004).

Table 8.3 UK Westminster Election, 5 May 2005

Party	Votes	Vote %	Seats	Seats %	Seat bonus %
Labour	9,556,183	35.2	356	55.1	19.9
Conservative	8,772,598	32.3	198*	30.6	−1.7
Liberal Democrat	5,982,045	22.0	62	9.6	−12.4
UK Independence Party	618,898	2.3	0	-	−2.3
Scottish National Party	412,267	1.5	6	0.9	−0.6
Green Party	257,758	1.0	0	-	−1.0
Democratic Unionist Party	241,856	0.9	9	1.4	0.5
British National Party	192,850	0.7	0	-	−0.7
Plaid Cymru	174,838	0.6	3	0.5	−0.1
Sinn Fein	174,530	0.6	5	0.8	0.3
Ulster Unionist Party	127,314	0.5	1	0.2	−0.3
Social Democratic and Labour Party	125,626	0.5	3	0.5	0
Respect	68,065	0.3	1	0.2	−0.1
Scottish Socialist Party	43,514	0.2	0	-	−0.2
Veritas	40,481	0.1	0	-	−0.1
Alliance Party of Northern Ireland	28,291	0.1	0	-	−0.1
Scottish Green Party	25,760	0.1	0	-	−0.1
Liberal	19,068	0.1	0	-	−0.1
Others	270,646	1.0	2	0.3	-
Total	27,132,327		646		
Turnout (%)	61.3				
Disproportionality (GI)	16.8				
Effective number of elective parties	3.59				
Effective number of legislative parties	2.46				

Source: calculated from http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/vote2005/html/scoreboard.stm
Given that the 'others' accounted for less than 2% of the vote total, they are excluded from the calculations of the effective number of parties and disproportionality.
*The Conservative total of 198 seats assumes that it wins the one remaining seat of Staffordshire South. The election for this seat was postponed due to the death of the Liberal Democrat candidate during the campaign.

here, a simple calculation of the average number of votes per seat won by each party demonstrates that the parties continue to face electoral tasks of very different levels of difficulty. The average Labour seat 'cost' 26,834 votes in 2005, while the Conservatives averaged 44,531 votes per seat (66 per cent more than Labour), and the Liberal Democrats averaged 96,485 votes per seat (364 per cent more than Labour!). But while the exact figures vary, these ratios are a continuation of recent trends rather than something startlingly new in 2005. The Electoral Reform Society, not known for sitting on the fence, titled its report on the election, the *Worst Election Ever*,[1] and calculated that if Labour and the Conservatives had achieved an equal share of the national vote, partisan bias would have resulted in Labour still winning 116 more seats than the Conservatives.

Thus the novel feature in 2005 was really the creation of a fairly comfortable majority for one party (how comfortable in practice depends largely on internal discipline within the Labour party) based on such a low percentage of the vote, just over one-third of those who voted. With the siege of plurality-rule laid by all the other conversions to PR for substate, European and local government elections, the question remains: are the 2005 Westminster results, and the reactions to them, strong enough to shake the foundations of SMP to such an

[1] http://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/publications/briefings/election2005.pdf

extent that it finally crumbles? Probably not, though of course it is too early to say. Certainly, there has been some immediate renewed interest in the deficiencies of the system and possible alternatives to it. One national newspaper, *The Independent*, launched a vigorous 'Campaign for Democracy' immediately after the election, with articles calling for PR, and it organised a petition to 'Mr Blair' calling for a fair electoral system. The same newspaper also commissioned a post-election opinion poll on the electoral system and its leading articles highlighted the finding (of the NOP poll) that apparently 62 per cent now favoured the introduction of PR as a 'fairer' system. The question asked, however, was very much a leading question, and was contradicted by another leading question which asked 'whether it was right that a party that won the most votes should get an overall majority' – 57 per cent said 'yes'. Again the results are mostly artefacts of leading questions.

Why don't the Conservatives support electoral reform given the continuing levels of partisan bias against them? Many believe that they need a single-party majority to implement their programme, and fear that with a PR system they would be confronted with a self-styled 'progressive alliance' of Labour and the Liberal Democrats that has had a combined electoral strength of around 60 per cent at recent elections. Labour also likes governing alone, does not want to give 'the balance of power' to the Liberal Democrats, and may calculate that with a new leader at the next election it will increase its vote and continue to benefit from partisan bias (despite boundary revisions). To end with a speculation: what could lead to PR? First, a Labour calculation that a coalition with the Liberal Democrats is the *only* way to keep governing. Second, a much greater reaction of public opinion against the electoral system than occurred in 2005. The catalyst for change to PR in New Zealand (see Chapter 14) was not just that the prior SMP system was 'unfair' but that it was producing 'perverse' results: at consecutive elections (1978 and 1981) the New Zealand Labour Party won more votes, but 'lost' both elections in that it was awarded fewer seats. Imagine if Tony Blair had been returned to power in 2005 with fewer votes *across the entire UK* than the Conservatives. It may take such a 'perverse' outcome to finally bring the edifice of SMP tumbling down.

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