

Unionism versus self-interest: would MPs support Proportional Representation?

In light of the electoral divergence between the UK's constituent nations, and the real danger of a break-up of the Union, Klaus Stolz makes the case for Proportional Representation. He explains, however, that reform will be a choice between the collective self-interest of Labour and Conservative MPs on the one hand, and their ideological values on the other.



Pro PR protest. Picture: [nuztorad](#), via a [\(CC BY-NC-SA 2.0\)](#) licence

Scholars of territorial politics have long seen the British two-party system as a cornerstone of integration in the multi-national British state. The persistent failure of the majoritarian first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system to translate existing territorial divisions into meaningful parliamentary representation, it was argued, had allowed the two major parties – Labour and the Conservatives – to manage and mediate diverging territorial interests internally, keeping separatist forces at bay.

With the election result of 2015, this perception has lost much of its power. Indeed, the apparent integrating function of the British party system has been a myth for quite some time. While FPTP may have helped to concentrate votes around the two major parties, it has also heavily exaggerated the existing electoral divergence between different parts of the country, contributing to the disintegration of UK politics. As this effect becomes increasingly obvious, strong commitment to British union might be expected to induce corresponding support for electoral reform in both the Conservative and the Labour Party. But the territorial concentration of their MPs means that career self-interest points instead in the opposite direction.

Electoral divergence between the UK's constituent nations

The general election results of 2015 and 2017 in the four constituent nations revealed an astonishing and unprecedented feature: in each nation a different political party leads the electoral league table. While this is an absolute first, electoral divergence between the four constituent nations is far from new. A look at a dissimilarity index for England, Scotland and Wales (Northern Ireland always had its own distinct party system) instead shows an increasing deviation from the overall UK result, though based on rather different figures across nations and over time: up until the 1970s, the share of votes cast per party in Scotland was rather close to that in England and so to the overall UK result. It was Wales that provided for the bulk of voter deviation.

Yet Welsh deviation has remained rather constant, while Scottish divergence has heavily increased. Thus, both, the long-term increase since the 1970s and the current upsurge in territorial electoral divergence are almost exclusively due to an increasing electoral divergence between England and Scotland. The highly different voting behaviour of citizens in England, Scotland and Wales is clearly putting the strain on the integrating function ascribed to both major parties and to the British two-party system.

Generally seen as the central institutional pillar of the Labour-Conservative duopoly, the FPTP electoral system has failed to protect the party system from this kind of territorial divergence. In fact, it has been heavily inflating the problem. Scottish and Welsh divergence from the UK result in terms of seats won per party has generally been between 5 and 20 percentage points higher than the corresponding figure for votes cast. This phenomenon was particularly pronounced during the 1980s and has reached even higher figures since 2005 with a peak of 40 percentage points difference (for Scotland) in 2015.

As a direct result of this effect, Margaret Thatcher governed the UK in 1987 with the support of less than 20 Conservative MPs from the Celtic periphery (Scotland 10 and Wales 8). In Scotland (and to a lesser extent in Wales) this representational deficit was perceived as undemocratic. It made for a widespread delegitimisation of the British political system and provided fertile ground for Scottish nationalism.

By 1997, Conservative representation from Scotland and Wales was even down to zero (!) despite winning almost 20% of the vote. Due to FPTP, the Westminster contingent of what still is known as the Conservative and Unionist Party had thus become de facto an English-only party. It was due to the Proportional Representation (PR) systems in the devolved parliaments that the Conservatives survived as a meaningful force in Scotland and Wales.

Scottish separatism and the Englishing of Britain's major parties

In the two most recent general elections this effect reached a new quality. For the very first time, FPTP actually worked in favour of a separatist party. Passing the necessary electoral threshold in Scotland, the SNP won almost all Scottish seats on just half of the Scottish votes in 2015, and still managed to hold on to an absolute majority on only a plurality of votes in 2017. The system that had long excluded the party from any meaningful representation at the UK level has now turned the SNP into the dominant Scottish force and the third party at Westminster.

On the one hand, this means that the Scottish voice is now a separatist voice, drowning the few deviant noises. Territorial division has reached the heart of the British Union. On the other hand, this also deprives both major British parties of a critical mass of Scottish MPs, accountable to and dependent on Scottish voters. In fact, despite Labour's good results in Wales, the Scottish meltdown of 2015 has turned Labour at Westminster into the second parliamentary party with a disproportionately high share of English MPs (89% in 2015 and 87% in 2017).

In a system of territorial politics that has long depended on the capacity of at least one British party to represent and mediate peripheral interests, the depicted 'Englishing' of both major British parties may have detrimental effects. With their 'SNP scare' tactics of the 2015 electoral campaign, with the heavily contested introduction of EVEL into Westminster parliamentary procedures and, most importantly, with their uncompromising adherence to the unitary principle and majority rule in the Brexit process, the Conservatives have already shown a lack of sensitivity for peripheral demands and grievances. There is little doubt that the parliamentary Englishing of political parties is also increasing their temptation to openly play the English card and thus to further reinforce territorial divisions.

Electoral system reform versus MPs' career self-interest

One obvious way to avoid this artificial augmentation of territorial divisions is to reform the electoral system. Of course, such a move would not automatically cure the underlying social and political divisions, but PR would at least temper the institutional expression of these divisions, enhance the capacity for territorial interest accommodation within the major British parties, and facilitate non-divisive territorial politics. As this mechanism becomes more apparent, the persistent unionism of Labour and Conservatives, together with the real danger of a break-up of the Union might indeed help to overcome the traditional resistance of both parties to electoral reform.

The main obstacle to this, however, remains the collective self-interest of their MPs. While the adoption of a PR system would increase the chances of Conservative and Labour candidates to re-enter Westminster in Scotland and Wales (for the Conservatives), the number of English seats to be won by these parties and thus the re-election chances of their incumbent English MPs would clearly be reduced. For unionist politicians, the issue of electoral reform can therefore be framed as a decision between their core values and their career self-interest. It remains to be seen which principle will prevail.

*This article gives the views of the author, not the position of Democratic Audit. It was first published on LSE's [British Politics and Policy blog](#). It draws on the author's [published work](#) in *British Politics*.*

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