

Britain's electoral reform debate is too narrow

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The local elections have bolstered the argument for change. But PR is not the answer

The local elections have given Britain's electoral reform debate its strongest stimulus since 2011. Reform's breakthrough, Labour's losses, Conservative weakness and the rise of smaller parties have made an old constitutional question newly urgent. The issue is no longer simply whether first past the post is unfair. It is whether it still does the one thing its defenders claim for it: producing two broad, stable rival parties.

A consensus has formed among the smaller parties around some form of proportional representation (PR). The answer, however, is more complicated than advocates allow. It is indeed time to abandon first past the post for the Commons. But replacing it with PR would solve one problem while worsening another. Britain needs ranked-choice voting for parliament, paired with a proportionally constituted House of Lords.

The old defence of first past the post was that it had a harsh but stabilising logic. As a general election approached, third parties would be squeezed, voters would sort into two camps, parties would adapt, and the system would return to equilibrium. That argument made sense when Britain had something like a unified national party system. First past the post punished third parties and rewarded broad parties capable of competing almost everywhere.

That premise has gone. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland already have distinct party systems. England is no longer uniform either. London, university towns, the southern commuter belt, post-industrial towns, rural counties and coastal England are increasingly different electoral worlds. First past the post still pushes voters towards two-party contests where they can identify the frontrunners. But with five or six parties polling competitively, the squeeze weakens: voters cannot reliably coordinate around a single challenger, and the result is a patchwork of local contests, some genuinely multi-cornered, some narrowing to two—but rarely to the same two.

In one place the real contest may be Labour-Green; in another Liberal Democrat-Conservative; elsewhere Reform-SNP or Reform-Conservative. The national result is a system that converts low pluralities into large parliamentary majorities. The old logic has not disappeared. It has fragmented.

Proportional representation seems like the obvious remedy. It has many backers, and its moral appeal is clear: parliament should reflect how people vote. But for the Commons, PR risks making Britain's central constitutional problem worse. The Commons is not merely a chamber of representation. It creates and removes governments. A voting system for the lower house therefore determines not only who gets a voice, but who gets executive power.

PR weakens the constituency link and shifts decisive bargaining from voters to party leaderships after elections. The problem is not just that PR causes fragmentation. It also incentivises political extremism. In a multi-party political system, which PR inevitably leads to, a political entrepreneur can only achieve a 10-15 per cent vote-share by showing political distinctiveness, most readily by becoming more extreme than every existing party. Once they secure a meaningful vote-share, PR allows intensely supported minority parties disproportionate leverage over government formation, as Israel and the Netherlands have demonstrated, even if a majority of the voters might detest them. Giving extremist factions a direct route to kingmaking may trade one pathology for another.

Wales has just supplied a live test. On 7th May, Welsh voters elected an enlarged 96-member Senedd for the first time under closed-list proportional representation. The result transformed Welsh politics: Plaid Cymru emerged as the largest party with 43 seats, Reform UK secured a historic breakthrough with 34, and Labour—in power continuously since devolution—was reduced to nine. No party got the 49-seat majority. PR has delivered what its defenders promise: a parliament that reflects how Wales actually votes. But it has also delivered what its critics fear. Government formation turned on post-election bargaining among party leaderships, and a polarising party emerged as a large bloc in the legislature.

One may object that closed-list PR is not the only version of PR being advocated for. In fact, the Liberal Democrats, the SNP and Plaid Cymru favour the [Single Transferable Vote \(STV\)](#), which preserves preferential voting in multi-member constituencies. Even so, STV remains predominantly proportional: in a six-member seat, a mere 14 per cent vote share can give a polarising party a foothold whatever the rest of the electorate thinks of it.

The better answer for the chamber which makes and unmakes governments is ranked-choice voting, also known as the alternative vote. Keep constituencies. Keep directly accountable MPs. But allow voters to rank their top two or three candidates. If no candidate wins a majority of first preferences, the last-placed candidate is eliminated and their votes are transferred to the next preference marked on those ballots. The process continues until one candidate reaches a majority or is the last one standing.

It is a system which lets ideologically aligned parties transfer support rather than cannibalise each other. A voter could—without making strategic calculations—support the Greens, then Labour, then the Liberal Democrats; or Reform, then the Conservatives; without wasting a vote. A winner would have to be more than the largest minority. They would need to be tolerable enough to voters of other parties to gather transfers. By raising the bar for victory, ranked-choice voting is closer to a truly majoritarian system.

That changes incentives. Under first past the post, an extremist party can win by mobilising its base while its opponents split. Under ranked-choice voting, a marmite-like party that is beloved by some voters but is many others' last choice hits a ceiling. It may win where it is locally strong, but it will struggle to capture executive power merely because the opposition is divided. Larger parties must seek second preferences. Smaller parties gain bargaining power before elections over policy in exchange for second choice recommendations to their voters, rather than after elections over office. Counting not only voters' first choices but also their fallback choices is majoritarianism adapted to a multi-party age.

The obvious objection to this reform is the 2011 referendum, in which the electorate decisively rejected the alternative vote, albeit with a mere 42 per cent turnout. But that decision occurred in a different political world: the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition, Labour still one of two dominant nationwide parties, Scotland before the independence referendum, Brexit before it detonated old alignments, and the hard right still an extra-parliamentary pressure group. The question today is not whether to rerun 2011. It is whether Britain's institutions still fit the party system that now exists. Additionally, in 2011, Labour and the Tories had no stomach for change. Today, the stakes in electoral reform for these traditional parties of governance are as high as those of the smaller parties.

The second lesson from 2011 is that voting reform cannot be sold as Westminster tinkering to help the ruling party. It needs to be a constitutional bargain between the larger and the smaller parties. The Commons should be elected by ranked-choice vote. The Lords, however, should be reconstituted as a proportionally selected checking chamber.

That means a statutory process with long staggered membership terms—say fifteen years, with a third of the membership elected every five years based on parties' first-choice votes in general elections. A meaningful threshold would apply and rules would prevent peers from seeking subsequent electoral office.

This chamber's role would not be to make governments. That would remain with the Commons. Its job would be to scrutinise, revise, delay and, in constitutional cases,

force reconsideration. A statutory process would also remove a prime minister's discretion to pack the upper chamber with loyalists. Its proportional design would ensure that governments would need to seek issue-based support from portions of the opposition; whereas only a united opposition could veto a government policy.

Britain has been arguing about electoral reform as if the only choice were first past the post nostalgia or full PR. That is false. The country needs institutions that match its actual political geography. First past the post no longer builds a single national majority. PR in parliament risks fragmented bargaining and minority leverage over government formation. Ranked-choice voting, paired with a proportional Lords, offers a better compromise: voters keep their MPs, parties face pressure to broaden their appeal, and no government can easily turn a minority plurality into unchecked control.

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