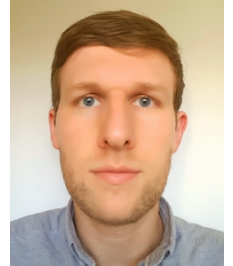


Unrepresentative democracy and how to fix it: the case for a mixed electoral system

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The rise of anti-establishment movements and the growing disaffection with politics may be less related to the financial crisis and more to how we elect key decision-makers, explains [Matthew Bevington](#). Looking at the actual level of support for governments across the EU, he makes the case for a mixed electoral system, through which the governments formed would pursue policies closer to the majority view.



The financial crisis is often seen as the most prominent inciting factor for the current anti-establishment sentiment sweeping the Europhile world. Add to that the continent-wide fiscal retrenchment, which has led to increased competition for scarce public services and has exacerbated difficult living conditions – especially for those on low incomes.

As important as the crisis was, its causes and were determined, in large part, by policymakers. So, it is the process by which we elect our policymakers that must become the subject of scrutiny.

One reason that there is such disaffection may be because almost all electoral systems across Europe produce governments that do not have the majority support of their electorates. With the exception of Malta, a predominantly two-party state that is now an anomaly in Europe – with 50.5 per cent of the electorate voting for the current government – all other governments in the EU did not receive majority support at their last general elections. This is a startling statement to make about a region so apparently committed to democracy and democratic values, but it is true. In terms of the percentage of the electorate that voted for parties currently in government in the EU, the average is 30.4 per cent.

[bevington_chart](#)

My research has attempted to uncover the actual level of support for governments. Using data from the Inter-parliamentary Union (IPU) and local sources, I have calculated the proportion of support for parties in government from across the EU at the most recent general elections and within the UK since 1918 as a percentage of the electorate – not just of those who voted.

The UK state of play

The average turnout in UK general elections since 1918 was 63.3 per cent. On average, more than a third – the so-called “unheard third” – of those registered to vote have failed to cast a ballot, and this figure does not include those who are eligible to vote but who have not registered.

Of the proportion of the electorate that did vote, no party since the Conservatives in 1935 has received more than 50 per cent support: the average winning percentage for parties since 1918 was 43.6 per cent. This means that not only have parties consistently failed to achieve a majority mandate from those who did turn out to vote, but they have had even less of a mandate when the electorate as a whole is taken into account.

Taking registered non-voters into account, the mandate of governments changes significantly. At the last UK general election, the Conservative party won a majority with 36.8 per cent of the vote. Taken at face value, this is historically not a high proportion. Since 1918, the only winning parties to receive a lower percentage were the Conservatives themselves in 2010 (36.1 per cent), and Labour before them in 2005 (35.2 per cent). Despite this, the Conservatives went on to form a majority government, with just under two-thirds of those who voted in 2015 *not* supporting them. In

itself this could be considered enough to undermine the party's political (not constitutional or legal) mandate.

If the measure is then broadened to consider the proportion of support that the party received from the electorate as a whole, the figure plummets to 24.4 per cent. This means that three-quarters of those who were registered to vote did not support the government.

The EU context

Considering the wider EU context, the UK's system is anomalous. In the short-term, the First Past the Post system is the most stable one, as it favours incumbents and for most of the past century has produced majority UK governments. However, it is also a very rigid system that requires historic changes in voting patterns to greatly affect the composition of parliament.

In the medium to long-term, this is highly destabilising. Many voters are disenfranchised by virtue of having a pointless vote in a safe seat, which leads to the kind of resentment with the so-called establishment that is increasingly prevalent. When electorates have no realistic democratic means to express their will, it is more likely that they will lean towards more extreme positions that aim to overturn the system of democracy as we currently understand it.

Typically, those against a proportional mechanism in the voting system argue that constituencies should only get the representative for whom they vote. Those for proportionality argue that the will of the electorate as a whole should be respected, and that the composition of parliament should match the proportion of the vote share. But it is possible to accommodate both positions and produce a more stable electoral system in the long-term.

As early as 1998, [the Independent Commission on the Voting System](#), which was set up by the Labour government, recommended a mixed system where the vast majority (80-85 per cent) of MPs were elected by FPTP "with the remainder elected on a corrective Top-up basis which would significantly reduce the disproportionality and the geographical divisiveness which are inherent in FPTP".

This mixed system can go even further than the commission recommended and have MPs directly elected in all constituencies with a top-up of MPs to produce a proportionally representative result. For instance, Germany has such a mixed system, where 299 seats for the 299 constituencies are elected directly in an FPTP style. However, there is a subset of seats awarded on top of that to produce a proportional result.

Using raw turnout data, the grand coalition government currently in office in Germany received 67.2 per cent of the valid votes in the last federal election in 2013. More importantly, however, the government had the support of 47.4 per cent of the electorate – the second-highest proportion in the EU and 23 percentage points more than the current UK government.

Mixed systems lend themselves to coalition-building, and in an increasingly fractured political landscape in the UK this is the most appropriate system. Government formation may be more onerous as a result, but the ensuing government will have a greater mandate and will be more likely to pursue policies that reflect the majority view.

Mixed systems are not a panacea for our problems – even the German system did not produce a government with more than 50 per cent support from the electorate – but it would better serve the long-term interests of the electorate, include a greater diversity of electoral expression and provide governments that pursue policy platforms closer to the majority view.

About the Author

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