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Facing up to multi-party politics : how partisan dealignment and PR voting have fundamentally changed Britain's party systems

Facing Up to Multi-Party Politics:
How Partisan Dealignment and PR Voting Have Fundamentally Changed Britain's Party Systems

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Abstract: In every region of the country, modern British party systems now involve at least five or six parties with significant vote shares at one election or another, a potential for legislative representation at some level, office-seeking capabilities and endurance over time, and distinctive ideological positions which are not encompassed by Labour versus Conservative differences. Whenever voters exercise their choices in proportional systems of voting (which do not forcibly suppress some preferences) they assign significant support to at least six parties, as in 2004 European election when electors in the median British region supported 5.3 effective parties. Under the current 'co-existence' of PR and plurality rule voting systems, the outcomes of PR elections have already exerted an important influence upon the development of 'major' party politics. The UK seems to closely fit a general pattern amongst liberal democracies for Duverger's Law to hold for the 'wrong' reasons. Here an increase in the effective number of parties occurs first and then it later induces incumbent political elites to shift away from plurality rule to a proportional system in order to defend their declining positions. Hence the subsequent introduction of PR does not generate any further multi-partism, but simply consolidates a change that has already happened.

To effectively understand contemporary changes in the UK political scientists and other commentators need to completely abandon the anachronistic 'legacy' conceptual apparatus of a 'two-party system' and the assumption that voting for a party necessarily betokens positive support. Instead we need to focus on how party competition works in an era where increasingly 'dealigned' voters have multiple preferences, activated in different ways at different contests, and imposing fundamental changes in how parties campaign and choose strategies from one contest to another.

These are difficult times for the vast majority of Labour and Conservative politicians, media commentators, political historians and academics studying British party politics and voting behaviour. Influenced by the Labour and Conservative monopolies of government and their duopolistic control of the House of Commons, exponents of the orthodoxy believe that the UK is still somehow a 'two party system', where only the bi-polar conflict of the two largest contenders at general elections 'really' matters. Such commentators acknowledge a 'new phase' in the development of a resilient 'two-party' politics, but one not different in kind from earlier phases or wobbles, such as the 1920s.[1] Yet time and again modern electoral behaviours throw up apparently disconfirming indicators that voters themselves now want to support a multiplicity of parties and are disillusioned with the grip of an artificially maintained 'two-party' politics. 'Major party' politicians and most media pundits cope with this evidence to the contrary by blithely continuing to not talk about other parties, or by proclaiming 'straight choices' to voters in self-evidently multi-dimensional contests.

But intellectual honesty is increasingly typing up in knots academic voices in this vein. Here, for instance, is Richard Heffernan writing in a leading undergraduate textbook in 2003:

> 'The British party system has changed, but in many ways remains the same… The established party system has changed, but it has been fragmented, not overturned… [W]hile the two-party system has clearly expanded to embrace additional parties [*the Scottish and Welsh nationalists are mentioned*] only the two major parties, Labour and Conservative, can form a single party government under Britain's electoral system. That is why, at the same time as it can no longer be described as a classical two-party system, Britain cannot be described as a genuine multi-party system. As its party system fragmented, Britain may be described as a "two party-plus" system, particularly as multi-party systems can be discerned as coming into being in the devolved assemblies in Scotland and Wales'.[2]

A careful reader may note multiple linguistic pressures at work here. The two-party system is changing but not changing, or alternatively fragmenting, or then again expanding to include other parties, or perhaps becoming a two party-plus system, or is no longer a 'classical' version of itself, while yet neither being a 'genuine' (as opposed to a fake?) multi-party system. Add in a bizarre implied claim that Britain only has one electoral system (in 2003!) and it is evident that contemporary conditions are indeed hard to reconcile with a 'legacy' conceptual apparatus inherited from simpler times.

Yet political science has its own developed repertoire of coping strategies for trying to ignore how voters are behaving and to pretend that things are still what they were, in line with the governing elites' pre-conceptions. A whole series of supporting myths are vigorously sustained by orthodox writers.[3] Acres of print are devoted to the scholastic concept of 'party identification', a 1950s construct designed for conditions in the USA (now the world's only two-party system?) Party ID is an artefact solely of a single, poorly designed and ultimately meaningless question (about which party survey respondents 'feel closer' to). It serves chiefly to buttress the view that the two 'major' parties 'count' more with voters than the others. 'Only general elections count' is the widespread myth used to explain why these contests are studied in depth with ESRC funding, while other types of voting and party competition are left almost uncovered or very inadequately researched by the ESRC. An influential series of British Election Study books stretching back to the 1970s presents general election voting in complete isolation from other contests. Analysts here set out to detect trends by looking across points of analysis spaced every four or five year apart, with no intermediate histories. [4] This stance is often supported by dismissing other contexts for voting as 'secondary' elections, showing only the ephemeral mid-term dalliances of far fewer voters, casting their ballots lightly and inadvisably because they know that the 'real' issues of power at Westminster are not at stake. It is still common to hear political scientists describe the Liberal Democrats (with around a fifth of the general election vote for over thirty years and more than four dozen seats in the legislature) as a 'minor' party – although in any other country in Europe they would clearly be a major party. And most electoral analysis still implicitly assumes that votes given to parties under plurality rule somehow must indicate positive support.

Against this well-entrenched set of positions, I focus here on capturing the key analytic issues raised by Britain's transition into a radically new era of party competition. I argue that at different types of elections we now have over-lapping party systems with up to five or six serious contenders for elected office and five or six parties with distinct ideological positions, right across Great Britain (and in addition to the quite separate party system in Northern Ireland). There is a long-run trend, which shows no sign of easing up, for voters to support a wider range of parties more conditionally and more flexibly, depending chiefly on the voting system being used and the precise context of competition. These new patterns of voting across *all* the top five or six parties can now have major implications for election outcomes, for party strategies, for the development of political issues and for government policy. For instance, parties that approach a PR election in the same way as a

plurality rule election can make serious mistakes. The roots of these changes can be traced to four contemporary developments:

- Voters have demonstrated a clear tendency to fragment their votes across more parties, creating distinctive party systems in England (with significant regional variations also), in Scotland and in Wales.

- There is a continuing process of partisan 'de-alignment' across Britain, as positive voter support for two-party politics gradually unravels.

- The 'co-existence' of plurality rule and PR elections is progressively accentuating and accelerating the transformation of both voters' alignments and parties' strategies.

- A slow-paced transition to using PR for elections has already proceeded half-way and some form of transition of representation at Westminster seems inevitable as existing multi-party politics develops further.

1. Contemporary party systems in Britain

How far has the electorate changed from supporting the two major parties? For traditionalists multi-party politics can be acknowledged in the peripheries of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland – by implication the less important, non-metropolitan, non-heartland areas, as well as containing only minorities of the UK population. But any similar trends must always be ignored, or characteristically downgraded to the status of inauthentic 'protest' voting, when we focus on England, the metropolitan core of the UK.[5] For exponents of the orthodoxy this weak grounding is why evidence of multi-partism in English alignments vanishes like an early morning mist in the tempering fires of a general election campaign. How well does this position stand up to current voting trends and support the thesis of the two party system's resilience?

To address the issues here, I focus first on the European Parliament elections of June 2004, held at the same time as the local elections in most parts of the country and as the mayoral and Assembly elections in London.[6] In all 17.8 million votes were cast across the country in this contest. After statistically removing any effect due to all-postal ballots held in four regions of England, turnout in these elections bounced up from the previous 1999 level of 24 per cent to reach 37 per cent.[7] This compares quite favourably with current (March 2005) predictions that only 50 to 52 per cent of registered electors will vote in the 2005

general election. Table 1 shows that across England the largest party's share of the vote never arose above 35 per cent, and in most cases was below 28 per cent; that the 'Conservative plus Labour' share of the vote varied between 44 and 52 per cent; and that the number of parties scoring over 4 per cent of the vote was 6 or 7 in every region bar two, where it was 5. The last column shows the most widely used (even if flawed) score for the number of 'effective' parties in competition. This index is simply calculated by expressing each party's or candidate's vote share as a decimal percentage (for instance, 40 per cent = 0.40), squaring it, and then dividing 1 by the sum of the squared numbers.[8] The number of

Table 1: Voting patterns at the 2004 European Parliament election

Region	Largest party's % vote share	% Con plus Lab vote share	Number of parties/ candidates standing	Parties with over 1% of vote	Parties with over 4% of vote	Effective number of parties (ENP) score
Scotland	26.4	44.2	11	9	7	5.9
North West	27.3	51.4	12	9	6	5.5
London	26.6	51.3	10	8	7	5.5
Yorkshire and Humberside	26.3	50.9	10	8	6	5.4
West Midlands	27.3	50.7	9	8	7	5.3
Eastern	30.8	47.0	10	8	7	5.3
Wales	32.5	51.9	10	9	8	5.0
East Midlands	26.4	47.4	9	7	6	4.9
North East	34.1	52.7	8	8	7	4.8
South West	31.6	47.1	8	7	5	4.7
South East	35.2	48.9	13	8	5	4.7
Great Britain	**26.7**	**49.3**	**36**	**9**	**6**	**5.6**
Northern Ireland	*32.0*	*na*	*7*	*6*	*5*	*4.4*
UK	*25.9*	*47.8*	*37*	*8*	*6*	*5.9*

Notes: Independent non-party candidates stood in all regions except West Midlands, London, South West and Wales. Where such candidates got over 1 or 4 per cent support they are counted in columns 5 and 6. Their support is always included in the ENP calculation. ENP is defined by taking the decimal percentage votes shares of candidates, squaring them, and then dividing 1 by the sum of the squared decimal votes shares. The GB and UK numbers count support for the Greens and the Green Party of Scotland as for one party.
Source: Compiled from Electoral Commission, *The 2004 European Parliamentary Elections in the United Kingdom*, pp. 128-41.

parties in competition in England ranged between a low of 4.7 in the south-east region to a high of 5.5 parties in the northwest and London, just a smidgeon behind the 5.9 parties in
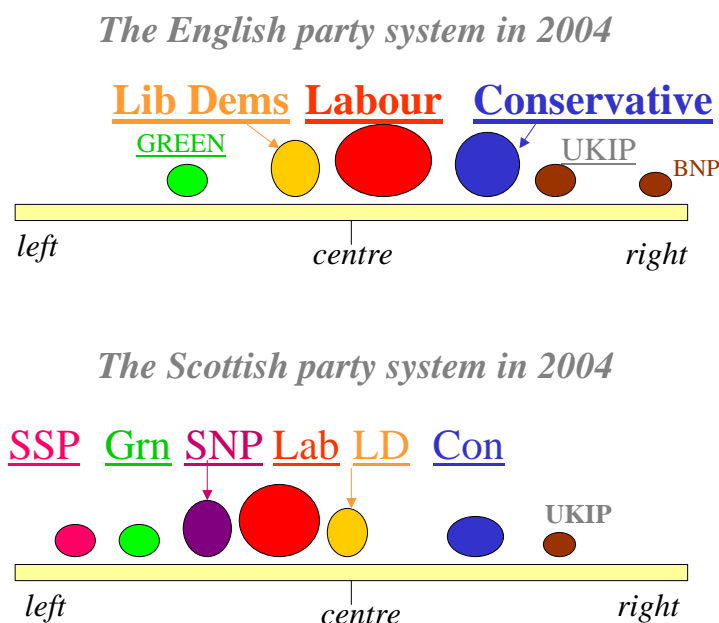
Scotland. Across Great Britain as a whole the national effective number of parties was 5.6 and the median regional score was only slightly smaller at 5.3. There is in short no evidence of *anything* resembling a 'two party system' in voters' alignments at these elections.

Although it is very important to register accurately how voters behave, the most esoteric exponents of the 'party system' concept (like Sartori, Mair and others) commonly insist that vote share configurations alone cannot define a party system.[9] In their view it is equally important to know how the parties position in relation to each other and structure their appeals, how they articulate the complete range of issues and how party divisions relate to underlying fundamental conflicts or issues in civil society. A key factor that sets an organized party apart from the isolated candidacies of independents is the party's endurance and ability to organize issues and to sustain an appeal to voters on multiple issues across time and space. Seen in these terms it is important to know not just which parties voters supported, but what they stood for, how sustainable their appeal was, how grounded they were in salient issues or distinct social groupings. This in turn is supposed to feed through (in however distorted a fashion under plurality or majority rule) into party representation in legislatures.

To assess this aspect, Figure 1 shows a summary picture of the party systems in England and Scotland, again at the 2004 European Parliament elections, arranged in a left-right space and with the 'blobs' showing parties roughly proportional to their voting support. I show all those achieving at least 5 per cent support. For England the three largest parties are in larger font and underlined to show that they hold seats in the House of Commons. Two additional parties (UKIP and the Greens) are shown underlined to show that they have legislative representation elsewhere, both having MEPs and members of the London Assembly. The BNP achieved 5 per cent support in England as a whole and just missed obtaining a list seat in the London Assembly election in 2004 by a handful of disqualified votes. For Scotland the Figure shows the seven parties obtaining at least 5 per cent support, with those represented in the Scottish Parliament again underlined and in larger font. (Clearly there is an additional dimension in Scottish politics, which is the union-independence one, not shown here, and support for Scottish independence is an important aspect of the appeals by the SNP, SSP and Scottish Green Party). It should be apparent that neither of the configurations shown remotely approximates a two-party system. For instance, Labour is relatively centrist and close to the Conservatives in both countries, and has two significant parties to its left in both countries, in addition to others not shown, such as Respect.

In terms of their ideological stances, all the parties shown here had distinct issues and social locations upon which their support was based. For instance, UKIP built up a surge of

Figure 1: Two of the party systems in Britain

The English party system in 2004

Lib Dems **Labour** **Conservative**
GREEN   UKIP
                                    BNP

left   centre   right

The Scottish party system in 2004

SSP Grn SNP Lab LD Con
                                    UKIP

left   centre   right

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support in 2004 (reaching a 26 per cent vote share and second party status in the east
midlands and southwest) by articulating a demand for the UK to withdraw from the European
Union altogether, a stance previously denied to voters by the three leading national parties
since 1983. Similarly the BNP's significant support in 2004 reflected the resonance of
immigration and asylum issues with some voters, along with some anti-Muslim sentiment.
The party achieved support from one in twelve voters in Yorkshire and Humberside and one
in 14 voters in the west midlands. Survey research in 2004 also showed that up to one in four
British voters said that they could envisage voting for the BNP in the future (see below).[10]
And the party has already won and later retained council seats. Similarly the Greens
(beneficiaries of an earlier surge at a European Parliament election in 1989) have a clear
ideological stance that is in no sense even remotely addressed by arguments between the
Conservative and Labour. The party has maintained their MEPs in London and the South
East won in 1999, and in 2004 kept two out of their three London assembly seats, initially
won in 2000. Green councillors have won local authority seats in over 60 wards and in 2005
tactical voting for a Green candidate in one Brighton seat brought them their first clear role in

a Westminster election. In Wales and Scotland the SNP and Plaid Cymru also address different issues and dimensions that are hard to show in the single dimensional representation here, while the Scottish Socialist Party also has a distinct left wing ideology and several MSPs and councillors.

Below the radar level of Figure 1 there were also emerging signs of coherent ideological positions generating further distinct party appeals in 2004, with some capacity to endure. These include: the old socialist left/anti-war position of Respect (which got nearly 5 per cent support in London in 2004 and around 2 per cent in the west midlands and Yorkshire); the rump of the old Liberal party (which got nearly 5 per cent support in the north west); two different old people's parties (which got 2 per cent support in two regions); and Christian or pro-life groups (which achieved 3 per cent support in London, building on similar performance at the 2000 and 2004 London elections).

Nor is it coincidental that the issues articulated by the newer and smaller parties winning significant levels of support at the 2004 European elections should have been important ingredients in the early stages of the general election campaign a year later. By the end of March 2005 the pre-general election campaign included major appeals by the Conservatives for support using the nationwide poster slogan: 'It isn't racist to want to limit immigration' (which implicitly suggested that immigration curbs would apply distinctively to non-white people); a clearly stigmatising 'initiative' calling for immigrants to be health-tested for tuberculosis before entry; a demand for gypsies' mobile homes sites to be more tightly regulated; and a 'personal statement' by the Tory leader that he favoured tightening up the abortion laws. For the Conservatives, it was evidently of the first importance to recapture as many as possible of the voters that they lost to parties on their right in 2004. Similarly, Labour made a concerted effort in the run-up to the general election to rekindle its dwindling environmentalist credentials and to make initiatives on aid for Africa, in a bid to win back some support from the Greens and other left parties. And all three main parties also produced a series of policies to appeal to older voters, whom they had previously neglected.

None of this implies that the smaller parties in 2004 or afterwards had the same kind of institutional structures and support as their longer-established rivals. UKIP, for instance, surged in 2004 on the back of a large donation from a previous Conservative funder and the recruitment of a media personality, Robert Kilroy-Silk. But after the election, when he called for UKIP to seek to displace the Tories, the funding was later withdrawn. The volatile Kilroy-Silk then challenged to become UKIP leader and after he was repulsed by the existing leadership, he left to form his own micro-party. UKIP's public profile worsened and its

support at the 2005 general election fell back sharply on 2004 levels. Over a longer period the BNP has been similarly crippled by leadership feuds (chiefly over homosexuality and whether or not to cultivate a more respectable image). And the Greens' aversion to nominating leaders (rather than 'speakers') has been damaging in a different way. But all this is to say that the smaller parties are not yet main parties, nor politically efficacious in the same way. It is not to say that they can be ignored or wished out of existence, nor to deny that they are likely to endure, some to grow in salience, and several to have their moments of dramatic significance, as with UKIP in 2004 or the Greens in 1989.

2. Contemporary partisan dealignment

The background conditions for the unparalleled dispersion of votes in 2004 and (as I show below) in other recent proportional representation elections, is partisan dealignment. This process is a complex one, encompassing four key changes:
- the continued unlinking of votes and party support from traditional class and social locations;
- the growth of political issues that fall outside the UK's previously limited segment of the left-right spectrum. These include all aspects of the European Union; numerous 'conscience' issues; environmentalism; Scottish and Welsh nationalism; race, ethnicity and immigration concerns (most of the time); and most recently the joint US and UK attack on Iraq.
- the re-positioning of the major parties themselves, notably Labour's centrewards journey to accept a US dominance in world affairs, globalisation pressures and privatisation, and their outflanking on the left by the Liberal Democrats (in England at least); and
- the decline in levels of voter attachments to and increasing disillusionment with the two long-lived main parties.

These changes have been long debated and recently well summarized so I will not spend much time on recapping familiar material here. A team of electoral orthodoxy 'fundamentalists', who dominated the British Election Study from the late 1980s to the mid 1990s, for a long period denied the evidence of class dealignment, arguing that the changes showed no weakening of predominant class 'allegiances', once the 1980s decline of Labour

support growth of third party voting were factored out.[11] But as Denver remarks: 'Any doubts that might have remained about whether voters were now thoroughly dealigned were swept away by events after the 1992 election'.[12] From just after Black Wednesday the Conservatives flat-lined in the opinion polls and most election results at 30-32 per cent for more than a decade. Labour won unprecedented numbers of seats in non-manual suburban and even ex-urban areas.

The same fundamentalist BES team also argued until the mid 1990s against evidence of declining 'party identification' in Britain arguing that it remained a main influence on voting behaviour (rather than just a corollary of it).[13] Supplementary studies in the same vein in Scotland even produced a now bizarre-looking claim of the 'death of a three-party system' there, following a temporary rollback of SNP support in 1979.[14] By 2001 the British Election Study found that while four fifths of respondents were coded as 'identifiers' with the three leading parties on the old question, an alternative measure of people who were stable partisans for the three main parties registered quite different results. Just 25 per cent were stable partisans for Labour, 14 per cent for the Tories and 2 per cent for the Liberal Democrats - in all, just *two* fifths of voters.[15] In other words replacing 'party identification' with a different (and better) measure produced half the level of regular partisan alignments suggested by the old, bogus ID question about which party respondents 'felt closer' to.

A closely integrated aspect of the obsession with party ID has been that orthodox voting studies almost completely neglected to study British voters' actual, complex preference structures across parties for a period of at least three decades. The party ID concept derived from work originally undertaken by Columbia School electoral analysts in 1950s America, where there were essentially only two parties that people *could* 'identify' with. Amongst the post hoc 'theories' then conjured up to mask the artefactual nature of party ID, the most enduring element has been that voters could only have this supposedly semi-mystical 'attachment' to one party at a time, a feature which stuck firm after Donald Stokes transplanted the idea with an accompanying aura of unexplained, psycho-babble 'theory' into the study of UK politics. According to Butler and Stokes:

> 'As long-established actors on the political stage *it is natural* that the parties should
> have become objects of mass loyalty or identification… A [major party] protagonist
> in the political drama can evoke from the electoral audience a response at the polling
> station which has mainly to do with the values of having *one's heroes* prevail' [my
> italics].[16]

Since one can only support one 'hero' at a time, the Butler-Stokes and later BES studies failed to include any sensible question to record in a straightforward manner whether people had any second preference amongst parties, let along third or fourth preferences. As late as the 1992 general election, after a long lead-in for recording first preferences and 'swithering' between parties during the campaign, the only question touching on preference structures at all was: 'If the voting paper had required you to give *two* votes, in order of preference, which Party would you have put as your second choice?'[17] This question is so hypothetical and convoluted that it cannot even effectively retrieve data on second preferences. And, of course, third or subsequent choices were still completely ignored.

The Essex BES team somewhat improved the questions to capture second preferences reasonably by the 2001 election study, but they also still ignored third, fourth or fifth choices. And in 2004 their book, *Political Choice in Britain,* managed to discuss supposed 'rational choice' accounts of how voters make decisions without once mentioning the idea that they would have preference structures across several parties. In a book with 57 charts and 78 tables the distribution of voters' preferences across parties is never described; the concept of preference structures does not even feature in the text or the book index; and there is no discussion of how preference structures across parties might have changed over time.[18] It is apparent that most orthodox electoral analysis still implicitly assumes that votes given to parties under plurality rule somehow must indicate unitary positive support for the party, although it is more than a decade since this position was intellectually demolished by Helena Catt.[19]

To see how little information is obtained about voters' preference structures by recording their top preference alone consider Figure 2. When someone votes for one party A over two possible alternative choices (or says that they 'support' party A or that they 'feel closer' to A) then this may mean at least ten very different things. (For simplicity I assume here that voter's rankings are always complete and transitive, as rational choice theory requires, and that there are no ties in the rankings, although both these simplifications are in fact highly contestable stances). To know that party A is preferred (using any measure of preference) over two other choices B and C, could mean that the voter is spoilt for choice at one end of the spectrum, with three parties they quite like. Alternatively it could mean that the voter just detects some minimal difference that makes a disliked party A still somewhat better than its even more intensely disliked rivals B and C. In other words once we junk the misleading intellectual baggage of party ID and its accompanying assumptions, from knowing top preferences alone we in fact know next to nothing about voters' preference

structures. With this datum alone, we only conjecture in a vacuum about what the meaning of a vote (or 'support' or 'identification') is for the actors involved. Thanks to the obvious defects built into previous BES studies and virtually all other commercial opinion polls and academic surveys, this cloud of obscurity covers all previous general elections before 1997. And even for more recent dates we still have absolutely no idea about people's third, fourth or fifth preferences in our most important academic surveys.

Figure 2: The many meanings of a vote for one party, assuming a three party system and a voter with complete preferences

| 1st choice >	2nd choice >	3rd choice	Voter's situation
Like	Like	Like	*Spoilt for choice*
Like	Like	Neutral	*Viable alternatives*
Like	Like	Dislike	*Viable alternatives*
Like	Neutral	Neutral	*Not all bad*
Like	Neutral	Dislike	*Not all bad*
Like	Dislike	Dislike	*No alternative*
Neutral	Neutral	Neutral	*Not much in it*
Neutral	Neutral	Dislike	*Can show aversion*
Neutral	Dislike	Dislike	*Negative voting only*
Dislike	Dislike	Dislike	*Hobson's choice*

Note: 'Neutral here means 'no strong feelings either way' rather than strict indifference.

Without detailed data on preference structures and on the meaning of voters' support for one party over others, we lack important information about how the electorate feel about parties, such as that shown in Figure 3.[20] The party blobs here show combined responses by respondents in 2004 to two questions. The first asked people to say whether they could vote for each party in the future, or could never vote for that party. The second asked respondents about each party whether they liked it or disliked it. From these responses I have computed the net proportions saying they could vote for a party in future minus those who say they could not, and saying that they liked a party minus those who say they disliked it. Figure 3 shows that the upper right quadrant (where parties could attract net support and are net liked) is almost unpopulated – only the Scottish National Party has this profile. Most of the main parties (and even Plaid Cymru in Wales) are located in the upper left quadrant of Figure 3, where they could attract net support in future but are net disliked by voters. The BNP clearly

arouses strong antagonistic responses, being strongly net disliked and not a viable party for the vast majority of respondents. The Greens are in the same quadrant, so also seem to arouse strong antipathies, but they are much closer to the origin. The overall picture emerging in 2004 then is of new and old parties who are at best tolerated in a resigned fashion by a majority of voters, without being widely liked.

Figure 3: How voters viewed the political parties in 2004
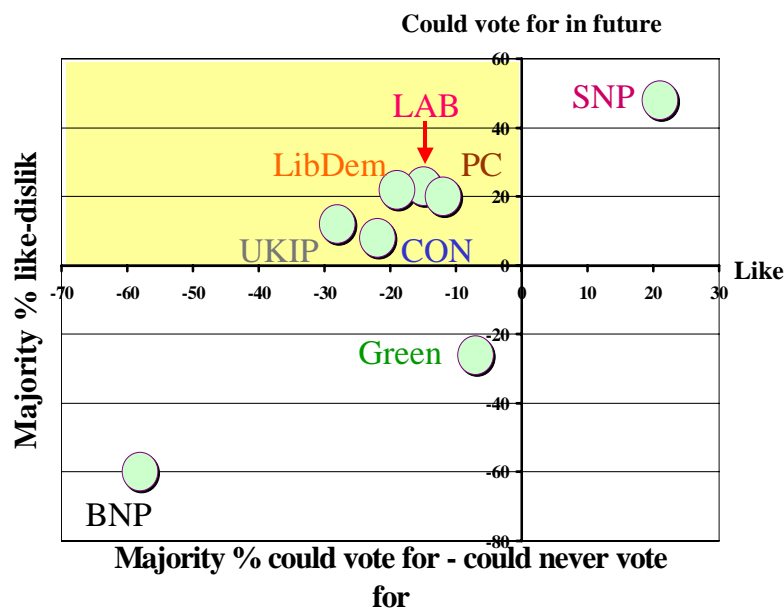
There is a second reason why voters' preference structures across parties have been left unstudied over decades. Short-sighted governing elites want social science research to focus on just the alignments that decide Westminster elections and control the levers of state power, and they are able to get their way because they ultimately control ESRC funding. But Conservative and Labour politicians and their civil servants have never even had to argue hard for staying focused on first preferences, because most political scientists have fully shared their short-termist and 'system biased' view of what political behaviour 'counts' and what is irrelevant. The electoral orthodoxy's attitude has been that if second, third and subsequent preferences cannot be expressed under plurality rule, why bother studying them?

The only narrowly restrictive exception to this stance has been a sterile and almost unchanged scholastic debate amongst electoral analysts about estimating how far citizens vote 'tactically'. Ironically the BES team up to 1992 criticized their predecessors for being

short-sighted here: 'In most studies of electoral behaviour the assumption is usually made that people vote for the party they like best'. Yet they then went on to define an ultra-orthodox stance sceptical of tactical voting by estimating it in a very restrictive way using the answer to one flawed question, suggesting that in 1983 and 1987 only one in sixteen people voted tactically.[21] Yet Figure 2 makes it crystal clear that in some sense almost every vote is tactical and intended to produce some effect *important to the voter* – it is just that this intention may well not be recognized at all by electoral analysts, let alone judged as 'valid' or efficacious in their system-biased view of the world.

To see how citizens often get these judgements right and analysts get them wrong, consider the millions of British voters who did not vote tactically for *second* placed parties that they judged had no effective chance of winning (like Labour in many south west England Tory seats in 1987). Instead they decided over the course of two or three elections to back the initially third-placed candidate (the Liberal Democrats in many south west seats, but also Labour in some working class areas where its support had been artificially depressed in the 1980s). These voters reasoned that the third-placed party would have a better long-run chance of winning the seat. In all analysts' coding frames, this would count initially as ineffective behaviour, shifting from a second-placed to a third-placed party in order to defeat a disliked incumbent. Yet in terms of rational choice spatial models it makes superb strategic sense. And empirically over two or three elections, by 1997 these longer-view voters transformed politics in many regions of England, especially in the south west.

The importance of tactical voting in deciding Westminster context outcomes is now at last acknowledged as critical, although what counts as tactical voting is still estimated in highly restrictive ways. But the more general and fundamental importance of second and subsequent preferences in determining how electoral change works under the forced conditions created by plurality rule voting has only just begun to be dimly appreciated. To give one example, for Labour and Liberal Democrat voters to behave co-operatively to oust the Conservatives, as they did very extensively in 1997, several different things had to happen. The two parties had to communicate to their voters that they were in some sense connected (which they did via the agreement on constitutional reform); [22] the parties had to co-ordinate their behaviours and their local signals to voters, concentrating their campaigning efforts in different seats, which they duly did; and voters themselves had to see the alternative recipients of their votes as legitimate. To see how effectively this complex manoeuvre worked, consider Figure 3, which shows how the balance of Liberal Democrats' second preferences across the Conservatives and Labour changed between the Tory victory in 1992

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and Labour's 1997 landslide. In 1992 Liberal Democrat voters narrowly preferred the Tories to Labour in ten of the twelve regions in England shown in Figure 4, whereas by 1997 Labour had a commanding lead in nine regions and a narrower lead in the rest. It was this tidal change in people's second and subsequent preferences, far more than the pro-Labour biases of the electoral system per se, that helped fuel the transition from a period of Tory hegemony to one of Labour predominance. And it was potentially ominous sign for Labour in 2005 that Liberal Democrat voters were once again more of less indifferent between Labour and the Tories in their second preferences.

Figure 4: The balance Liberal Democrat voters' second preferences between the Conservatives and Labour in the regions of England at the 1992 and 1997 general elections

REGION	1992	1997
North west urban	8	-42
South west	8	-42
West Midlands urban	15	-41
London	-7	-36
West Midlands rest	15	-35
Yorkshire: rest	5	-32
Yorkshire: urban	5	-29
East Anglia	14	-28
South east	7	-27
East Midlands	10	-21
North	0	-15
North west: rest	8	-14

Note: I distinguish here between the conurbation areas of the North West, West Midlands and Yorkshire and Humberside regions and their more rural hinterland areas.
Source: P. Dunleavy, H. Margetts and S. Weir, *Replaying the 1992 General Election* (London: LSE Public Policy Group and the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust, 1992), p. 4; and P. Dunleavy, H. Margetts and S. Weir, *Making Votes Count: Replying the 1997 General Election* (London: Democratic Audit of the UK, 1997).

There is a final dimension of how partisan dealignment affects electoral behaviour, its relevance for turnout decisions. General election voting in Britain fell from 77 per cent in 1992 to below 59 per cent in 2001 and current estimates (in March 2005) suggest that it may

fall further in the May 2005 general election (to 50 to 53 per cent). A continuous decline of this magnitude across four consecutive elections is without parallel amongst established liberal democracies. Looking at patterns of voting in the UK suggests that there are around two fifths of voters who are regularly interested in politics and broadly turnout at more or less every election they can. In 1992 around two thirds of the less interested remaining 60 per cent of electors turned out to vote, but by 2005 on current projections less than a quarter could do so – a major change. David Huang has shown that non-turnout has long been strongly explained in survey data by respondents having a low degree of trust in the 'two party system', and hence that non-voting is part of a continuity of behaviours with third or fourth party voting.[23]

## 3. How the co-existence of plurality and proportional voting systems affects voters and parties

Exponents of the voting studies orthodoxy in the UK still manage to completely ignore the possibility that the plurality system used for Westminster elections may affect how people cast their votes, and even form their preference structures. For instance, unwary student readers of Jocelyn Evans' 2004 textbook on *Voters and Voting,* will find not the slightest mention that electoral systems can have any impacts on people's political alignments. Apparently, people vote the same way whatever electoral system is used to count their ballots.[24] In fact this position is a central plank of the system-biased orthodoxy in the UK, sustained largely by ignoring the issues rather than by any explicit argument. A few pioneering analyses of how people cast general election and local election ballots held on the same day provided early evidence of 'vote-splitting' by large numbers of voters.[25] Some changes of votes respond to different tactical situations at local authority and Parliamentary constituency levels, and some to different issue mixes. But this pioneering work was largely ignored, or treated as an oddity, rather than a clue to a central process underlying people's votes.

The advent of major proportional representation systems since 1999 has also changed the evidence base crucially because most systems allow people to express multiple preferences. The 'British AMS' systems used for electing the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh National Assembly and the Greater London Assembly let voters express two preferences, in a constituency vote and a top up vote. In London the Assembly vote always coincides with the

Mayoral election, where people can express a first and second preference – casting four votes on the same day. STV is used in Northern Ireland and is being introduced for Scottish local government (although in a form that may not operate very proportionally). The List PR system used for the European Parliament elections is a top-preference only system, but it is reasonably proportional and in 2004 was held simultaneously with local elections in many parts of Britain, especially in London where it was the last of five votes that people cast at the same time. In all these systems there is extensive evidence of vote-splitting – with nearly a quarter of Scottish and Welsh voters casting one of their two votes for different parties. Over two fifths of London voters split one of their four votes in 2000 when Ken Livingstone stood as an independent candidate, which might have been dismissed as a 'special case'. But in 2004 Livingstone's return to the Labour fold cut this proportion down only to 34 per cent.[26] Even people who respond affirmatively to party ID questions commonly give support to different parties, although the two main parties' supporters are the still the most 'loyal'.

But paying attention narrowly to vote-splitting captures only a small fraction of the difference that proportional elections make to the ways that voters behave. Figure 5 above shows that the much bigger impact is to broaden hugely the number of parties that voters support in the first place. In general elections conducted under plurality rule since 1992 the effective number of parties (ENP) has varied been 2.2 and 3.1. But in PR elections since 1999 the ENP number has varied between 3 and 5.8 parties, and there have clearly been major increases in ENP scores in Scotland (up from 3.3 parties in 1999 to 4.3 in 2003), in London (up from 4.7 parties in 2000 to 5.8 in 2004), and in the European elections (up from 4.3 parties in 1999 to 5.1 in 2004). In Wales the Plaid Cymru surge in 1999, responding to Tony Blair's unpopular imposition of Alun Michael as the Welsh Labour leader, produced a strong ENP score of 3 parties, which then did not change in 2003, when the Plaid tide receded from its unprecedented peak but newer parties picked up votes. These differences between plurality and PR elections are already clear from the raw data in Figure 5, but it is important to bear in mind also that the effective floor for the ENP score in any kind of competitive partisan situation is going to be around 1.5 parties. So to see the real impact that electoral system difference make you rally need to subtract this minimum level and look at how much increment there is under the two different classes of system. Roughly speaking plurality rule elections adds another 0.7 to 1.5 parties to the minimum level, while proportional systems add from 1.5 to 4.3 parties.

Figure 5: The effective number of parties scores in main elections since 1992, Great Britain
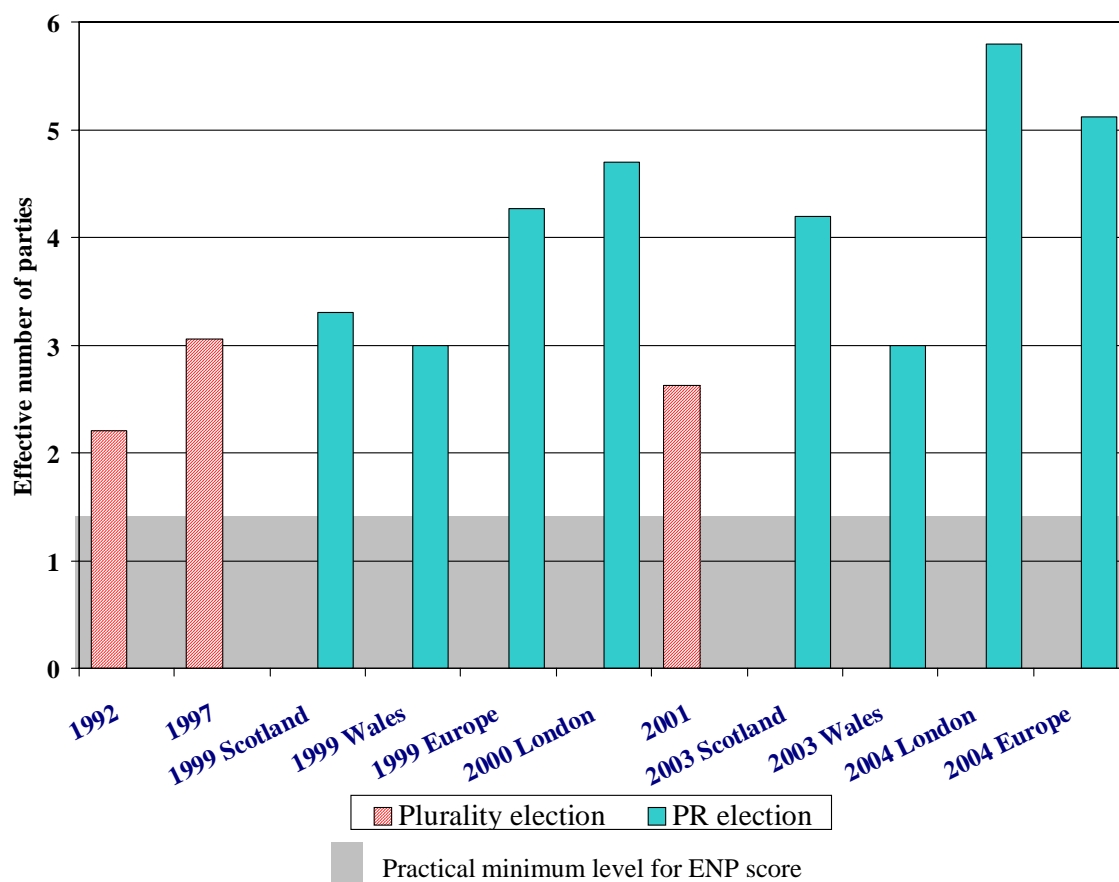

How can we explain these very strong differences in people's political behaviour across the different systems? To some degree there are varying conditional effects. There are different issue mixes at the different contests and the proportions of voters turning out in the London and European elections. Exponents of the electoral studies orthodoxy have been quick to devise rationalizations to support their view that only general elections 'really count' or 'really' define partisan alignments. In the early days of devolution it was common to hear commentators argue that the Edinburgh Parliament elections in 1999 were clearly seen as 'secondary elections' because turnout was 'only 59 per cent' (down from xx per cent in the 1997 general election) – a refrain picked up the English press to claim that the new legislature was coolly received. However, Scottish turnout in the 2001 general election then came in at just one per cent below the 1999 level. Much the same commentary was repeated in 2003 when Scottish Parliament turnout fell to 50 per cent – but current projections for Scottish

voting level in 2005 are once again much the same. Everything else in the 'secondary elections' concept seems to be just a crystallization of the electoral studies orthodoxy's prejudice that only general elections count.

Missing from the system-blind view of mainstream authors, of course, is one key explanatory variable, namely the 'psychological effect' of the electoral system itself. Figure 6 shows the deviation from proportionality (DV) scores for all the major elections in Great Britain since 1992. This standard measure is again still not covered in election orthodoxy textbooks, but it is very simply explained.[27] It shows the proportion of members of a legislature who hold seats which they are not entitled to by virtue of their party's overall vote share in the elections – that is, what percentage of members would be replaced by different people under a pure proportional

Figure 6: The deviation from proportionality scores in main elections since 1992, Great Britain
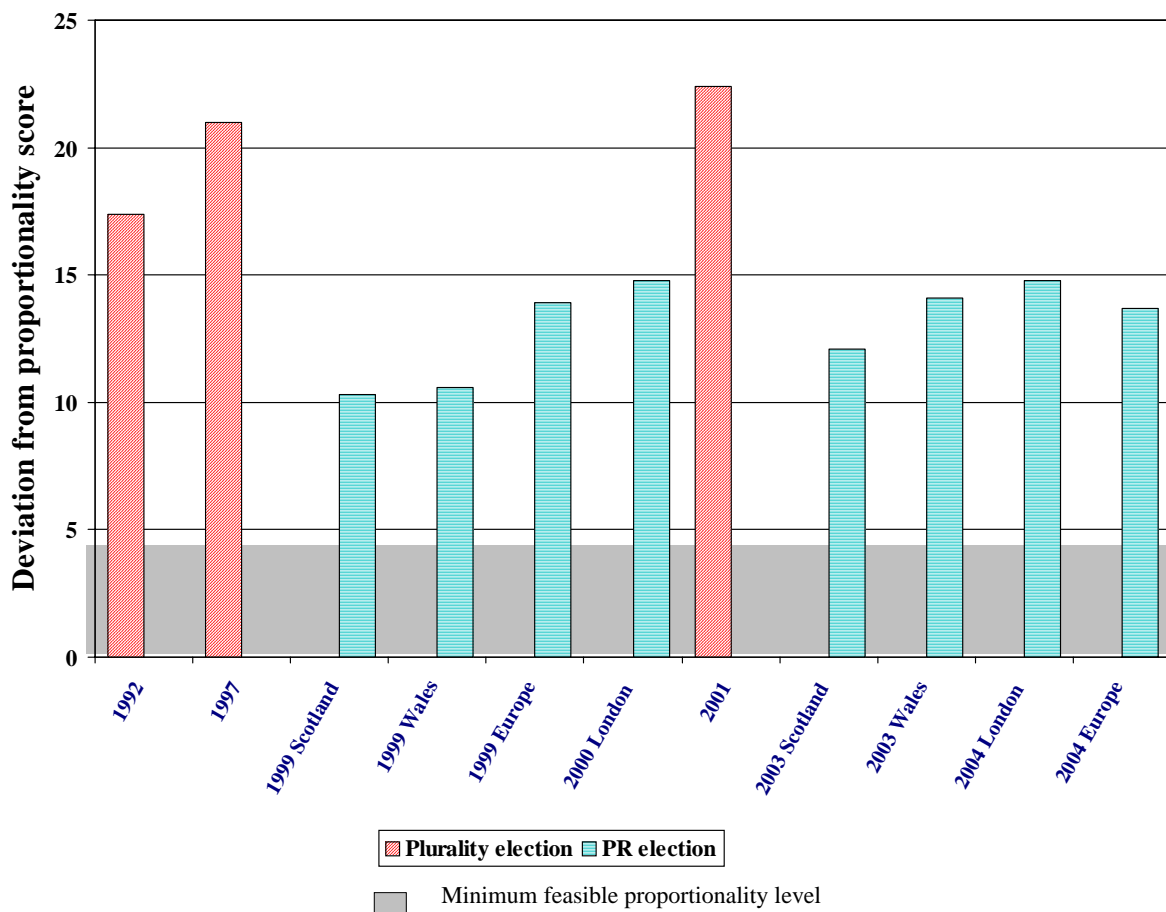
system. The DV measure in theory has a floor of zero but in fact Figure 6 shows that the practicable minimum level is around 4 per cent - because even the purest PR system will have difficulty in giving any representation to votes which are split across many very small parties or independent candidates.

The deviation from proportionality scores in Figure 6 are clearly much higher in Britain's plurality rule elections, reaching a high point of 23 in 2001 when Labour won two thirds of the seats in the Commons on the basis of just over two fifths of the vote. After a quarter of a century of Thatcherism and Blairism (both based equally on wildly unproportional elections) British voters are now very well aware of the effects of plurality rule in over-representing the leading party and in squashing the representation of third, fourth and smaller parties. It seems undeniable that a major factor in the lower ENP scores at plurality elections is the pervasive perception that voting for a wider range of parties is likely to lead to 'wasting' your vote.

Figure 6 shows that the DV scores for proportional elections are in every case lower than for general elections, in the range from 10 to 15. These scores are relatively high and Helen Margetts and I have discussed elsewhere in detail why this should be.[28] The Welsh Assembly AMS system clearly has too few top-up seats to deliver proportional results, with a strong pro-Labour bias built into its operations by the government for obvious partisan reasons. The London Assembly is also a very small representative body, with just 25 members: so that each seat allocation here assigns 4 per cent of seats, preventing a very close fit with votes. The de Hondt rule used for allocating seats in all the UK proportional systems also has an additional bias favouring the two leading parties. But an important element explaining the PR systems' still relatively high DV levels is also the effect of voters willingness to support a much wider range of parties under a system they see as fairer. Figure 6 shows that DV scores in all three of the British AMS systems increased somewhat from 1999-2000 to 2003-4, reflecting the trends shown in Figure 5. The greater the share of the vote going to parties too small to win seats, the more that DV scores will go up. This effect may reduce over time, as both party elites and voters acquire better information about how the new PR systems work in practice. Party appeals may be consolidated and voters may work out how to 'play the system' to produce the results they want.[29]

A final aspect of Figure 6 to mention here is that comparing national general election DV numbers with the regional PR numbers grossly flatters the plurality system. Strong pro-Labour biases in its areas of strength (central Scotland, Wales, the industrial north and inner

conurbations) are partly offset in national DV scores by pro-Tory biases elsewhere (such as the outer suburbs, south-east and eastern England and more rural areas). Figure 7 shows instead the levels of disproportionality as they are experienced by voters in the election results *within* the regional areas where they live. The regional DV scores in 2001 were as high as 35 per cent in Yorkshire, Scotland and Wales. In these areas more than a third of votes found no expression at all in the make-up of the legislature, a staggeringly high level for any liberal democracy.

One of the major problems in interpreting the conventional DV score is that although it has a theoretical floor of zero, there is no relevant upper ceiling. (The DV score will reach 100 only when none of the parties winning votes in an election are awarded any of the

Figure 7: Deviation from proportionality scores at the regional level in the 2001 general election, and the alternative DV (ADV) scores
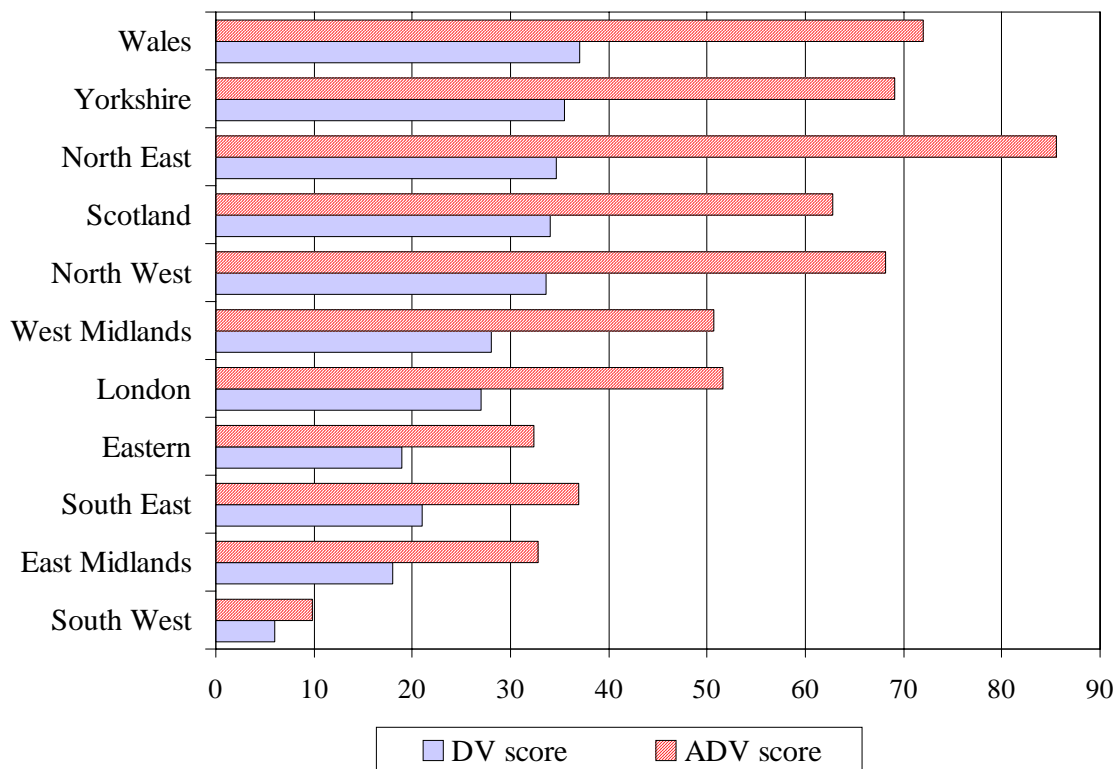
seats, which is clearly a nonsensical measure to think about in relation to liberal democracies).[30] To cope with this problem Figure 7 also shows a measure called 'alternative deviation from proportionality' (or ADV score), which is calculated by multiplying the DV

score by 100 and then dividing it by the total share of the votes going to the second and subsequent parties.[31] The reasoning here is that the larger the initial size of the largest party's vote the less scope inherently exists for deviations from proportionality to occur through 'leader's bias'. The ADV measure starts at zero but reaches 100 when the largest party wins all the seats available, whatever vote share it obtains. This is a relevant point to define a ceiling because if a polity goes across this line (e.g. to 110 per cent) then we cannot regard it as *any* kind of liberal democracy.[32] But a polity that has an ADV score of 100 is still just a liberal democracy – indeed this situation occurs quite commonly in British local government when the largest party in local authority elections wins all the available seats, creating completely one-party councils.[33]

In ADV terms the 2001 election placed the north east region at an astonishing 86 per cent score, on the brink of not being a liberal democracy at all, because Labour won over 93 per cent of the seats for 59 per cent of the votes. Four other regions (Wales, Scotland, the north west and Yorkshire and Humberside) were 70 per cent of the way to not being a liberal democracy at all, and two other regions (London and the west midlands) were over the half-way mark. Thus 7 out of 11 regions were closer to not being a liberal democracy at all than to being proportional systems. And in three of the four remaining regions the ADV scores were around 33 per cent or more. Only in the south west was near perfect proportionality attained, thanks chiefly to sophisticated and far-sighted tactical voting by citizens there.

The evidence reviewed here points strongly to the critical impact which voting systems have upon how voters decide whom to support and why. There can be no room for doubting that plurality rule elections actively suppress many of the wider (and often multiple) choices that British voters have taken every opportunity to express in proportional systems. This clear effect renders obsolete the kind of system-blind model of how people form alignments propagated by the election studies orthodoxy and demands a completely new and different approach to modelling alignments. A huge amount of research still needs to be done to map what is actually influencing behaviour here, and because of the systematic neglect of voters' preference structures across parties much of the data needed has still to be collected and analysed.

But Figure 8 below suggests an exploratory model of the main variables likely to be relevant and shows how they may interconnect. The essence of the model here is that voters do indeed have underlying preferences across parties and across issues. But these are not expressed directly or in an undistorted fashion by how they vote. Instead the specific institutional context of each election influences voters in three main ways. First, it sets the

issue mix for each election, activating some underlying preferences more than others. Second, via party strategies (which I say more about below) the institutional context affects to some degree how voters order and rank the parties. Third, voters form clear perceptions about what the viability of a party is in different kinds of elections and institutional context, for instance, perceptions that recognize the greater risk of 'wasting' your vote by supporting third, fourth or subsequent parties in plurality rule elections compared with proportional elections. Voters will of course update these impressions of parties' relative efficacy, drawing on their knowledge of what happened in terms of votes and seats at the most recent elections (labelled E_0 in Figure 8). In itself though this term is quite deliberately ambiguous – it could mean either the last time a given type of election was contested (which might be four or five years ago); or the last election in which the voter took part, which could be last year or two years ago for fairly active voters. But note that in this latter sense, there can be cross-overs

Figure 8: Modelling voters' behaviour under 'co-existence' between plurality rule and proportional representation systems
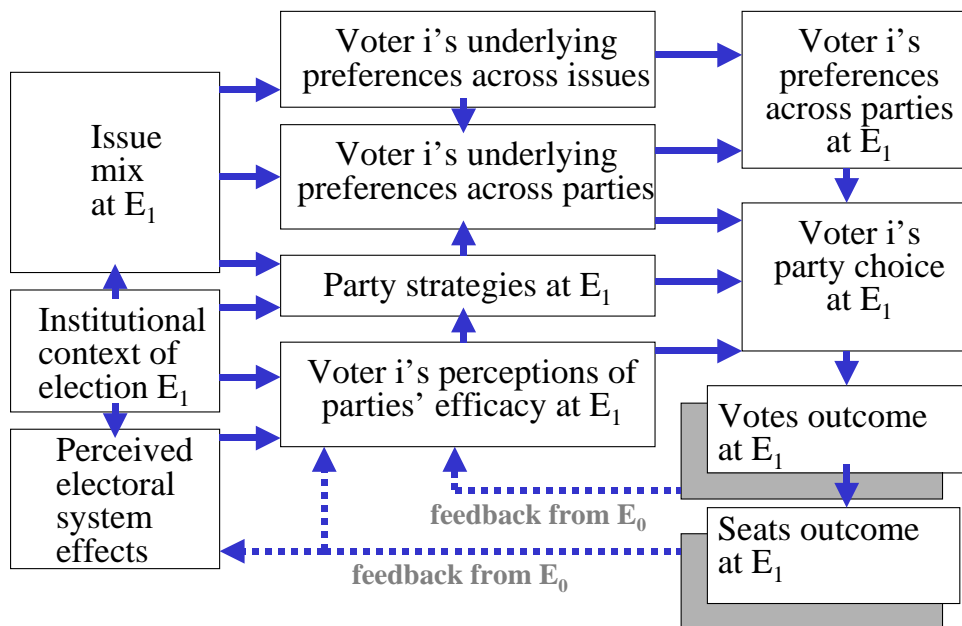
Note: E_1 here means 'the current election'; E_0 means the last election

from a party's performance in a PR election to its standing in the run-up to a plurality rule election; and of course vice versa. The result is a complex network of influences which we

still imperfectly understand.

So far I have focused chiefly on how the co-existence of different kinds of electoral systems affects voters' political alignments. But it is important to recognize also that co-existence has very important implications for party strategies. Yet these are also lessons that the main political parties have been quite slow to appreciate. Pursuing strategies or courses of action that normally work well for parties at plurality rule elections and deploying them in PR elections can produce disastrous consequences. For instance, the two main parties' national leaderships are used to being able to control who gets to run their sub-national machines. In 1999 Tony Blair wanted Alun Michael rather than Rhodri Morgan to become the Welsh Labour leader, even though Michael was far less popular with party members or Labour voters in Wales. Using a complicated electoral college procedure, and putting massive pressure on trade unions and especially Labour's Welsh MPs, Number 10 duly managed to deliver a Michael victory in the leadership contest – but with disastrous consequences. Welsh voters resented Michael's imposition and at the first Assembly elections deserted in droves so that Labour's expected majority failed to materialize, and instead Plaid Cymru had an *annus mirabilis*, even in south Wales. In the Assembly itself Michael's standing was so low that he could not do a coalition deal with any other party. After a year he resigned and the popular Rhodri Morgan became Welsh Labour leader in his stead, quickly putting together a coalition with the Liberal Democrats.

A year later in the 2000 London election, Tony Blair again tried to impose a party loyalist more to his taste (Frank Dobson) instead of the most popular London Labour politician, Ken Livingstone. Again the electoral college was heavily stacked against Livingstone via the MPs and trade union sections, and Dobson duly became the official candidate. Livingstone responded by running triumphantly as an independent, leaving Dobson to limp home a battered fourth and Labour's representation in the Assembly to fall to 9 out of 25 seats. By 2004 Labour's leadership had apparently learnt the painful lesson that PR elections are different and that a wise party fields its most popular candidates, rather than just party hacks or leadership stooges. Livingstone was readmitted early to Labour membership, reducing the normally mandatory period of exile for rebels to a minimum, in time to deliver a second convincing victory as Mayor, this time in official Labour colours.

In the 2004 European elections also the Conservatives learnt a hard lesson about PR campaigning. Labour shrewdly talked up the prospects of Britain being forced to leave the European Union altogether as a result of Conservative scepticism, in the process boosting the public profile of the UK Independence Party, whose central policy plank this is. When UKIP

also gained prominent funding support and attracted Robert Kilroy-Silk as a candidate, the Conservatives were suddenly left with a surge of support for a party on their right, taking away most of the extra votes they would normally expected to have gained from Euro-sceptic voters. Mid-way through the European election campaign the Tories appeared to be panicking without a strategy for this unexpected conjuncture, and they barely managed to retarget some of their resources from attacking Labour in Euro-sceptic tones to fighting off the UKIP threat.

When the 2004 results were announced it was a tactical triumph for Labour and an illustration of the diversity of campaigning contexts in modern British politics. In the local elections announced on the Thursday night (polling day itself), the Tories did pretty well, picking up xx new councillors and clearly winning the largest share of the vote. But by Friday afternoon the gloss went off this victory as Livingstone won the London mayoralty convincingly for Labour over the Tory candidate Stephen Norris. And by Sunday the European results came out presenting the appearance of a huge setback for Michael Howard, as the UKIP surge to 17 per cent thwarted any increase in the Tories' vote share or seats. The implications for the relative fortunes of the political parties was equally strong, with the Conservatives slipping back from the first signs of revival under Howard's leadership to flat-lining in the low 30 per cent range for the rest of the year. By this time playing a PR election strategy correctly, Labour also regained a strong lead in the opinion poll measures of Westminster voting intentions, a key boost at the start of the run-up year to a general election.

4. Is the UK in transition to PR voting?

Nor does the significance of Britain's PR electoral systems stop with co-existence. The trends reviewed above are already substantial and irreversible and they do not seem a stable or settled process, nor yet suggest that a new constitutional equilibrium has so far been attained between what voters want and what the major parties will let them have. The scope for new developments, like the emergence and strengthening of new parties like UKIP, is still considerable. And the institutional framework is slowly tilting towards more use of PR and multi-preference elections.[34] The Scottish Parliament has voted to introduce the Single Transferable Vote (STV) into Scottish local government elections, and may tinker with the Parliament system itself as well. The direct election of mayors in England has spread the use

of the supplementary vote beyond London and produced generally effective results, with strong Mayors who have solid public backing. Any regional assemblies in England will also use a British AMS election system, although in autumn 2004 voters in the north east rejected the first weak Assembly proposed under the Labour government plans. It has become fairly clear that if any election of House of Lords members is ever to take place, it will have to be done using a PR system of some kind. This scope for further institutional drift towards PR, along with the impacts already apparent on voters' behaviour and on old and new parties' campaigning styles, invite a further question. Will the co-existence of voting systems progressively push the UK further towards the eventual adoption of PR at all elections?

This question gains added force from recent discussions about whether Duverger's Law still has any contemporary relevance. Duverger stressed that plurality rule would force voters to concentrate their votes and penalize those who did not by ignoring their preferences and crushing the representation for third or fourth parties.[35] By contrast, PR systems tolerated new party formation more easily and rewarded smaller minority viewpoints with far more representation, thus encouraging multi-party systems. I have already shown that the same process can certainly be observed operating at some level within the UK under co-existence. But Cox has argued persuasively that in fact there is nothing essential in the plurality rule election system itself that encourages the emergence of two main party blocs at a national level.[36] Cox's modification of the Duverger effect says that it operates *only* at the level of each individual constituency, to encourage the emergence of two major blocs within each electoral area. In Cox's view Duverger's law says nothing at all about how many parties emerge nationally, which depends on a quite separate set of factors determining how nationalized party politics is in any given country (rather than being regionalized or localized). Thus in the UK with 646 constituencies there is nothing automatic within the electoral system itself that limits the effective number of parties to two. Instead, Duverger's Law properly construed implies only that the maximum number of parties within the UK cannot exceed 646*2 = 1292 parties – a proposition so stunningly banal that no one perhaps will disagree.[37] Cox's reinterpretation is extremely timely since on some reckonings the number of parties active in Indian politics under plurality rule has passed 150, as the previous major parties' representations shrinks in favour of regionalist and localist politics. Canadian politics has also seen repeated bursts of regionalist politics creating considerable turbulence in the party system. And of course the regionalization of UK politics has considerably increased with devolution.

A key recent contribution by Josep Colomer opens a new dimension in the debate. Looking across a large comparative database of liberal democratic countries that includes transitions in their electoral systems, he shows that Duverger's law linking plurality rule empirically to two (or at least restricted) party systems and PR elections to a multi-party system holds, but for the wrong reasons.[38] Where countries have abandoned plurality or majority rule systems for PR the effective number of parties grows *before* they make the change, and does not subsequently grow further under PR. Using a rational choice model, Colomer interprets this key finding as showing that governing elites only ever concede a shift from plurality or majority systems to PR when they are already forced to do so by the electorate. As voters split their support increasingly amongst a larger number and a wider range of parties, self-interested incumbent elites will initially maintain plurality or majority systems in hopes that the change is temporary or can be sat out, until voters are forced back into accepting major party dominance. Eventually, however, if the fragmentation of alignments persists then the risk of incumbents losing elections catastrophically will grow, especially under plurality systems, which may behave chaotically.[39] At this point, incumbent elites (or one faction of them) will decide that it is in their interest to avoid the risk of losing out completely and instead try to stabilize their vote share and legislative representation by introducing a PR electoral system. This elite acceptance will be delayed as much as possible, just because governing elites always behave in a ruthlessly self-interested fashion. Consequently when PR is at last conceded there is characteristically little impact on voting patterns – because by this stage the new party system is already well established.

The Colomer analysis has a great deal of applicability to the UK's experience with introducing PR election systems – for example, the relative fortunes of the leading parties in Scotland, Wales and London have not changed very much since the introduction of PR. And there is no doubt at all that broadly proportional systems were conceded by Labour reluctantly in all three cases and only because it was an evidently essential part of implementing the devolution packages. More broadly, combining Colomer's argument with the evidence that I have reviewed above implies that the co-existence of voting systems since 1999 is in effect just a kind of long-drawn out transition to full proportionality. The UK's governing elites have conceded the principle of (rough) proportionality for new institutions, where it is less threatening. But apart from the Scottish initiative to bring in STV for local councils and voting systems in Northern Ireland (which do not impinge on major party interests), neither the Labour nor the Conservative leaderships have been prepared to accept PR for established institutions. If this interpretation is correct then voters will have to persist

for some considerable time in supporting multiple parties that are repeatedly crushed by plurality election rules before (one of) the major party elites finally cracks and concedes electoral reform system-wide or some other form of constitutional re-balancing. The evidence reviewed here suggests that voters will indeed do just this, and that the co-existence of voting systems will provide them with many opportunities to force their preferences upon elites in time.

There is one interesting and unexpected aspect of party system change in Britain compared with that taking place in other main plurality rule systems like Canada and India. There a main motor of change undermining how the electoral system works has been the declining nationalization of party politics. But in Great Britain, apart from the re-emergence of the nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales, there is as yet no sign of similar trends. Even with new devolution institutions forming key foci for regionally differentiated politics, the remarkable thing about the changes towards multi-party politics charted above is that they have occurred pretty much everywhere in quite similar ways.

To see how this works, I consider an index of how linked up or de-linked up partisan politics is, a measure developed by Cox and refined by others.[40] Table 2 shows how the index works in an intuitive way. The top part of the table shows a polity with three constituency areas, in each of which two parties compete on equal terms. To calculate the (de-)linkage score for this system we compute the national effective number of parties (ENP_N), which is 6 here because each party has a sixth of total votes. We also compute the local ENP score in each of the three areas, which is 2 in each case. The mean local number of parties (ENP_L), score is thus also 2.

Table 2: Measuring party (de-) linkage across electoral areas

(a) An example of very weak linkage

Party A	Party B	Party C	Party D	Party E	Party F	Total votes
100	100					in Area 1 = 200
		100	100			in Area 2 = 200
				100	100	in Area 3 = 200
100	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**Total Votes = 600**

Here $ENP_N = 6$ $ENP_L = 2$ De-linkage score = $([6-2]/2)* 100 = 200$

(b) An example with somewhat more linkage

Party A	Party B	Party C	Party D	Total votes
100	100			in Area 1 = 200
	100	100		in Area 2 = 200
		100	100	in Area 3 = 200
100	**200**	**200**	**100**	**All areas = 600**

Here $ENP_N = 4$ $ENP_L = 2$ Delinkage score = $([4-2]/2)* 100 = 100$

Note: Using the abbreviation ENP for 'effective number of parties', the subscript N to mean 'national' and the sub-script L to stand for 'mean local constituency score', then the de-linkage score is computed as:
$([ENP_N – ENP_L] / ENP_L)*100$.
ENP_N is calculated in the normal way using national party vote shares. ENP_L is calculated by working out the effective number of parties in every constituency and then computing the mean ENP across them all.

We calculate the (de-)linkage score as $([ENP_N – ENP_L] / ENP_L)*100$. This index has a theoretical minimum of zero, but no maximum level and in Table 2a (which is a pretty unlinked-up party system) the resulting score is a high 200. Table 2b shows what happens if we consider a four party system with some more overlaps between the parties standing in each constituency – here the index drops to a still high 100. In practical politics terms modern Indian politics under plurality rule achieves a party de-linkage score around 150. In the United States (the world's only perfect two party system in legislative elections) there are

nonetheless some sharp constituency differences and the de-linkage score is somewhat over 20.[41]

Figure 9: (De-)Linkage scores for recent elections in Great Britain
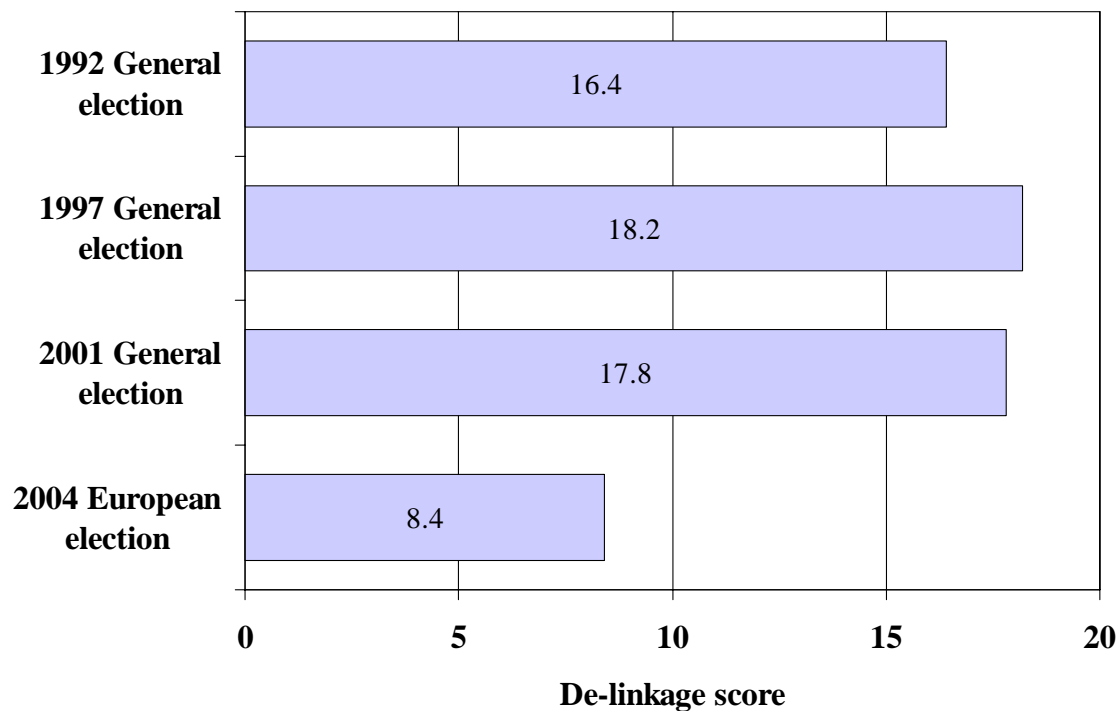
Note: The de-linkage score is calculated as in the Note to Table 2.

With these benchmarks in place, how does British party politics compare? Figure 9 shows the de-linkage scores for the general elections since 1992 and for the European elections in 2004. It is apparent first that British politics has very low levels of de-linkage scores, below even those for the USA. Second, it is clear that despite the increasing number of third, fourth and fifth party candidates at general elections, there is not yet any trend for party politics to become more de-linked, and indeed the fluctuations recorded are also very small. Finally it is of course very difficult to compare de-linkage scores across very different elections, especially since the general election scores encompass more than 600 separate contests in very small local areas, whereas the 2004 European elections took place across just 11 very large regional constituencies. But the de-linkage index is also low for the European contest, indicating that very similar numbers of parties are in competition in each area. Thus

the considerable changes taking place in British politics have not been accomplished by increasing de-linkaging of parties across different areas and regions. Instead voters across Britain have behaved in pretty similar ways, effecting essentially national changes.

Conclusions

British voters have changed their behaviours in some very striking ways, supporting a wider range of parties than ever before. Right across the country the old proposition, that somehow Labour versus Conservative disputes encompass all other positions, has long since ceased to be true. Ideologically there are now at least six or seven distinct positions involved in party politics. And citizens in every part of the UK now seem to have complex and articulated preference structures across parties, perhaps as they always have had, perhaps more complex than those they previously had. Wherever institutions have allowed voters to express their widened political preferences without worrying about 'wasting' their votes, they have responded emphatically by supporting a wide range of different parties – and, equally significantly, new parties have been there for them to vote for. In addition, many voters now want to express multiple preferences, both across different types of election and whenever voting systems allow the to split their votes, thereby expressing the conditionality of their support for the parties they vote for.

Since 1999 proportional and plurality rule elections have co-existed in the Great Britain mainland (and since 1973 in Northern Ireland). The pattern of supporting at least five or six significant parties whenever the stranglehold of plurality rule is lifted now prevails in at least half the elections in the UK. And the general trend has been for the number of parties to increase, reaching 5.3 effective parties at the 2004 European elections. The decisions that voters make in PR elections under co-existence have already exerted and will continue to exert a huge influence on 'major party' decision-making. Like it or not, party leaders in every part of the UK must now think strategically in multi-party terms. When they forget this key imperative, the results have been disastrous.

These changes have exposed further some fundamental intellectual problems in the mainstream or orthodox approach to electoral analysis and party systems change in Britain. Political scientists have been intellectually un-prescient and in thrall to the governing elites, assigning undue importance to studying only factors immediately relevant to structures of power in Westminster. Academic analyses have systematically neglected topics that are

assigned lesser importance by political elites, and hence have repeatedly skewed the development of knowledge in a 'system-biased' manner. The failure over decades to collect data about British voters' multiple preferences across parties, or to analyse explicitly how plurality rule elections distort the expression of voters' preferences, both bear eloquent testimony to this effect. And the prolonged acceptance of intellectually bogus concepts (like party identification) continues to covertly sustain a strong tendency for the electoral studies orthodoxy to deny that the 'two party system' has fundamentally changed and has now receded into history beyond recall. These are collective problems and not just failings of individual analysts or authors. Many of the same unexamined myths and assumptions of British politics are propagated over and over again by political historians, Labour and Conservative politicians and media commentators.

This paper is a call for thought-clearing and for facing up to the new facts as they are defined by voters and by party activists and leaders in the country, rather than the misleading appearances created by smoke and mirrors in the procedures of the House of Commons or the self-serving, bi-polar rhetoric of the Labour and Conservative parties. Britain is not just a multi-party system – it is if anything now a set of very closely linked but none the less qualitatively different five or six-party systems. These modern party systems reflect the exhaustion of previous main party and governing elite strategies, of attempting to suppress some issues and sublimate others into a limited part of the left-right spectrum. That approach can no longer accommodate what voters want to talk about and vote about. The co-existence of voting systems already achieved reflects our existing degree of progress in a Colomer transition towards full multi-party politics, with the advent of either full PR elections for Westminster or some other fundamental re-balancing of the national constitution.[42]

None of this is to argue that modern political changes are universally to be welcomed or without problems. The decline in general election turnout has been a serious worry, albeit a rational response by voters to a primitive Commons electoral system that renders irrelevant so many deeply felt votes. The proliferation of new parties will have dynamic consequences for the expression and growth of different viewpoints, not all of them welcome for liberals or even democrats. And in the protracted interim period of co-existence that lies ahead, the self-interest of the governing elites and their unwillingness to listen effectively to what voters are saying will continue to pose major problems. In particular, the chaotic and unresponsive nature of plurality elections for Westminster will continue to fuel the spectre of arbitrary governance styles and attendant policy disasters that in 2001-5 began to characterize the Blair government as firmly as they once did that of Margaret Thatcher.

NOTES

1 . See B. Harrison, *The Transformation of British Politics, 1865-95* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), Ch.7. He wrote then, unpresciently as it turns out: 'Why has the two-party system been so resilient? Or to put the question another way, why have electoral systems that favour multi-party situations never found much favour in Britain? (p. 206)' As examples of the same long lags in perception see also C. Pollit, C. Talbot, J. Caulfield and A. Smullen, *Agencies: How Governments Do Things Through Semi-Autonomous Organizations* (Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2004), who argue: 'The United Kingdom is …[a] purely majoritarian [sic] system… In the United Kingdom there has been an effective two-party system for many years…' (p. 97).

2 .   R. Heffernan, 'Political parties and the party system', Ch. 7 in P. Dunleavy, A. Gamble, R. Heffernan and G. Peele (eds), *Developments in British Politics 7* (Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2003), p. 121.

3 . I take the concept of an electoral studies orthodoxy from Helena Catt's careful and convincing account in *Voting Behaviour: A Radical Critique* (Leicester: Leicester University press, 1996), especially Chs 1 and 5. Key sources of the orthodoxy are the PSA's Elections, Parties and Public Opinion Specialist Group, and its publications, first the *British Parties and Elections Review* published as a series of edited books first from Harvester-Wheatsheaf and then from Frank Cass between 1990 and 2004, and from 2005 as the *Journal of Elections, Parties and Public Opinion*, published by Taylor and Francis. Earlier debates about the orthodoxy and its limits are given in P. Dunleavy, 'Mass political behaviour: Is there more to learn?', *Political Studies* (1990), vol. 38, no. 3, pp. 453-69; P. Dunleavy, 'Political behaviour: Institutional and experiential approaches', in R. E. Goodin and H_D. Klingemann (eds), *A New Handbook of Political Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 276-393; and I. Crewe and P. Norris, 'In defence of British electoral studies', in I. Crewe et al (eds) *British Elections and Parties Yearbook 1991* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992).

4 .   The position of orthodox voting studies here is rather like the 'great books' tradition in political philosophy, which for so long argued that the classics of political philosophy 'stand outside of time', instead of grounding analysis of what their authors meant their texts to say in their immediate historical context.

5 . The same kind of reasoning apparently underlies the decisions by xxx and xx in their 2005 book on *Devolved Politics in the UK* to ignore London government and the distinctive politics of London completely - even though the London mayor Ken Livingstone is perhaps the most powerful and certainly one of the most effective politicians operating below national government level in the UK.

6   My analysis is derived from the Electoral Commission's excellent and comprehensive volume, *The 2004 European Parliamentary Elections in the United Kingdom* (London: Electoral Commission, 2004). Previously studying multi-party politics in the UK was made difficult by the absence of reliable and complete election statistics, a deficit that the Commission's detailed publications have at last begun to make good.

7 . To derive this estimate I have computed how many more postal votes were received in the four all-postal regions from the mean turnout in the remaining Great Britain regions and removed that number of votes from total turnout.

8.   See   P. Dunleavy and F. Boucek, 'Constructing the number of parties', *Party Politics*, (2003), vol. 9, no. 3, pp. 291-315.

9.   See P. Mair, *Party System Change: Approaches and Interpretations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 51: 'A party system clearly involves something more than the sum of its component (party) parts, and incorporates some elements of understanding of the mode of interaction between these parties'.

10.   See H. Margetts and P. John, ' Latent Support for the Far Right in British Politics: The BNP and UKIP in the 2004 European and London Elections' (Paper to the Elections, Parties and Public Opinion Conference, University of Essex, September 2004).

11.   A. Heath, with J. Curtice, R. Jowell, G. Evans, J. Field and S. Witherspoon, *Understanding Political Change: The British Voter 1964-87* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1991); A. Heath, R. Jowell and J. Curtice, *How Britain Votes* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1985). A. Heath, R. Jowell, J. Curtice, G. Evans, J. Field and S. Witherspoon, *Labour's Last Chance? The 1992 Election and Beyond* (Aldershot: Dartmouth).

12 .   D. Denver, *Elections and Voters in Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003), p. 93.

13   A. Heath and S-K. McDonald, 'The demise of party identification theory?', *Electoral Studies*, volume 7, no. 1, pp. 95-107.

14   J. Brand, D. McLean and W. Miller, 'The birth and death of a three party system: Scotland in the seventies', *British Journal of Political Science*, (1983), vol. 13, no. 4, pp. 463-88.

15 .   H. D. Clarke, D. Sanders, M. C. Stewart and P. Whiteley, *Political Choice in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 196-99.

16.   D. Butler and D. Stokes, *Political Change in Britain* (London: Macmillan, 1974), Second edition, p. 36.

17   Heath et al, *Labour's Last Chance?*

18.   Clarke et al, *Political Choice in Britain,* passim.

19. Catt, *Voting Behaviour: A Radical Critique*, pp. 111-20.

20.   Source here is the 2004 State of the Nation survey conducted by H. Margetts and S. Weir for the Rowntree Reform Trust. A national sample of xxx respondents were interviewed by ICM Research.

21. Heath et al, *Understanding Political Change*, p. 52.

22   See Robin Cook and Robert Maclennan, *Looking Back, Looking Forward: The Cook-Maclennan Agreement Eight Years On* (London: New Politics Network, 2005).

23 David Huang,

24.   J. A. Evans, *Voters and Voting: An Introduction* (London: Sage, 2004). Evans does provide (on pages 157-8) a brief, mainly conjectural discussion of how electoral systems might perhaps influence turnout, especially in foreign countries under 'PR systems'. The best (but rather difficult) analysis still remains R. Taagepera and M. Shugart, *Seats and Votes: The Effects and Determinants of Electoral Systems* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1989).

25.   C. Rallings and M. Thrasher, 'Split ticket voting at the 1997 British general and local elections: An aggregate analysis', in D. Denver, J. Fisher, P. Cowley and C. Pattie (eds) *British Elections and Parties Review: Volume 8, The 1997 General Election* (London: Frank Cass, 1998).

26.   See P. Dunleavy, H. Margetts and S. Bastow, 'Freed from constraint: Political Alignments in the 2000 London elections', (Paper to the 2001 Political Studies Association Conference, University of Manchester, April 2001). P. Dunleavy, H. Margetts and J. van Heerde, 'Political alignments in the 2004 London elections', (Paper to the 2004 Elections, Parties and Public Opinion Conference, Oxford University, September 2004).

27.   The DV concept is well explained in Taagepera and Shugart, *Seats and Votes*, Ch. 10. Its continued absence from UK textbooks or even more 'advanced' analyses is hard to explain. David Denver's introductory volume, *Elections and Voting in Britain* does not mention the concept but does at least devote 4 pages to Britain's PR systems, albeit mainly in terms of debates about electoral reform. Evans' book *Voters and Voting* ignores electoral systems completely, not even giving an explanation of what 'PR systems' are.

28   P. Dunleavy and H. Margetts) 'How proportional are the British AMS systems?', *Representation*, (2004) vol. 40, no.4, pp. 317-29.

29   See Andrew Cox, *Making Votes Count: Strategic Co-ordination in the World's Electoral Systems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

30   Unfortunately this aspect seems to have escaped Pippa Norris in her otherwise useful book, *Electoral Engineering: Voting Rules and Political Behaviour* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 20004). On pages 88-93 she revives the earlier thoroughly discredited Rose Index, originally conceived by Richard Rose as 100-DV. Norris asserts incorrectly that this is somehow a 'standardized form' of the DV index and then presents extensive country data in this completely misleading format. In fact the Rose index is nonsensical since (in the inverse of the DV score itself) it can only reach zero when all seats are given to a party with no votes at all – which obviously has nothing to do with any liberal democracy, nor indeed any working polity that has ever existed.

31   See Dunleavy and Margetts) 'How proportional are the British AMS systems?' for further explanation of the DV and ADV concepts.

32   A score above 100 per cent is feasible in several ways, for example if all or most of the seats are won by the second largest party.

33   See P. Dunleavy and H. Margetts, *Proportional Representation for Local Government: An Analysis* (York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1999).

34   See P. Dunleavy and H. Margetts) 'From majoritarian to pluralist democracy: Electoral reform in Britain since 1997', *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, (2001), vol. 13, no.3, pp. 295-319; also republished as 'United Kingdom: Reforming the Westminster Model', in J. Colomer (ed) Handbook *of Electoral Choice* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004), pp. 294-305.

35   M. Duverger, *Political Parties: Their Organization and Activity in the Modern State* (New York: Wiley, 1954).

36   Cox, *Making Votes Count*.

37   Cox, *Making Votes Count*, p. 271.

38   Josep Colomer, 'It's parties that choose electoral systems (or, Duverger's Laws upside down)', *Political Studies*, (2005), vol. 53, no.1, pp. 1-21.

39   For example, in 199xx because of the combined growth of Liberal support and the rise of new parties on the right, the Canadian Conservatives went from being the majority party of government to holding just 3 seats.

40   See J. Moenius and Y. Kasuya, 'Measuring party linkages across districts: Some party system inflation indices and their properties', *Party Politics* (2004), vol.10, no. 8, pp. 543-64.

41   Moenius and Kasuya, 'Measuring party linkage across districts'.

42   For instance, an 'Australian' solution, favoured by Peter Hain and sometimes linked also to Gordon Brown, would see the introduction of the supplementary vote or the alternative vote for Commons elections (combating the problem that more than half of all MPs cannot claim local majority support), combined with a PR-elected House of Lords.