

Majoritarianism Under Pressure: The Electoral and Party Systems

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1. Introduction

The electoral system was once seen as ‘the key to the lock’ of the British constitution (Steel 1979). On this view, the Conservatives and Labour kept their duopoly of power by locking the constitutional door to outsiders. A proportional electoral system would lead to coalition government, and the new parties in government would unlock the door to other constitutional reforms.

That view is outdated: several constitutional reforms have taken place since 1997, without electoral reform. But in comparative perspective, these constitutional reforms have been moderate not fundamental (Flinders 2005). In Lijphart’s (1999) terms, the changes have involved the federal/unitary dimension much more than the executive/parties dimension. In this book’s terms, the reforms have mainly involved geographical aspects of the concentration-of-power axis. Electoral reform might still spark further constitutional change.

This chapter thus considers the prospects for electoral reform, and the possible constitutional futures that could result from different electoral systems – or from the current system. Note that the party system is not part of the constitution, so I examine the party system primarily in terms of its effects on the electoral system and the duopoly of constitutional power. I leave aside such issues as party ideology and party campaigning.

I start by outlining four factors undermining the single-member plurality (SMP) electoral system, often called ‘first-past-the-post’ (section 2), before considering different motivations for or against reform (section 3). I then cover some possible parliamentary obstacles to enacting reform (section 4). After exploring the three most likely alternative

systems (section 5), I examine the constitutional futures that could result from changing or keeping SMP (section 6).

My main conclusion – unsurprisingly – is that electoral reform remains unlikely, and that even if reform does occur, it will probably not be a radical change.

2. The gradual decline of the British electoral system

The electoral system has come under increasing pressure from four related developments:

- a) the rise of minor parties;
- b) the decline of the ‘cube law’;
- c) the decreased cohesiveness of government backbenchers; and
- d) the rise of pro-Labour bias.

I will consider each factor in turn.

In 1951, the political scientist Maurice Duverger published a graph called ‘Elimination of the Liberal Party in Great Britain’, showing a collapse in Liberal votes and seats from 1910 to 1951 (Duverger 1964: 227). Figure 1 updates Duverger’s graph: by 2005 the Liberal Democrats had risen to 22 percent of the vote and 10 percent of the seats in Britain.

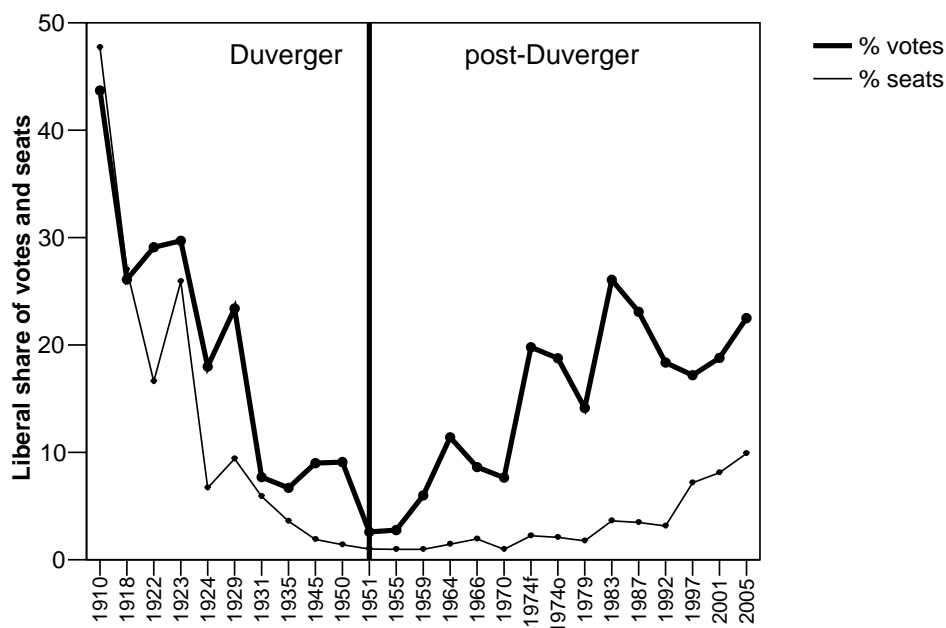


Figure 1: Elimination of the Liberals?

Notes: Figures refer to Britain only.

Liberal resurgence is the main reason why third parties now take one-in-three votes and one-in-seven seats. (Third parties are any non-Labour or non-Conservative party.) Also important have been the development of an autonomous party system in Northern Ireland and the rise of Scottish and Welsh nationalism (Table 1).

Table 1: Third-party seats

Date	Third-party seats (%)	Number of seats won by				
		Lib	SNP	PC	Ind	NI
1955	1.3	6	0	0	0	2
1959	1.1	6	0	0	1	0
1964	1.4	9	0	0	0	0
1966	2.1	12	0	0	0	1
1970	1.9	6	1	0	1	5
1974f	5.8	14	7	2	2	12
1974o	6.1	13	11	3	0	12
1979	4.3	11	2	2	0	12
1983	6.8	23	2	2	0	17
1987	6.9	22	3	3	0	17
1992	6.8	20	3	4	0	17
1997	11.5	46	6	4	1	18
2001	12.1	52	5	4	1	18
2005	14.2	62	6	3	3	18

NOTES:

1. Figures refer to UK seats.
2. Abbreviations: 1974f (February 1974). 1974o (October 1974). Lib (Liberal party, before 1979; SDP/Liberal Alliance, 1983-7; Liberal Democrat, from 1992. SNP (Scottish National Party). PC (Plaid Cymru). Ind (independent). NI (parties in Northern Ireland not aligned to Conservative or Labour).

The rise of third-party seats is the chief cause of hung parliaments. If there are no third-party seats, only a tied election would produce a hung parliament. The more seats are won by third parties, the greater the chance that they will hold the balance of power, and hung parliaments become more likely (Blau 2004: 435-8, 448-51).

A second but now less important cause of hung parliaments is the decline of the so-called ‘cube law’. At its simplest, the cube law means that in a two-party election, a party with a 1 percentage point lead in votes would have a 3-point lead in seats, and a party with a 2-point lead in votes would have a 6-point lead in seats. The cube law thus helps a party with a small lead in votes win a more secure parliamentary majority. But the cube law has now declined to a square law (Blau 2004: 432-5). John Major’s precarious

majority of 21 seats in 1992 would have been larger under a cube law, and thus more manageable.

A third development has been the decreased cohesiveness of parties in Westminster. Government cross-voting, defined as one or more government MPs voting against the whips' instructions on a whipped division, has increased in frequency and size since the 1970s as more backbenchers have rebelled more often (Norton, 1978; Cowley, 2002). We should not overstate the impact (Dunleavy 2006: 325). But governments with small majorities have found life harder since 1970 (Blau 2002: 47-54, 340-6; Blau 2004: 438-40).

These three factors should be seen together: the rise of third-party seats and the cube law's decline make small majorities more likely, and decreased backbench cohesiveness makes small majorities more dangerous. This weakens the common argument that SMP fosters secure, stable single-party government.

The fourth development has been the rise of a large pro-Labour bias. Consider a cube law with no bias: whichever party has a 1-point lead in the Conservative–Labour vote would have a 3-point lead in seats. Now consider a cube law with a 1-point bias to Labour. A 1-point lead in votes would become a 4-point lead in seats if Labour won, but only a 2-point lead if the Conservatives won.

Recent election results have been biased to Labour and against the Conservatives, for reasons that I discuss elsewhere (Blau 2004: 440-4). Bias helps to explain why the Conservatives' 8-point lead in votes in 1992 only gave a 21-seat Commons majority, while Labour's 9-point lead in 2001 gave a 167-seat majority. Labour would not have had an overall majority in 2005 without bias (if such a situation can be conceived). This bias is not set in stone, of course: anti-Conservative tactical voting might turn into anti-Labour tactical voting, for example. But Labour's apparent advantage will probably not disappear in the near future (Blau 2004: 444-5), and it might increase.

Pro-Labour bias could thus lead to an election with a 'reverse winner', where the Conservatives come first in votes but second in seats. Reverse wins could lead to popular and political pressure to change the system. A reverse-win would be especially damaging if combined with a hung parliament resulting from the rise of third-party seats and the cube law's decline. Calls for reform could be louder if this in turn followed a government with a small majority struggling to control its troublesome backbenchers – a 'quadruple whammy' for the British electoral system, with each of the above four developments combining to deal what could potentially be a knockout blow (Blau 2004: 446-7).

Reverse wins and troublesome backbenchers are less important than hung parliaments. By itself, a reverse win would only lead to electoral reform in two situations: if the popular outcry were so great that a party felt it must enact reform, which is unlikely, or if the losing party thought that reform would give it more chance of winning, a view I reject elsewhere (Blau 2008*b*: 72-5).

Note too that pro-Labour bias gives Labour further incentives to keep the status quo, even in hung parliaments. Although I previously treated pro-Labour bias as making electoral reform more likely (Blau 2004: 445-7), this overlooked the fact that bias gives Labour extra reasons to keep SMP.

3. Initiating and enacting reform

There is of course a big difference between electoral reform being considered and electoral reform actually happening. To understand the prospects for electoral reform, we must therefore distinguish between two stages of the reform process, two motivations for reform, and two focuses of reform. (For more details, see Blau 2008*b*: 63-5.)

The two stages of the reform process are *initiation* and *enactment* – starting and finishing electoral reform, respectively. Initiation is the phase of consultation, deliberation or legislation; enactment is the successful passage of legislation.

The two motivations for reform are *interests* and *attitudes*. A politician may support/oppose reform because she thinks this will benefit her (self-interest) or her party (party-interest), or she may do so because she think the reform is simply right, for example because her democratic attitudes lead her to favour a proportional system. It seems reasonable to suggest that among politicians, self-interest and party-interest tend to dominate, with democratic attitudes also sometimes important (Katz 2005: 61-3).

The two focuses are *act-based* and *outcome-based* (Reed and Thies 2001). A politician may support/oppose electoral reform depending on whether she focuses on the very act of supporting the reform, or whether she focuses on the effects of the reform itself. For example, she may support reform because she feels bound by a manifesto commitment, or because she thinks the effects of the reform would help her party.

Obviously, the interests/attitudes and act-based/outcome-based distinctions are not exclusive. And politicians may have several motivations and focuses, which may overlap or point in different directions.

Act-based motivations are the most likely cause of reform initiation, for example where a major party initiates reform to get third-party backing in a hung parliament. But

reform initiation need not lead to reform enactment. While the Liberals would probably have achieved electoral reform if the financial crisis had not toppled the minority Labour government in 1931 (Butler 1963, 83), they could not enforce reform in February 1974 – a reverse-win hung parliament – and they failed again when they held the balance of power from 1976 to 1979. A major party might initiate reform simply to buy time before calling another election and hopefully winning a parliamentary majority, hence avoiding reform enactment. So, a single hung parliament may not be enough for a third party to get electoral reform – although two in a row might be more problematic.

A major party would thus have to see reform being in the party's *outcome*-based interest if initiation is to turn into enactment – if electoral reform is to get off the agenda and onto the statute book. Neither major party currently sees things this way. Labour's 1997, 2001 and 2005 manifestos all had commitments to initiate electoral reform, but enactment has never been a serious option (Hazell 2007, 13). The Conservatives remain hostile to reform (see for example Coates 2007).

Actually, some writers see reform as being in the outcome-based interest of one or other party (for example Bale 2006 on the Conservatives; Denham 2005 on Labour). But these writers make faulty inferences about how the parties would fare under more proportional systems (Blau 2008*b*: 70-4). The most likely scenario for electoral reform is if the leaders of a major party take a short-term view, accepting a coalition with a third party rather than biding their time in opposition or trying to govern with a minority.

Even here, third-party pressure could be deflected. Consider the Liberal Democrats, who firmly support electoral reform (Liberal Democrats 2007). They currently have about three-quarters of third-party seats, and are thus most likely to hold the balance of power in a hung parliament. But if they were instead offered House of Lords reform, probably including a more proportional electoral system in the Lords, they may well accept this (see the chapter by Russell, this volume). It would not preclude Commons electoral reform later on, and should solidify their legislative influence in the upper house (Russell and Sciara 2006). As Richard Katz (2005, 62) notes, then, 'both proponents and opponents of electoral reform may be prepared to trade their preferences or interests [about electoral reform] for support on other questions.'

4. Parliamentary obstacles to electoral reform

If one or other major party initiated reform, what route would such a reform process take? In the UK there are nine likely paths to electoral reform (Blau, 2008*b*: 77-

81). Different paths affect both the likelihood of initiation becoming enactment and the type of electoral system chosen. For example, a government which fears a Commons veto might attempt to sidestep the Commons by holding a referendum before the Commons stage, not after it (Dunleavy and Margetts 2001, 317). A government could also defuse partisan controversy by asking a Citizens' Assembly to choose the alternative electoral system, as in British Columbia (Warren and Pearse, 2008). But this reduces the government's control over electoral system details. In British Columbia, for example, the citizens' assembly recommended a candidate-centred form of electoral system which politicians would not have picked. Note that the assembly's proposals were rejected in a referendum. In the UK, Labour remains committed to a referendum, another possible obstacle to electoral reform.

Of course, all nine paths in the UK involve Parliament, because parliamentary statutes are required for electoral reform. And the primary veto point in Parliament is the Commons. Would the Commons be a significant obstacle? Many people argue that electoral reform is unlikely because MPs would reject an electoral system which threatens their seats – the view that 'turkeys do not vote for Christmas', as voiced for example by Tony Benn (House of Commons debate, 5 November 1998).

In fact, the turkeys-voting-for-Christmas argument is unconvincing (Blau 2008*b*: 82-7). For example, a government could announce an electoral reform bill as a confidence motion, forcing most or all reluctant MPs into line. *Timing* could be a bigger problem. A sudden or unexpected decline may not give a party enough time to reform the electoral system. The Liberals did not reform the system when they had the chance in 1918; by 1924 they were a minor party with just 40 seats (Bogdanor 1981, 128-37). Neil Kinnock has stated that when he was Labour leader, from 1983 to 1992, he could not campaign for electoral reform – despite his preference for it – as this would have looked like an admission that Labour could not win by itself. Reform remains in Labour's interests, he argues, so Labour should introduce it while in government, before the opportunity passes (Kinnock 2005).

Timing also affects the legislative mathematics of reform. As the number of a party's MPs falls, the greater the proportion that would be needed to vote for reform. Let us assume 80 minor-party MPs backing reform, 5 Sinn Féin MPs who do not take their seats, and full turnout in a Commons vote. 321 MPs would thus be needed for a majority. (Some of these assumptions are unrealistic but the general point remains valid.) Let us also assume that Labour MPs are, very roughly, split into a third who favour

reform, a third who oppose it, and a third who are undecided.¹ Under these assumptions, a reform bill would need the backing of 242 Labour MPs – two-thirds of the current 353 MPs. If Labour lost 32 MPs, creating a hung parliament, three-quarters of the remaining Labour MPs would need to vote for reform. If Labour lost 95 seats and could just form a minimal-winning coalition with the Liberal Democrats, nine out of every ten Labour MPs would have to back reform. Worse, Labour MPs who oppose reform are more likely to be in safe seats.

So, the more a party needs reform, in a hung parliament where it wants third-party support in exchange for electoral reform, the harder reform becomes. This reflects both legislative mathematics and, in Labour's case, the current relationship between attitudes and marginality. But pre-emptive electoral reform – predicting a hung parliament and enacting reform in time for the election – is unlikely. This approach is most likely for a party facing electoral meltdown, as in France in 1985 (Tsebelis 1990, 226-8). But the Liberals did not think this necessary in 1918, nor the Canadian Conservatives before the 1993 election. Politicians are often too optimistic about their abilities to change the opinion polls, and this makes pre-emptive reform unlikely.

5. What electoral system might be chosen?

So far I have mostly talked as if reform is simply a matter of whether a party favours SMP or a different system. But there are many different systems, each with pros and cons for different parties. As House of Lords (non-)reform shows, acceptable alternatives may be hard to find even where many people dislike the status quo. We must therefore compare different electoral systems, both because different constitutional futures could result, and because different electoral systems affect the likelihood of reform in the first place.

There are three likely alternatives to SMP. The first option is to keep existing seats and introduce preferential voting, probably using the Alternative Vote (AV). Under AV, voters rank each candidate in order of preference. If no candidate has a majority of first preferences, the bottom-ranked candidate is eliminated and her preferences are reallocated. This continues until one party has a majority in the constituency.

A pragmatic benefit is that AV could be introduced very quickly, since existing constituencies could be kept. But politically, AV's benefits are less certain. AV fosters tactical voting, which has disadvantaged the Conservatives in recent elections. AV would

¹ I thank Mary Southcott for these estimates about Labour MPs.

have extended this tactical voting: in 2005 Labour's majority might have been 20 to 30 seats larger (Baston 2005, 42). The tactical situation is changing, however. The 2005 general election saw some tactical 'unwind' (Fisher and Curtice 2006), and more importantly the 2006 local elections saw anti-Labour tactical voting (Baston 2006, 58). AV could seriously disadvantage Labour if this continued. Although at least one senior Labour figure recommended AV before the 2005 election (Hain 2004), the leadership did not budge and the opportunity may have passed. As noted above, timing matters. Nonetheless, Labour figures continue to toy with the idea (Wintour 2008).

The second electoral reform is a Mixed-Member Proportional (MMP) system, often called the Additional Member System (AMS) in the UK. MMP systems elect representatives in two tiers: a 'constituency tier', usually single-member districts, and a 'list tier', using some form of proportional representation. The list tier counteracts some or all of the constituency tier's disproportionality. In the Scottish parliament, 57 percent of seats are now chosen by SMP, and 43 percent are list-tier seats spread over 8 regions. MMP systems are often praised for combining constituency-based representation with more proportional results (Shugart and Wattenberg 2001).

A mild form of MMP was allegedly agreed to in 1996, when Tony Blair accepted a 50-seat list tier on top of the existing House of Commons (Ashdown 2000, 426, 528). We can call this 'super-sized MMP'. But even a 100-seat or 150-seat list tier would only be mildly proportional (Dunleavy and Margetts 2005, 864-6). Of course, its limited proportionality makes it *more* palatable to a major party, which would not lose out much in seats. Furthermore, super-sized MMP would not require changes to existing single-member districts, so it could be introduced fairly quickly, though not as quickly as AV. Super-sized MMP also sidesteps the 'turkeys voting for Christmas' problem because it would not itself threaten any MP's seat.

However, super-sized MMP is politically implausible: it would further swell an already large chamber. A more likely form of MMP would be to keep about 650 seats, at least initially, with anywhere from 10 to 50 percent of seats in the list tier. This would require a lengthier process of boundary redistricting than the above two options, but again a small list tier would probably not be markedly more proportional than the current system, which might thus make it acceptable to major parties. An MMP system in the UK would doubtless include a legal or effective threshold of at least 5 percent, to stop extremist parties from getting representation, and perhaps in a cartelistic attempt to reduce the threat from parties like the Greens, Socialists, or UK Independence Party.

A third option is some form of STV in multi-member constituencies. STV requires voters to rank candidates in order, as with AV, but unlike AV there are many candidates in a given seat. Three or four candidates are elected in each seat in Scottish local elections and in most Irish parliamentary districts; higher district magnitudes would foster greater proportionality although large numbers of candidates in a district makes voting harder (Farrell 2001: 140-2). Lower district magnitudes are less proportional – STV with a district magnitude of 1 is, of course, AV. The government could thus enact a relatively disproportional form of STV.

Is MMP or STV more likely for the Commons? The experience of MMP in Scotland has turned some Labour members against MMP, primarily because of tensions between Labour's constituency-tier MPs and other parties' list-tier MPs (Lundberg 2006, 73-5). But STV tends to promote intra-party conflict, and MMP would give Labour leaders more control over candidate selection. Of course, politicians often act in instrumentally irrational ways when reforming electoral systems, for example because of faulty information (Benoit 2007, 369). Furthermore, the experience of electoral reform in other countries suggests that bargaining often takes electoral reforms in unexpected directions. But Labour frontbenchers and backbenchers should avoid STV if they are instrumentally rational.

Clearly, a new electoral system may not be very proportional. AV would increase the Liberal Democrats' representation, but may not help other parties in the short-term; in some conditions AV will be less proportional than SMP. A major party considering PR would surely prefer a system which was not very proportional – MMP with a small proportion of list-tier seats, or possibly STV with low district magnitude. The Liberal Democrats would be the main beneficiaries; the Greens, Socialists, UK Independence Party or British National Party may well win the odd representative at Westminster, but not much more (Dunleavy and Margetts 2005, 864-6).

Those who advocate hung parliaments as a way to introduce electoral reform should not be overly optimistic in any respect. Even if a hung parliament arises, electoral reform may not be initiated; even if electoral reform is initiated, it may not be enacted; even if electoral reform is enacted, it may not be a radical change.

6. Majoritarian futures?

I now turn to constitutional futures and the question of whether these are likely to be majoritarian. 'Majoritarian' has many meanings (Powell 2000; Blau 2005) and we need a sensible conception for both electoral and party systems.

For electoral systems, majoritarianism must involve proportionality between votes and seats. An electoral system is majoritarian to the extent that it tends to magnify the winning party's vote-share into a larger seat-share; an electoral system is proportional to the extent that it tends to translate a given vote-share into the same seat-share.

These 'tendencies' are *not* purely systemic: they depend crucially on electoral geography, electoral behaviour and party behaviour (Blau 2004). For example, American congressional elections are much more proportional than British parliamentary elections even though both use SMP. As section 5 explained, electoral behaviour can make AV more or less proportional. 'Proportional' systems too work differently in different contexts. For example, in the mid-1950s the Dutch increased their lower house's size, which would should have made elections more proportional; but more parties competed and greater disproportionality resulted.

For party systems, 'majoritarian' involves the scale from one-party dominance to multi-party politics. There is a long and sterile debate about how to describe the UK here. This debate is academic in the worst sense of 'academic': the debate is of interest only to academics and to the unfortunate students who have to answer essay questions on this trivial issue. Yet the debate often depends on simple differences in perspective. Academics usually classify party systems by looking at one part of the party system only – usually votes, or seats, or competition for government. But different academics look at different parts of the party system. Thus Dunleavy, Lijphart and Sartori all classify the UK party system differently, but it turns out that this is because Dunleavy looks at votes, Lijphart looks at seats, and Sartori looks at competition for government (Dunleavy 1999: 214-5; Lijphart 1999: 75; Sartori 1994: 33-40).

I have argued that we should count parties not at one scale but at four: votes, seats, legislative power and cabinet power (Blau, 2008a). I quantify the number of parties with the widely-used 'effective number of parties' index (Laakso and Taagepera 1979). The index provides an intuitive guide to the degree of multipartism. For example, if two parties each have 50 percent of the vote, the index is 2.0. With three parties taking 50, 40 and 10 percent of the vote, the index is 2.4, which is nearly midway between two and three parties. The index has certain imperfections (Dunleavy and Boucek 2003) but this need not worry us here.

Figure 2 shows estimates of the effective number of parties at these four scales since 1922, the first election after Irish independence. Note that even this approach focuses at the Westminster level, and a fuller assessment of 'the' British party system would require sub-national analysis.

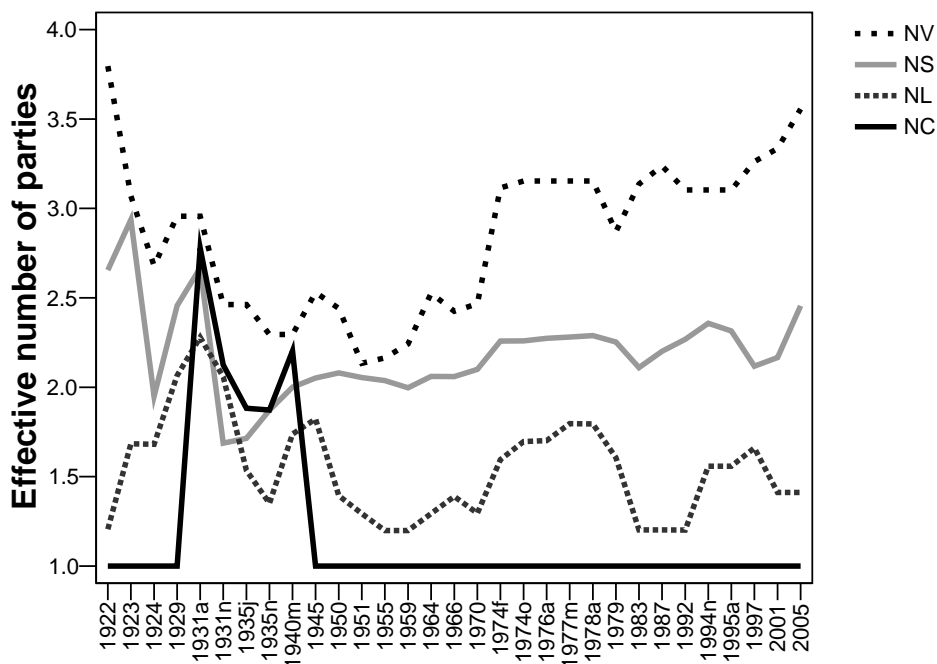


Figure 2. Effective Numbers of Parties in Votes, Seats, Legislative and Cabinet Power.

Notes: NV, NS, NL and NC represent the effective number of parties in votes, seats, legislative power and cabinet power respectively. I calculate additional values of NS, NL and NC for intra-parliamentary changes in coalition status (August 1931, June 1935 and May 1940) and intra-parliamentary changes in majority/support status (April 1976, March 1977, August 1978, November 1994 and April 1995). I weight figures by length of time, to prevent short periods having undue effect. For further details, see Blau (2008a: 172-185).

Four features are worth noting. First, only in the 1950s and 1960s did Westminster elections approach two parties in votes. We now have the equivalent of 3.5 parties in votes. Second, multipartism in seats has also increased since the war, but more slowly than multipartism in votes. We now have the equivalent of 2.5 parties in seats, although this figure could quickly rise or fall, primarily depending on the Liberal Democrats. Third, legislative power was quite widely dispersed in several pre-1945 parliaments, but one party has dominated since then, except in the minority parliaments of the late 1970s and mid-1990s. Fourth, cabinet power was quite widely dispersed in the pre-1945 coalitions, but has been exactly 1.0 since then, with single-party cabinets.

In summary, from 1922 to 1945 the Liberals' decline and Labour's rise led to multipartism at all levels of the UK party system; since 1945, creeping multipartism in votes and seats has occasionally led to hung parliaments where legislative power is more widely shared, but cabinets have remained single-party affairs.

This picture of the British party system is more helpful than traditional attempts to define it monolithically as a two-party system, or a two-and-a-half-party system, or a multi-party system. Unfortunately, a two-dimensional graph with one dimension already

taken by the electoral system means that we do need a monolithic measure of multipartism here. As this book is about *constitutional* futures, we must ultimately focus on the party system in terms of *power* – specifically, the distribution of, and competition for, legislative and executive power. I must stress that I do not view this as the ‘real’ nature of the UK party system; I am merely simplifying in order to depict constitutional futures on a two-dimensional graph. How we count parties depends on where we look, and for a book on constitutional futures we must look mainly at power – without forgetting that creeping multipartism in votes and seats can lead to further multipartism in legislative and cabinet power.

Figure 3 depicts constitutional futures in terms of majoritarianism for the party and electoral systems. (The party system, to reiterate, is not itself part of the constitution but affects many other parts of the constitution.)

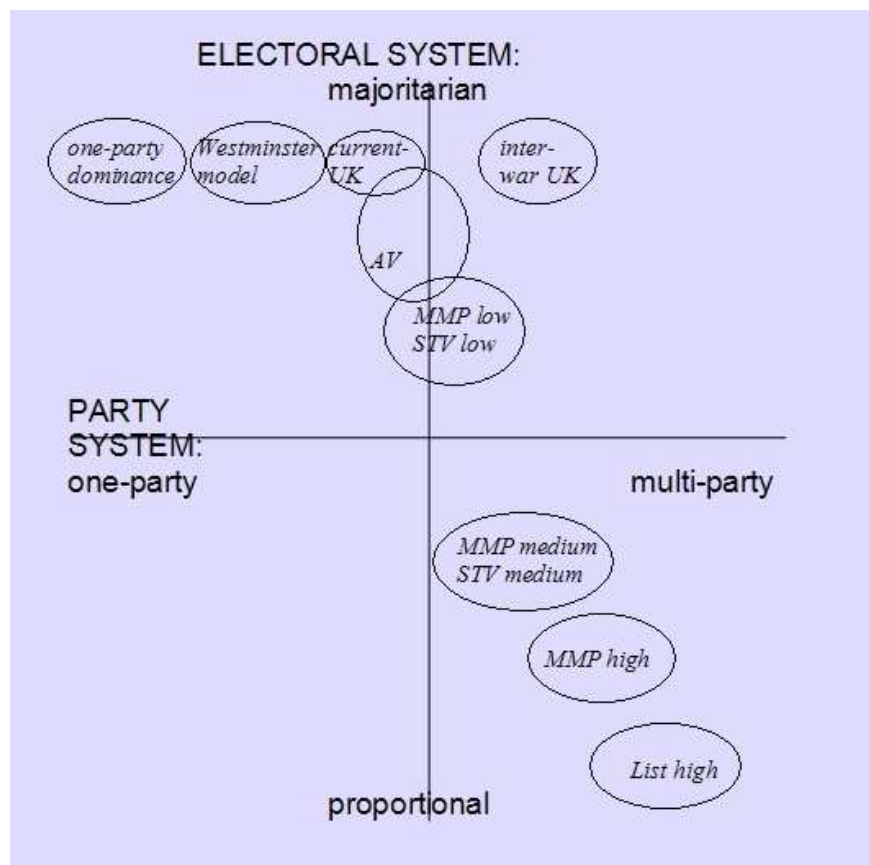


Figure 3. Constitutional futures: the electoral and party systems

One-party dominance, in the north-west quadrant, means that one party keeps winning a majority of seats. (We should not talk of ‘elective dictatorship’, a term which is insulting and inaccurate – insulting to people who have lived and in many cases died under real dictators, and inaccurate because it understates legal checks on the UK’s

rulers.) One-party dominance differs from the so-called **Westminster model** where two parties alternate in power over time. But in both cases, one party has almost all legislative and executive power at any time.

Of course, a duopoly of power is the exception, not the rule, for British politics in the late 19th and 20th centuries (Bogdanor 2004: 733; Dunleavy 1999: 214-7). The **current UK** situation is somewhat more multi-party than the Westminster model. And the **inter-war UK** saw a higher degree of multi-party politics, discussed above. This involved minority governments, coalition governments, and parliaments where the largest party could not guarantee its legislation.

The UK is currently heading towards this north-east quadrant of the graph. If creeping multipartism increasingly spills over into the legislative and cabinet arenas, and if there is no electoral reform, we may well return to the pre-war situation of coalitions and minority governments. So, one constitutional future is multi-party politics under SMP.

But the north-east quadrant would probably be unstable, in two senses. First, governments would fall more often. Second, this would in turn give incentives to voters and parties to move the UK to a different quadrant. Voters could coordinate by deserting third parties, returning to the north-west quadrant's two-party dominance (Figure 4, Arrow 1). Or parties could introduce a more proportional system, fortifying multi-party politics and moving the UK to the south-east quadrant (Figure 4, Arrow 2).

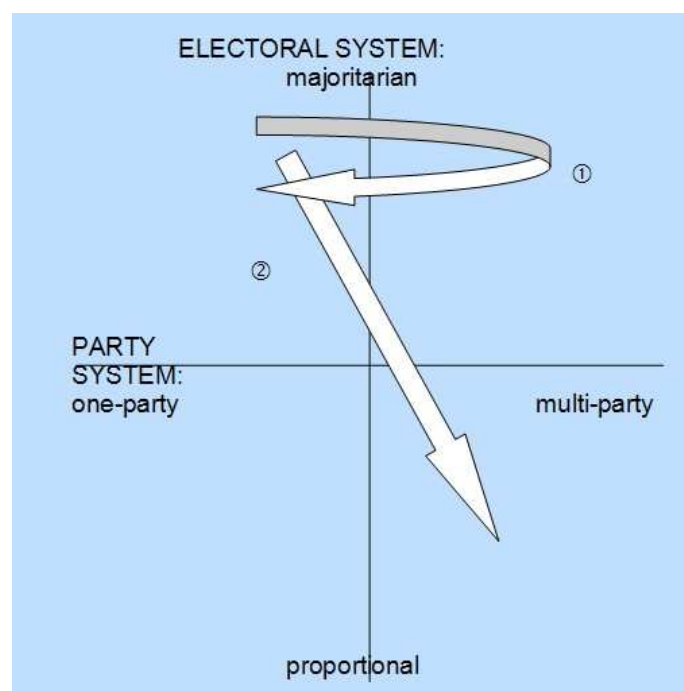


Figure 4. Two likely scenarios for the electoral and party systems

AV is sometimes seen as majoritarian because it gives (artificial) majorities at the constituency scale: if all voters complete their ballot papers, every elected MP will have a majority of votes. But my focus is on majoritarianism at the national scale, and AV can help or hinder this. Third parties should benefit from AV's greater voter choice, but this may not make election results more proportional if there is a significant bias against one of the major parties. AV can be either majoritarian or proportional; I assume that the former is more likely, although some elections will be more proportional. AV will almost certainly increase third-party representation, primarily for the Liberal Democrats, so Figure 3 depicts the AV area as more multi-party than for SMP. But positioning AV on the graph is particularly tricky.

MMP low, STV low refers to MMP systems with a relatively small district magnitude for list-tier seats (as in the Jenkins Commission's proposals for MMP) and STV with a district magnitude of 2. (STV systems are actually hard to classify in terms of proportionality – Farrell 2001: 140, 155-6.) At low district magnitudes, either MMP or STV would be more proportional than SMP, and hence would probably increase the degree of multipartism. But this would not be a major shift from the current situation, unless the greater leverage of third parties led to an even more proportional system later on, such as **MMP medium, STV medium**, which have higher district magnitudes. Examples are Scottish legislative elections (for MMP), and Scottish local elections and Irish parliamentary elections (for STV), discussed above. These more proportional systems are less likely to be chosen straight away, unless the choice of electoral systems is delegated to a Citizens' Assembly.

MMP high involves a highly proportional MMP system with a 5 percent threshold, as in Germany. (As noted earlier, STV with a high district magnitude is not a realistic option for the UK.) **List high** involves a party list system as in the Netherlands. Assuming that the latter option did not have a 5 percent threshold, it would usually be more proportional than a system with a threshold, but in both respects it is a very unlikely option for the UK.

Note that the placing of these alternative electoral systems is very approximate. Note too that the south-west quadrant of the graph is largely empty: except in small countries with few social/political cleavages, proportional electoral systems do not end up with one-party or two-party politics.

I would again emphasise that proportionality of power involves more than just the electoral system. Consider Germany, where different parties share power more proportionately than the UK (Powell 2000; Blau 2008a: 176-81). This reflects not only Germany's proportional electoral system and its coalition governments, but also its *legislative* system. The lower house's strong committee system gives opposition parties more influence, and the constitutionally strong upper house is often controlled by different parties to those with lower-house majorities. Opposition parties already exercise increasing influence in the UK House of Lords, and Commons committee reform might happen without electoral reform. So, proportionality of power can increase without electoral reform. In the UK, the legislative route to more proportional power is more likely than the electoral route, in the short term.

7. Conclusion

Significant electoral reform remains very unlikely. Even in a hung parliament, electoral reform may not be initiated: the governing party still has considerable executive powers without a legislative majority, and reform would probably not be in Conservative or Labour interests. Even if third-party pressure leads to an electoral reform process starting, it may not end in electoral reform: there are many act-based and outcome-based interests and attitudes which can drive a wedge between reform initiation and enactment. Even if electoral reform is enacted, it would probably not be a radical change, as this is not in Conservative or Labour interests.

Nonetheless, we have already gone some way along the multiparty path. Historically, this is of course a well-trodden path; 'the pitiless iron law of the plurality system' (Duverger 1986: 79) has been rusty for much of the time since 1885. Even without electoral reform, further increases in third-party influence are probable. Not only are hung parliaments and small government majorities more likely than before, but we can expect to see greater proportionality of power through legislative reform and/or electoral reform in the second chamber. The latter could well be offered in place of Commons electoral reform in the event of a hung parliament.

The most likely constitutional futures for the UK, then, are more multi-party in terms of the party system, and probably more proportional for the electoral system. Whether the former precedes the latter, or vice versa, remains uncertain; much will depend on the particular details of the time at which reform is initiated. And it is hard to predict whether the UK moves to the north-east quadrant on Figure 3 and back again, or

to the north-east quadrant and then to the south-east. But if electoral reform does occur, it is unlikely to be strongly proportional. And even an extreme electoral reform would hardly touch the real basis of the UK constitution: control by the upper ranks of party politicians.

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