

Without electoral reform, the current system gives Britain the worst of all worlds: US-style primaries in the main parties could be the answer

In recent decades, Britain has evolved into a multi-party system, but it still has an electoral system designed for only two parties. From an American perspective, [David Schleicher](#) argues that if the UK decides not to reform its electoral system, it should enact laws to encourage US-style party primaries and pass rules that discourage the development of multiple parties.



At first glance, the United States and Britain have largely similar electoral systems. Like the United States, Britain uses single-member districts and the 'first-past-the-post' (FPTP) or 'plurality' system for counting votes – the party with the largest vote in each locality wins. This means that third- or fourth-party votes are 'wasted' – they don't go towards determining the winner between the top two candidates in any given district. This punishing of third parties is not a glitch, it's a feature. The goals of Britain's voting system (and ours) are to produce clear choices for voters, to create majority winners, and to force coalition-building among voters *inside parties*, rather than in Parliament between parties. That is, in order for a FPTP system to work, it needs to punish third parties.

However, British politics has become completely maladapted to its voting system. It now has multi-party politics with a two-party electoral system. This produces all of the harms of having FPTP with none of the benefits, and none of the benefits of a proportional representation (PR) system either. Unless it chooses to adopt a PR or some PR variant, Britain should pass election laws that go beyond merely keeping FPTP in place, and instead will actively help iron out its multi-party system into a simpler two-party one.

Put another way for the political scientists out there, Duverger's Law is normative, and not merely positive. The Law is named after the famous French political scientist Maurice Duverger, and it claims that political systems with single-member districts and FPTP vote counting systems will develop two party systems. In countries with such systems in the 1950s – the USA, Britain, Canada, etc, – Duverger argued that voters do not want to waste their votes supporting small parties that cannot win. Perhaps more importantly, candidates, donors and activists do not want to cast in their lot with parties that do not have a chance of winning power.

Duverger's Law is more of a tendency than a 'law.' The USA still has a two-party system, and Britain did for most of the 19th century and from 1945 to 1970, but does not today. Canada has a four party system. It now seems clear that adopting first-past-the-post voting alone does not guarantee anything about the shape of a country's politics. Recently this blog noted that [all of the main 'Westminster model' countries in the UK would now have hung Parliaments](#).

However, reducing Duverger's Law to a weakly predictive observation ignores what should be its most important aspect, that it should also be considered a normative argument — and a good one at that. If a country uses FPTP, the electoral system *should* discourage voters from wasting their votes, and *should* channel competition and talent into the two major parties. Further, the normative aspects of Duverger's Law will become highly relevant for the UK if voters reject reform at the May 2011 referendum. If Britain is going to stick with first-past-the-post vote counting, it should recognize that it is costly to have third, fourth or smaller parties, either at the district level or nationally.

What makes Duverger's law a compelling normative argument is that it allows FPTP to work. A two-party system will produce certain democratic goods. Centrally, it makes it easier for voters to assign responsibility for things they like and don't like, and so it accordingly generates increased accountability for politicians. Further, it provides the population with the ability to choose between two possible majority coalitions, giving the electorate the ability to make the final crucial decision about who will govern.

Voters often have little direct information about the policy stances of individual politicians and have little ability to assess them, following politics in a haphazard way. They notice things here and there about how the country is doing or what politicians have recently done. In Morris Fiorina's famous term, voters develop 'running tallies' of party performance and then use these to determine their vote. As long as parties are relatively consistent over time, and voters can tie specific observations about what they see in the world to a party, then these tallies can provide a pretty good guide to whether a governing party has done well or

poorly.

A two-party system makes the development of running tallies substantially easier. Voters face a clear choice. And having only a single party in power at any time makes assigning responsibility easier. Further, it promotes accountability. Politicians in power know that they will be held accountable for what happens – not their coalition partners or anyone else.

Finally, FPTP gives voters the ability to make the final decision about who will govern. In a two-party system, governing coalitions still have to be formed but they are formed *before* the vote, inside each of the two major parties. Unlike in multiparty systems, voters choose between already-formed coalitions inside each main party, rather than choosing among parties that then go to Parliament to form coalitions (as the UK parties did in the aftermath of the 2010 general election). This is the central difference between PR systems and FPTP systems – whether coalition building is done before or after the election. If it works, a two-party system produces a majority winner, whereas PR systems produce a representative legislature that then produces a majority coalition.

Political scientists have engaged in an endless debate about whether FPTP or PR is better. However, having a multi-party system with FPTP voting provides neither the benefits of a two-party system nor the benefits of proportional representation. Although there are many parties, they do not receive seats in Parliament equal to their support in the population, thus providing decidedly unproportional representation. But the goals of FPTP aren't achieved either. Voters do not face a clear choice, because they have to decide between rival opposition parties and will have difficulty figuring out who in a coalition government is responsible for government policy. And multi-party elections in a FPTP system do not produce majority winners, so we don't know which coalition is favoured nationally. Even at the local level, [most MPs can also no longer draw on the legitimacy of having majority local backing](#).

In fact, it is such a bad state of affairs that you wonder how it came to this. Why do voters continue to support the Liberal Democrats? I suspect the reason has to do with weak internal party democracy in the two major UK parties, the Conservatives and Labour. The Liberal Democrats were formed in 1988 from a merger of the Liberal party and the Social Democrats, a moderate off-shoot from the Labour Party. If Labour had been able to hold one-person-one-vote primary elections, there might never have been this split.

Britain just began experimenting with holding primary elections in 2009, but the change has made little headway yet. The absence of the ability to do this has led to groups who were sufficiently unhappy with both parties that they would chance their preferred party losing power in order to make a point (or have a chance of creating a hung parliament.) This doesn't happen in the United States, outside of Presidential campaigns (where in 3 of the last 8 elections we have seen strong third party candidates). For instance, in this election cycle, the ability of Tea Party supporters to contest and win Republican primaries has quelled talk of a third-party consisting of Tea Partiers.

[Elsewhere I have been skeptical of the degree to which primaries express voter policy preferences](#). There are no parties internal to the Democrats and Republicans and so voters can't use party labels when voting in primaries. This leaves voters relatively uninformed, without the ability to translate their haphazard observations into a retrospective policy-based vote. And so policy preferences don't play much of a role in most American primaries. But primaries do still have benefits. Particularly, they draw the energies of interest groups, donors and candidates into the two-party system and away from third parties. And this allows America's FPTP system to work well.

The discussion in Britain is currently whether to abandon first-past-the-post for proportional representation, or more immediately whether to opt for the half-way house of the Alternative Vote at the May 2011 referendum. But there is another option, and a key one if voters say 'No' to change. Labour and the Conservatives could agree to pass rules that would make FPTP work much better – rules requiring main parties to hold primary elections in each district, giving dissident groups the ability to contest elections within parties rather than through third parties. And they could pass other rules that discourage third party development. For instance, the US Supreme Court has permitted all sorts of state government limitations on third parties – such as bans on fusion, or keeping small third parties out of public television debates – that funnel political energies into the two party system. And as I argued [here](#), it is a good thing they do.

For the United States the implications are also clear. If we persist in having FPTP elections, then our election laws should ensure that citizens get the real benefits of using that system. They should encourage a healthy competitive atmosphere inside the top two parties, so that interest groups and lobbies try to succeed inside the two-party system. And we should keep the oft-criticized rules that discourage the development of national third parties. Abandoning these rules, or closing up our primaries, would lead us Americans to where Britain is today.

This blog is an updated version of David Schleicher, 'Why Britain likes to party too much', <http://balkin.blogspot.com/2010/05/why-britain-loves-to-party-too-much.html>

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