

UK Politics and Government – Electoral Systems

Politics Edexcel and AQA – revision notes – based on Hodder Education revision guides

Aliza Samorly

The UK electoral system

First-past-the-post, FPTP = plurality system/simple plurality

FPTP = candidates with the most votes in a constituency wins a seat in the House of Commons.

This system is used in the UK, presidential and congressional votes in the USA, India and Canada, and several UK colonies.

Features

The UK is divided into different constituencies. There are 650 parliamentary constituencies in the UK and consequently 650 Members of Parliament elected to the House of Commons.

Following the 2023 boundary review: 543 in England, 57 in Scotland, 32 in Wales, and 18 in Northern Ireland. Thus, following devolution, there are representatives of the devolved regions in the Commons and in local elected representation such as the Senedd, the Welsh governing body that is elected separately from UK general elections.

Each party can nominate only one candidate to stand for election in each constituency.

Each constituency elects one MP.

Voters marks an X next to their preferred candidate in a single-member constituency.

The winning MP is the one with the most votes, thus, plurality. The winner does not require to win an absolute majority (above 50%) of the total vote cast.

- Most seats are safe seats; a minority are marginal seats.
- The winning party often wins sufficient number of seats and can have a strong majority government (thus legitimacy, mandate), but not always, see 2017 general elections – the Conservatives formed a minority government and turned to DUP for support in key decisions.
- Because voters are likely to engage in tactical voting, FPTP tends to be a two-party system.

Concepts

Plurality = 'the most votes', the candidate that wins more votes than any other candidates. Not necessarily an absolute majority.

Safe seat = seats that are almost always won by the same given party because that party is dominant in the constituency. Campaigns tend to focus on non-safe seats constituencies because the predicted likely result in safe-seats constituencies is highly likely; thus, the campaign is less 'needed' to recruit public support. Similar to the swing-states in the USA.

Marginal seat = a constituency where more than one party can realistically win the election, thus, the key battleground for political campaigning.

Winner's bonus = FPTP tends to be rewarding for parties whose votes are highly concentrated because winning the majority of the votes is effective. Consequently, the largest party is likely to have a disproportionate number of seats share compared with the total national share of the vote; because of the division into constituencies.

Tactical voting = occurs when voters select a candidate that is not necessarily their favoured choice, in order to prevent winning from the candidate they do not prefer.

Majority government = one party is in power and enjoys a majority of the seats in the House of Commons. Thus, at least 326 seats out of 650 seats.

Hung parliament = when no party enjoys a majority of seats, leading to either a minority government or to a coalition of parties. Very problematic, difficult to govern and make decisions, impact on legitimacy as well.

Coalition government = when two or more parties share power, normally because neither one won a majority of the seats independently. The combination of seats provides the combined majority.

Minority government = one party makes up the government but it does not enjoy a majority of seats in the House of Commons. It is likely then to recruit the support of other parties or MPs for voting on key policies. For example: the Conservatives turn to DUP for support between 2017-2019; these deals are called '**confidence and supply**' arrangements.

Advantages and disadvantages of FPTP

- Usually produces a single clear winner that can form a majority government.
 - However, not always, and then resulting in a **hung parliament**.
 - For example: In 2010 the Conservative party had to resort to form a coalition with the Lib Democrats; in 2017 a minority government aided by the DUP.
- Creates a strong alliance between the MP and its constituency; can increase representation, accountability, and protection of interests of the voters especially in local matters.
 - However, the overall outcome is not proportional and may not be fair: some parties may win more seats compared with their total overall vote.
 - For example: in 2019 the Lib Dems won almost 12% of the vote but under 2% of the seats.
- The bond between the MP and voters in the constituencies enhances accountability, and by implication, representation.
 - However, many votes are 'wasted' because they do not influence the outcome in safe seats constituencies. Many of these safe seats' constituencies become void of party competition, '**electoral deserts**'.
- It protects democracy against extremist parties because it makes it much harder for them 'to break into politics' even when they run.
 - For example: the British National Party received more than half a million votes in the 2010 general election but failed to win a seat.
 - However, it prevents new fresh parties from effectively competing and breaking into the system: stagnation, inertia of the system. Not quite democratic and pluralist.
- The system facilitates the reflection of regional differences with regional unique needs and representation and accountability.
 - For example: the SNP is strong in Scotland, the Labour in inner cities and the Conservative party in various rural areas.
 - However, there is an element of inequality in the vote because votes in safe seats are less 'valuable'.
- The vote is simple, clear and easy to operate.
 - However, it encourages tactical voting.
- Providing clarity between an existing government and the opposition = a-government-in-waiting.
 - However, it produces a 'winner's bonus' wherein the winning party is generally over-represented at the expense of alternative parties.
- Relative stability.
 - However, some would argue inertia and stagnation.

Summary for other electoral systems

First-past-the-post, Plurality = UK general election and English and Welsh local government elections.

- Tends to be a two-party system, usually a strong majority government, and with little choice for the voters.

Additional member system, AMS, Hybrid = Scottish parliament elections, Welsh parliament elections, and Greater London assembly elections.

- Multi-party, difficult for one party to gain majority, and voters have two votes.
- A combination of FPTP with a party list vote that is based on Proportional Representation PR = awarding seats is broadly in proportion to the votes for each party.
- Voters face two votes – a constituency vote and a list vote that produces ‘top-up’ representatives.
- The representatives are elected through FPTP but then the list of vote is used to produce a more proportional outcome.
- Two third of the seats are awarded on the basis of FPTP wherein each constituency elects one candidate, and another third is allocated by voters choosing their preferred political party.
 - + Combination of advantages of both FPTP and party list.
 - +The outcome tends to be more proportional.
 - +Voters have more choice.
 - +Can benefit small parties.
 - Loss of some advantage of FPTP by the likely need to resort to a coalition.
 - Loss of some advantage of PR by loss in proportionality.
 - There are two different types of representatives, one with a clear constituency responsibility and one without.
 - Some candidates may be rejected by voters in the FPTP stage but being elected via the party list representation.

Single transferable vote, STV, Proportional = all Northern Ireland elections, and local elections in Scotland.

- Multi-party, a majority government is unlikely, and voters have many choices.
- Voters rank candidates in order of preference, and to get elected, a candidate must receive a certain number of votes known as a ‘quota’ based on a calculated formula.

Supplementary vote, SV, Majority = city regional mayoral elections, the London Mayor.

- Tends to be a two-party, a majority government is more likely, and voters have two choices.
- Voters have two choices, a first and a second choice. If a candidate wins an overall majority in the first preference, over 50%, then the candidate is elected.
- If not, the second round of counting begins between the top two candidates while all other candidates are eliminated.
- The second-choice votes are added to the first choice to provide two final totals. Because only two candidates were left, one of them must achieve an absolute majority.

Comparison of the suitability of the different systems, based on the objective

Strong stable government = FPTP.

Maximum voter choice = Single transferable vote.

A multi-party system = Single transferable vote.

Strong constituency representation = FPTP.

A proportional outcome = Additional member system.

An absolute majority for the winner = Supplementary vote.

Votes are of equal value = Single transferable vote.

The pros and cons for electoral reform in the UK

In favour of retaining FPTP

- Tends to produce clear decisive results with a strong and stable government.
- SV doesn't solve all the problems identified in FPTP.
- AMS tend to fail to provide one party with a decisive majority.
- STV can lead to a confusion and gridlock.

In favour of electoral reform

- Necessary because FPTP delivers disproportional results.
- SV wastes fewer votes.
- AMS allows for smaller parties the opportunity to influence decision making.
- STV requires sharing of power between different parties.

Referendum

- Referendums are public votes on a particular issue/question that is likely to have constitutional importance, hence reverting back to a form of direct democracy.
- Divisive issues within the government or the nation, a threat to legitimacy and stability.
- Relatively rare in the UK but more frequent since 1997.
- Because of parliamentary sovereignty, the government is not bound by the outcome of the referendum, yet it is unlikely it would be ignored because of the issue of legitimacy and mandate.
- All referendums are binary: 'yes' or 'no'; it can be both a strength and a weakness of the use of referendum.

Examples

2014 – should Scotland become a completely independent country? Level = Scotland.

2016 – should the UK remain a member of the EU? Level = national.

Strengths

- Encourages participation = 'pure' form of direct democracy and direct decision of policy choices.
- Facilitating constitutional changes = the UK has a flexible constitution that can be changed and the changes are based on public support via the referendum.
- Educative function = encourages passive participation, acquiring knowledge and understanding of key issues.
- Political benefits = bypassing political stalemate over specific issues that are often deeply divisive. Thus, resorting back to a form of direct democracy, back to a clear majority, direct decisions, and thus aiding legitimacy that is required for breaking out of the stalemate.

Weaknesses

- Government power = the government chooses the timing and the phrasing of the question itself.
- Complex questions are oversimplified into a 'yes' or 'no' vote; yet that is exactly what is eventually required for policy decisions.
- Misleading rather than educating the public = much information available can be biased.
- Undermining representation in democracy.
- Weak mandate = while it is back to direct democracy the turnout rate is often low, thus undermining the mandate.

- Tyranny of the majority = eliminating the view of the minority opinion on the question. On the other hand, with a low turnout (alienation, mistrust, apathy) one can argue that implementation of the outcome decision is a tyranny of the minority, because of the low turnout rate.