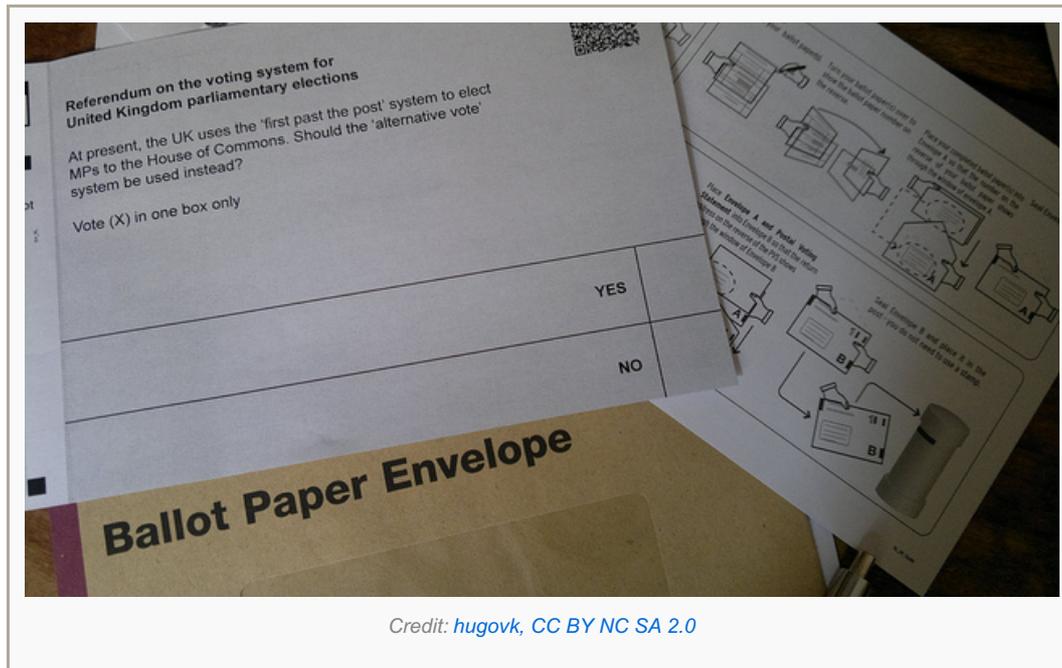


As well as being a democratic outrage, First Past the Post also has additional unseen consequences

By Democratic Audit UK

*It is an article of faith amongst political reform campaigners that the existing First Past the Post (FPTP) electoral system needs to go if we are to improve Britain's democracy. Here, **Ed Straw** describes the 'unseen consequences' of FPTP, and suggests that organisations such as Office for National Statistics and the Institute For Fiscal Studies to estimate these costs.*



The case against First Past The Post is well-established. It provides the bare minimum of democracy, is unrepresentative for the majority, and distorts the allocation of power. But how many people are aware of its costs in wasted public expenditure and excess taxes, its maintenance of spent ideologies and their progeny of poor policies, its role in the decline in standards of political parties and politicians and thus of governments, and its value to preferential lobbies and their appropriation of wealth?

FPTP institutionalises 'Zigzag Government'

With two parties perpetually dominant, operating in a system essentially adversarialist in action, zigzag government is the norm. The canoe of state tacks right only to bump into one bank, and then left till it bumps into the opposite bank.

We experience too much public expenditure followed by too little; salvo welfare followed by its punitive withdrawal; countless adversarial 'solutions' for secondary schooling whilst countries with moderating parties in government reached consensus long ago and now direct their effort into making their various systems work; proven policies for governmental support for R&D and innovation followed by their termination; one 'cure' for the health service, then the opposite – or the rebadged same. The straight waste, reform and set up costs, and the re-reform and closure costs of all of these zigzags are borne by taxation.

The capacity to deal with some 'wicked' problems from teenage pregnancies to gangs to perpetual unemployment is built up – usually through the dynamism and innovation of the third sector. Real progress is often made, then the canoe tacks right and all of that knowledge and skill is casually discarded. The price paid rises as withdrawn effective services leave some people in their receipt back where they started, and government to pick up their costs in other ways.

FPTP perpetuates the ideological hangover

Unchallenged by a more competitive electoral system, the 'left' and the 'right' parties remain trapped in their histories and beliefs, seeking differentiation through adopting the opposite of the other, and embracing policies based on their various 'bibles' rather than on any great insight, analysis, or understanding of their intended targets. So we suffer an ideological hangover in a post-ideological age – ideological welfare, ideological privatization, ideological schooling, ideological terms and conditions – all with the cost of their ideology premium.

In a 'winner takes all' two-party system, nominally we experience the construction/ imposition of one ideology for a period, followed by another, quite different ideology. For a while, one ideology is deemed to be correct. Subsequently, for another while another ideology is apparently correct. Both main parties cling to their roots with an extraordinary tenacity, even when confronted with the obvious fact: the conditions in society giving rise to these ideologies have long gone. But FPTP keeps them in business and allows them to continue to indulge their emotion-based policies – again with taxation paying for this indulgence.

In economics Hayek and Keynes are often juxtaposed. Thus right-wingers support Hayek, and left-wingers Keynes. Hayek is the classic theoriser of markets being set free and Keynes of them being regulated. Hayek believed that creative destruction during recessions is essential to move an economy forward, as dead wood is chopped out. Keynes is the counter-cyclical smoother, particularly during a depression when government spending via debt is essential to restart an ailing economy.

In the 1980s, one of the many weaknesses identified in Western management thinking was either/or. In other words, the thinking that companies should either be centralised or decentralised, the front line tightly controlled or autonomous, collaborative with another company or competitive with that same company. Eastern thinking does not recognise false juxtapositions or divisions, and is content with the ambiguity of both positions being right, or possible, or simultaneously applicable. Centralised and decentralised. Controlled and autonomous. Competitive sometimes and collaborative sometimes. Keynes and Hayek.

A first- past-the-post two-party political system is essentially an either/or arrangement. Bipolar politics is designed to promote argument, not thought – and when has any problem really been solved through adversarial argument? The NHS has been under a permanent state of 'reform' for 30 years, and yet remains 'uncured,' trapped between Labour's rigid attachment to its surviving major post war achievement and public distrust of the Conservatives' intentions. The problem is the model, the solution only possible in a multi-party state free of the past and aware of the extensive public engagement necessary to contemplate real reform – as the Canadians did with their health service in the early 2000s.

I have come to recognise the flatulence of the 'four legs good, two legs bad' debates – more state or less state, more private sector or less, right wing or left wing, high tax or low tax, generous welfare or tight welfare. Such is the compression of the political playing field, policy cross-dressing has taken off as the parties seek to appeal to the electorate from less prejudiced or ideological positions: the Conservative Party emphasises offender rehabilitation, whilst Labour is stressing prison works; Conservatives for gay marriage, Labour for vetting and kettling; Conservatives for universal personal pensions, Labour laissez-faire; Conservatives reducing police numbers, Labour increasing them; Conservatives for localisation, Labour for centralisation.

Who is left and who is right in all of this? Does anyone care? Or is the point that something actually changes for the better? Surely the objective is the right state, right government, right tax, right welfare, right answers, and right actions.

Democracy is competition

Competition and democracy are close relatives. Competition matters as much in politics as it does for supermarkets, probably more. In limiting competition, standards inevitably fall. This market truism applies equally to the market for political parties, policies, politicians and to their experience relative to people's wants and needs. The past not the future is the way to power here. The Labour/Conservative duopoly operating in a rigged market results inevitably in lower quality government. The two perpetual parties have only to convince enough people –

'enough' being a long way from a majority – that they are better than the other lot or the least worst (to quote Russell Brand). The electorate is forced into the dismal choice. Any self-respecting competition authority in the world would rule it illegal.

One of the further crosses of the two-party state is that when one of the parties is effectively unelectable, a one-party state is all that is left. It led Thatcher to excess and Blair to flogging dead horses – and taxation paid the bill once more.

Orderly competition drives improvement in all things. Multi-party competition that allows new parties to become established and the old to die is essential for successful government. A sound system of proportional voting produces this.

FPTP Is best For preferential lobbying

Finally, FPTP is the best electoral medium for preferential lobbying. This scourge of democracy is near universal. Its elimination will only be achieved through a complete redesign of systems of government. But, such lobbying is made even easier by FPTP. If, for example, you are a media owner and you want to secure a satellite tv or newspaper monopoly, you will lobby one party to secure this in unwritten return for electoral support of your media. Should this party consider refusal, the simple threat to offer the same deal to the other party should change its mind. Under a multi-party system, the support of the several parties likely to form a coalition will have to be secured. The outcome of the election is less predictable, along with who to lobby. The Westminster system is the best in the world for preferential lobbying.

Does FPTP Mean strong government?

Usually at this point, a politician will stress how important is strong and decisive government and thus first past the post (even though a sole party of government can, of course, be elected under PR if the electorate so chooses). We heard this in relation to the Alternative Vote referendum by those opposed to power sharing – 'we need the strong government that only first past the post can give' and, by inference, not the namby-pamby government from coalitions and other inadequates. Sounds good, does it not? Flutters the spine? Makes one stand up straight?

From time to time, strong government has been in operation, most potently with Thatcher. She drove some changes through with which most would now agree, like building the M25. She drove some necessary change but punitively and with destructive speed, like the mine closures. She also drove hard some major errors, like the poll tax.

I have never seen the point of strong government of itself, when strong can and does lead to such high costs. I want right government not strong government. Right government may from time to time be bold and courageous, and it may also be considered, cautious, careful, and experimental. Strong is often an excuse for those with high control needs. Its end game is Stalin, Mao Tse-tung, and Hitler. A Thatcher would never have been necessary to resolve the worst excesses of the UK's ideological hangover in the factories if we had previously had the plurality of proportional voting. First past the post produced both the problem and the strong and costly solution. It maintains a country in a perpetual state of civilian civil war. No first past the post – no problem – no need for Thatcher.

Estimating the costs of FPTP

FPTP has many hidden direct and indirect costs. These are unrecorded, unstated and considerable, in taxes, wasted economic capacity, and wealth appropriation. I am today asking those institutions that specialize in government finances to estimate the hidden costs of FPTP since, say, 1980, compared with proportional voting systems. The purpose of these estimates is to make plain the expense of retaining FPTP, to make its retention politically unsustainable.

Ending FPTP is and essential, and first step

A caution to end with. FPTP has to go and be replaced with a sound system of PR. But systems of government with PR still suffer from many of the same failures and poor performance as the UK's. Much more has to change in all of these systems, including the EU. My view as to what else must be done, including further Competitive Democracy and a comprehensive Treaty For Government, is in my book *Stand & Deliver: A Design For Successful Government* [here](#). Ending FPTP is an end in itself and an enabler for these other changes.

This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of Democratic Audit UK, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before commenting.

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