

So What Went Wrong with the Electoral System? The 2010 Election Result and the Debate About Electoral Reform

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ABSTRACT

Single-member plurality is often thought to facilitate a two-party system of alternating single-party majority government. However, no party secured an overall majority in the 2010 UK election, which was followed by the formation of the first peacetime coalition government since the 1930s. This article assesses whether this outcome was a one-off occurrence or was symptomatic of longer term changes in voting patterns in the UK that have reduced the likelihood of single party majorities. To do so it charts trends in the level of third party support and representation, the incidence of marginal seats, and bias in the treatment of the two largest parties.

ONE FEATURE of the outcome of the 2005 UK general election stands out above all others—no one party secured an overall majority of seats. As a result the election was followed by the formation of a coalition government for the first time in peacetime since the 1930s; indeed it was the first time ever in modern British politics that a coalition between two whole parties was formed afresh immediately after a general election. The mould of single-party alternating majority government, a mould to which British politicians have become accustomed in the post-war era, was finally broken.

This article examines why the first past the post (or single-member plurality) electoral system failed to deliver an overall majority for any one party in 2010. In particular it asks whether this failure was a one-off event, or was an outcome that is likely to be repeated should the system continue to be used in future. It then considers the implications of this analysis for the debate about electoral reform in Britain, a debate that has now acquired new force following the commitment made by the new Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government to holding a referendum on replacing the current system with the Alternative Vote.

The argument for first past the post

At the heart of the debate about the merits or otherwise of the single-member plurality electoral system is an argument about the function of elections in a parliamentary system of government.¹ Some argue that the principal purpose of an election in such a system is to produce a body of legislators whose views broadly mirror those of society as a whole. If that body is representative of public opinion then the decisions it makes should reflect majority opinion, a seemingly desirable state of affairs in a democracy. Those who uphold this view typically argue that parliamentary elections are best held using some form of proportional representation.

However, one likely price of such an arrangement is that who forms the government does not simply depend on who has won most votes, but also on post-election negotiations between the parties so that a coalition or minority government can be formed. For those on the other side of the argument, this is too high a price to pay. They argue that it is more important that the electorate should determine directly who forms the next government than that the legislature should reflect precisely the distribution of opinions and political preferences across the electorate. Otherwise, it is suggested, voters lose the power to hold a government accountable by removing it from office. Those who uphold this view thus favour an electoral system that more or less guarantees an overall majority to whichever party comes first in votes, even if that party fails to secure anything like half the votes, thereby ensuring that elections become a choice between an incumbent single-party government and an opposition alternative.²

The apparent tendency for single-member plurality to promote and sustain a system of single-party government that alternates between two parties was most famously identified in the early 1950s by Maurice Duverger. In what became known as 'Duverger's Law', he stated that, 'The simple majority electoral system favours the two-party system'.³ Two principal reasons have been identified as why this is the case.⁴ The first is a 'mechanical' one; if there is only one winner in a constituency, then that winner will rarely, if ever, be a third party that has secured relatively few votes across the country as a whole. The second is a 'psychological' one. If indeed it is the case that a third party is unlikely to secure representation, then voters are discouraged from voting for it in the first place.

However, the claim that single-member plurality facilitates alternating single-party government rests not only on the way it makes life difficult for third parties, but also on the way in which it treats the two largest parties. In particular, it has been argued that the system rewards the party that comes first in votes more generously than the party that runs second. This property was summarised—again in the early 1950s—as a 'cube law', which states that if the two largest parties

divide the votes they win between them in the proportion A:B, the seats that they win will be divided in the proportion $A^3:B^3$.⁵ In practical terms what this formula means is that when the outcome of an election is close to being a dead heat between the top two parties, a 1% switch of votes from one of those parties to the other will result in as many as 3% of the seats changing hands. So a party that wins, say, 51% of the votes cast for the two largest parties is likely to secure as many as 53% of the seats won by those two parties. As a result even if third parties do win a few seats, it is likely that, even in the event of a narrow outcome, whoever has come first will have an overall majority of seats.

Although such a system is not proportional it can be regarded as 'fair', at least so far as its treatment of the top two parties is concerned. Single-member plurality provides a bonus to whoever comes first, irrespective of which is the party that occupies that position. But clearly it is important that the system should be even handed in awarding that bonus. If one party would secure 53% of the seats on the back of 51% of the vote won by the two largest parties, then the other principal party should also secure 53% of the seats in the same circumstances. Otherwise, it would apparently be easier for one party to win an overall majority than the other. Indeed it might even be possible for a party to win a majority even though it did not secure most votes, an outcome that would seem to deny rather than facilitate voters' ability to determine who should form the next government directly through the ballot box.

We have then identified four crucial foundations to the argument that single-member plurality facilitates a system of alternating single-party majority government, such as the UK has hitherto enjoyed in the post-war period. These are that the system:

- (i) should discourage people from voting for third parties,
- (ii) reward such votes as are cast for third parties with few seats,
- (iii) give a 'bonus' of seats to whoever comes first in votes, and
- (iv) to award that 'bonus' in an even-handed fashion.

In the remainder of this article, we will assess whether single-member plurality largely continues to exhibit these features in Britain, or whether the outcome of the 2010 election is symptomatic of changes in voting patterns that have undermined the ability of the system to perform in the manner anticipated by Duverger's Law and the cube law.

Discouraging third parties

So, our first consideration is whether single-member plurality is continuing to prove effective at discouraging people from voting for third parties. To address this, in Table 1 we summarise the votes cast across

1. Trends in party support, UK 1922–2010

	Conservative and Labour (%)	Liberal/Alliance/Liberal Democrat (%)	Others (%)
1922	68.2	28.8	3.0
1923	68.7	29.1	1.6
1924	80.1	17.8	2.1
1929	75.2	23.5	1.3
1931	91.6	7.0	1.4
1935	91.3	6.7	2.0
1945	87.6	9.0	3.4
1950	89.5	9.1	1.4
1951	96.8	2.6	0.6
1955	96.1	2.7	1.2
1959	93.2	5.9	0.9
1964	87.5	11.2	1.3
1966	89.9	8.5	1.5
1970	89.5	7.5	3.0
1974 (February)	75.1	19.3	5.6
1974 (October)	75.1	18.3	6.7
1979	80.8	13.8	5.4
1983	70.0	25.4	4.6
1987	73.1	22.6	4.4
1992	76.3	17.8	5.8
1997	73.9	16.8	9.3
2001	72.4	18.3	9.4
2005	67.6	22.0	10.4
2010	65.1	23.0	11.9

Between 1922 and 1945 the figures include a small number of votes cast in ‘university seats’ elected by single transferable vote. In 1922 Liberal includes both Liberal and National Liberal.

Sources: C. Rallings and M. Thrasher, *British Electoral Facts 1832–2006*, Ashgate, 2007; 2010 Nuffield Election Study data set compiled by Robert Ford.

the UK as a whole in all elections held since 1922, which was the first election to be held following the partition of Ireland and the first at which the Labour Party replaced the Liberals as the principal opposition to the Conservatives. We show three statistics: the proportion of votes cast for Conservative and Labour combined (hereafter the ‘two-party vote’), votes cast for the Liberal Party and its successors, and votes secured by all other parties.

The top half of the table shows how, once Labour had replaced the Liberals as the Conservatives’ principal opposition, voter sympathies soon concentrated themselves on Labour and the Conservatives. Within ten years nine of every ten votes were cast for one or other of those two parties. The proportion remained at or around that figure for the next 30 years. Indeed in the early 1950s the figure was as high as 96%, and the Liberal Party appeared to be on the verge of extinction. It is little wonder that it was at this time that Duverger’s Law should have emerged in the academic literature.

But in February 1974 there was a dramatic change. Nearly one in four votes were cast for parties other than the Conservatives and Labour. With nearly one in five votes, the Liberal Party secured what was by far its biggest share of the vote at any election since 1929. At the same time, support for other, smaller parties also reached its highest level since the partition of Ireland. In particular, the Scottish National Party won one-fifth of the vote in Scotland, while in Northern Ireland the fracturing of the unionist vote and the termination of the link between the Ulster Unionist party and the Conservative party meant that electoral politics in the province became wholly divorced from the party system in the rest of the UK.

This heralded a new pattern that was to persist for the next three decades or so, with the proportion of the vote won by Conservative and Labour combined oscillating around the three-quarters mark. The one further development of note during this period was that support for 'Others' increased markedly in 1997 to a new high, thanks primarily to votes secured by a wholly new 'Referendum Party' that campaigned for a referendum on Britain's membership of the European Union.

However, the last two elections, including 2010, have seen yet a further erosion of the two-party vote, and it is now at a lower level than at any time since 1922. Although the Liberal Democrats may not have fulfilled the high expectations generated by the opinion polls during the 2010 election campaign, at 23% their share of the UK vote was still the second highest share Britain's main third party has secured at any time since 1929. Meanwhile, the share of the vote won by 'Others' reached yet another all-time high. Indeed, even if we leave Northern Ireland to one side, no less than 9.8% of votes in Great Britain were cast for an 'other' candidate, the highest proportion recorded at any election since the First Reform Act.

So, the single-member plurality electoral system has never looked less effective at discouraging voters from supporting smaller parties than it does now. Never before in the history of British politics has the share of the vote won by the two largest parties been consistently as low as it has been at recent elections. Indeed, so far as votes cast are concerned, it is difficult to argue any longer that the UK is a two-party system at all.⁶

But what of the translation of votes cast by third parties into seats? Table 2 shows the number of seats won by third parties at each election since 1922, distinguishing between those won by the Liberal Party and its successors, those won by other smaller parties and candidates standing in Great Britain and those won by others standing in Northern Ireland. In so doing we also indicate for elections held between 1992 and 1994 the number of such seats that were won by candidates standing in one of the university seats, where the election was conducted using the single transferable vote rather than single-member plurality. These seats should clearly be discounted in assessing

2. Seats won by third parties in UK general elections 1922–2010

	Liberal/Alliance/Liberal Democrat	Others (GB)	Others (NI)
1922	115 (3)	12 (1)	2
1923	158 (2)	6 (1)	2
1924	40 (3)	12 (1)	0
1929	59 (2)	7 (2)	2
1931	36 (2)	3 (2)	2
1935	21 (1)	9 (3)	2
1945	12 (1)	21 (7)	4
1950	9	1	2
1951	6	0	3
1955	6	0	2
1959	6	1	0
1964	9	0	0
1966	12	0	1
1970	6	2	4
1974 (February)	14	11	12
1974 (October)	13	14	12
1979	11	4	12
1983	23	4	17
1987	22	6	17
1992	20	7	17
1997	46	11	18
2001	52	10	18
2005	62	12	18
2010	57	10	18

Figures in brackets between 1922 and 1945 are seats won in 'university seats' elected by single transferable vote. In 1922 Liberal includes both Liberal and National Liberal.

Sources: C. Rallings and M. Thrasher, *British Electoral Facts*. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/election2010/results/>.

the degree to which third parties were able to win seats under single-member plurality.⁷

Gradually during the inter-war period, Liberal Party representation in the Commons, together with that of other parties, was squeezed. By 1950 only a dozen MPs represented parties other than Conservative and Labour, and in the subsequent 20 years that figure was never greater than a baker's dozen. However, the growth in third-party support in February 1974, together with the fracturing of Northern Ireland's politics, had a clear impact on third-party representation—all of a sudden there were now some three dozen or so MPs representing parties other than Conservative or Labour. Still, given the extent of third-party support (a quarter of the vote) this was still a miserly reward (just 6% of the seats). The degree to which the system discriminated against Britain's main third-party formation was further emphasised in 1983, when a quarter of the vote brought the Liberal/SDP Alliance just 4% of the seats.

However, in recent years the Liberal Democrats have been far more successful at winning seats, even though the party has never quite

managed to emulate the share of the vote won by the Alliance in 1983. In 2005 the party won more seats than it had done at any time since 1923. And while the party's tally fell back slightly (despite an increase in its share of the vote) in 2010, at 57 it was still the equal second highest number of single-member plurality seats to be won by Britain's main third force since that date.

The explanation for this change is reasonably straightforward. The Liberal Democrat vote has become geographically somewhat less evenly spread. When the Liberal/SDP Alliance made its advance in 1983, its vote was very evenly spread—the standard deviation of its share of the vote across every constituency was just 7.3. At recent elections, in contrast, the equivalent figure has been between 10.4 and 11.⁸ And as the party's vote has become more unevenly spread, so it has become more likely to come first in some places rather than perpetually either second or third everywhere.

Discrimination against third parties is not an invariant feature of single-member plurality. Rather, the degree to which it does so depends on the geography of those parties' support. The more geographically concentrated a third party's vote, the less effective the system is at denying it representation. Thus, while first past the post does still discriminate against the Liberal Democrats (even in 2010 the party still only won 9% of the seats), an increase in the geographical concentration in that support means that it now does so less effectively. Coupled with the seats won by the (relatively concentrated) support won by nationalist and Northern Ireland parties, this development has at the last three elections produced a House of Commons in which there have been as many as 80–90 third-party MPs—and thus inevitably a House that is more likely to be hung.

Marginal seats

But what about the second key property ascribed to single-member plurality—a tendency to reward whichever party comes first in votes with a 'bonus' of seats, so that the lead of the first party over the second party in the House of Commons is an exaggerated reflection of its lead in the country as a whole. In particular, can it still be argued that this tendency is in line with the expectations of the 'cube law'?

A moment's reflection indicates that the degree to which single-member plurality will exaggerate the lead of the largest party over the second party must depend on how many constituencies are closely fought—or marginal—between those two parties. If 3% of the seats are to change hands as a result of a 1% swing in votes from party A to party B, then it must be the case that in 3% of the seats the lead of party B over party A is less than 2% of the vote. This requirement was formulated more formally by two statisticians, Maurice Kendall and Alan Stuart, who demonstrated that if the cube law was to operate, the frequency distribution of the Conservative (or Labour) share of the

two-party vote across all constituencies needs to approximate a normal distribution with a standard deviation of 13.7.⁹ It can also be shown that, if this condition is satisfied, then in the event that the Conservative and Labour parties were to have the same shares of the two-party vote across the country as a whole, 30% of constituencies would be ones where the Conservative share of the two-party vote would be between 45 and 55%.¹⁰ We can term these seats ‘marginal seats’.

Table 3 shows how far these conditions have been satisfied at each election since 1955. First it shows the number of seats that were marginal, as we have defined that term, and the proportion of all seats won by Conservative and Labour that fell into that category. Thereafter it indicates, the standard deviation of the two-party vote across all constituencies, together with the kurtosis, a measure of the degree to which the distribution conforms to a normal distribution. A normal distribution is often described as a ‘bell’-shaped curve, and the kurtosis indicates whether the height of that bell is as high as it would be if the distribution were normal.

A striking story emerges. In the 1950s the frequency distribution of the two-party vote did come close to meeting the stipulations identified by Kendall and Stuart. The standard deviation was close to the 13.7 mark, while there was only a slightly negative kurtosis—an indication

3. Changing distribution of two-party vote 1955–2010

	Marginals		Two-party vote	
	Number	%	Standard deviation	Kurtosis
1955	166	27.2	13.5	−0.25
1959	157	25.7	13.8	−0.29
1964	166	27.3	14.1	−0.45
1966	155	25.6	13.8	−0.46
1970	149	24.5	14.3	−0.27
1974 (February)	119	19.9	16.1	−0.68
1974 (October)	98	16.4	16.8	−0.82
1979	108	17.8	16.9	−0.87
1983	80	13.2	20.0	−1.05
1987	87	14.4	21.4	−1.03
1992	98	16.1	20.2	−1.03
1997	114	19.6	18.1	−0.85
2001	114	19.7	18.3	−0.82
2005	104	18.8	19.7	−0.96
2010	85	15.0	22.2	−1.08

Marginal seat: Seat where Conservative share of two-party vote (overall Conservative share of two-party vote—50%) lies within the range of 45–55%.

Two-party vote: Votes cast for Conservative and Labour combined.

Table based only on seats won by Conservative or Labour at that election and contested by both parties.

Source: Curtice, ‘Neither Representative nor Accountable’ and author’s calculations.

that at the centre of the distribution there were somewhat fewer seats than would occur if it were normal. Still, at around the 160 mark, the proportion of seats that were marginal was only a little less than the 30% required for the cube law to operate. It is thus little surprise that during this period the electoral system did exaggerate small leads in votes into quite large leads in seats—thus, for example, in 1955 a Conservative lead over Labour of just over three points in terms of votes was translated into an 11-point lead—and an overall majority of 59—in terms of seats.

But here too something changed in February 1974. The number of marginal seats suddenly fell to 119, or no more than one in five of the total. Meanwhile, the standard deviation of the two-party vote increased to 16.1. There were even fewer marginal seats in the second election of that year, held in October. It was in truth no accident that the February 1974 election produced the first hung parliament of the post-war era or that the October 1974 election only gave Labour an overall majority of four, a majority that soon disappeared, thereby leaving the minority Labour government dependent on, first, the Liberals and then other parties for support. Not only had there been a notable increase in the number of third-party MPs at those elections, but also the ability of the electoral system systematically to exaggerate the lead of the largest party over the second largest had also been seriously eroded.

The principal reason for this erosion was long-term change in the geography of Conservative and Labour support.¹¹ Beginning with the pattern of movement between the 1955 and 1959 elections, Conservative support became increasingly concentrated in the South and Midlands of England together with more rural areas. Labour, meanwhile, performed better in Scotland, the North of England and more urban constituencies. Initially, this development had little impact on the number of marginal seats. But waves of the same pattern at successive elections meant that, by the early 1970s, constituencies that were already relatively strong for the Conservatives were becoming more so, while the opposite happened in seats where Labour was relatively strong. As Britain diverged politically, so fewer seats were left where both parties had a chance of winning.

Meanwhile, as in the case of third-party support and representation, the pre-1974 status quo was never restored. Indeed by 1983 just one in eight seats were marginal while the standard deviation of the two-party vote had reached 20. True, there was some reversal of the decline in marginal seats in the 1990s—not least because in the 1997 and 2001 elections Labour were relatively successful in the South of England and the Midlands—but even so the character of the frequency distribution of the two-party vote still fell far short of what was required for the cube law to operate. With some 80–90 MPs now representing third parties, a hung parliament had in truth become a rather likely prospect.

In fact, the chances of such a parliament occurring increased further in 2010, thanks to a further fall in the number of marginal seats, which have now fallen to a level only a little above that which pertained in the 1980s. For once again, previously Conservative and previously Labour Britain diverged. On average, the Conservative share of the two-party vote increased by 10.2 points in seats that the party had already won in 2005, while it increased by only 6.3 points in seats Labour were defending.¹² The sharpest manifestation of this divergence was in heavily Labour Scotland, where, in contrast to the rest of the country, there was a small net (total vote) swing from the Conservatives to Labour. However, divergence on much the same scale was also evident within England and Wales, not least because Labour's vote held up relatively well in seats with high ethnic minority populations.

Bias

Still, at this point the reader might be asking themselves an important question. If the exaggerative quality of the electoral system has indeed been eroded for some time, why did a hung parliament not occur before 2010? Part of the answer is that at most recent elections, the winning party has enjoyed a handsome lead in votes, let alone seats, as typified by the Conservatives' 15-point lead over Labour in 1983, and Labour's 12.5-point lead over the Conservatives in 1997. Such large leads might well be expected to produce overall majorities, despite the growth in third-party representation and the fall in the number of marginal seats. However, in 2005 Labour enjoyed no more than a three-point lead over the Conservatives, yet still emerged with a very comfortable overall majority of 66. How was this possible? And, indeed, why, given what happened in 2005, was the seven-point lead that the Conservatives obtained in 2010 still insufficient to secure an overall majority?

The answer lies in a marked failure of single-member plurality these days to treat Labour and the Conservatives in an equal-handed manner. Instead it has come to reward Labour more favourably than the Conservatives. There are in fact a number of possible different reasons why such a 'bias' can emerge under first past the post, and it is the Conservatives' misfortune that most of these have come together to work against them at recent elections.

Table 4 provides a simple introduction to the trends over time in the two most obvious potential sources of bias.¹³ The first such potential source is that the seats won by party A have more voters in them than do those won by party B. If that is the case then the average vote won by party A across every constituency will be less than that party's overall share when the votes cast for each party are totalled across the country as a whole. So the first statistic displayed in Table 4 is the difference between the mean Conservative share of the two-party vote

4. Measures of bias 1955–2010

	Conservative percentage two-party vote		
	Mean – overall	Median – mean	Median – overall
1955	+0.3	+0.6	+0.9
1959	+0.4	+0.8	+1.2
1964	+0.1	+0.4	+0.5
1966	–0.3	+0.2	–0.1
1970	–0.9	+0.8	–0.1
1970 ^a	–0.1	+0.5	+0.4
1974 (February)	–0.1	–0.5	–0.5
1974 (October)	–0.3	+1.4	+1.1
1979	–0.7	–0.5	–1.2
1979 ^a	–0.1	+0.9	+0.9
1983	–0.5	+1.7	+1.2
1987	–0.8	+1.4	+0.6
1992	–1.2	–0.0	–1.2
1992 ^a	–0.2	–0.7	–0.9
1997	–0.4	–1.6	–2.0
2001	–1.4	–1.5	–2.9
2001 ^a	–1.1	–1.4	–2.5
2005	–2.1	–1.1	–3.2
2005 ^a	–1.5	–1.0	–2.5
2010	–1.3	–0.8	–2.1

^aNotional results based on estimates of what the outcome would have been if that election had been fought on the new constituency boundaries that were introduced at the subsequent election. The 2001 redistribution (together with a reduction in the number of seats) was confined to Scotland.

Two-party vote: Votes cast for Conservative and Labour combined.

Figures based on all seats in Great Britain. Northern Ireland excluded.

Source: Author's calculations.

across every constituency and the party's overall share of that vote totalled across the whole country.

The second main potential source of bias arises if one party's vote is more efficiently distributed than another's. A party's vote is distributed efficiently if the seats it does win are secured with relatively small majorities, while those it loses are lost badly. Such a pattern would mean that most of the votes won by that party helped it to win seats rather than wasted either stoking up large majorities or losing out narrowly.

One way of identifying whether one party's vote is more or less efficiently distributed is to compare the mean share of the two-party vote it wins across every constituency with the median value of that statistic across all constituencies. This is done in the second column of the table. If a party's vote is more efficiently distributed then its median share of the two-party vote should be higher than the mean, for that indicates it has managed to win more than its mean share in over half of all constituencies—and, of course, who wins most seats depends not on who wins most votes overall, but on who wins most votes in the median constituency.

Table 4 suggests that until 1997 no one party was particularly disadvantaged. True, the Conservatives' mean share of the two-party vote tended to be smaller than their overall share, and especially so as a set of constituency boundaries grew older.¹⁴ For most of the post-war period the population of Great Britain has shifted away from the more Labour inclined urban areas and northern half the country, and thus the longer a set of constituency boundaries have been in place, so the greater the degree to which Labour seats have become relatively smaller. However, the process has been at least partially corrected by the periodic redrawing of constituency boundaries. This can be discerned by looking at the figures in the table that show what would have happened if an election had been fought on the new boundaries that were introduced at the next election and comparing them with the figures for the actual result for that election as fought on the old boundaries.

In any event, this tendency for Conservative held seats to be bigger was for most of the post-war period counteracted by a tendency for the Conservative vote to be more efficiently distributed (though one notable occasion when this was not the case was February 1974 when, as a result, Labour won four more seats than the Conservatives despite winning 0.7% less of the UK vote). This was because Labour had a tendency to win more seats than the Conservatives by large majorities.¹⁵ Thanks to this counterbalance the overall level of bias (as measured by the difference between the median and the overall Conservative share of the two-party vote in the final column of the table) was usually relatively small.

However, this pattern changed in the 1990s. From 1997 onwards it has been Labour's vote that has been the more efficiently distributed.¹⁶ At that election the Conservatives lost ground particularly heavily in seats they were defending, while Labour's ability to capture seats from the Conservatives was further enhanced by tactical votes from Liberal Democrat supporters who wished to ensure the local Conservative was defeated. Consequently, the Conservatives came a relatively good second in too many seats, and it is a pattern that has not subsequently been fully reversed.¹⁷

At the same time, the advantage that Labour has derived from winning seats that are smaller has also been relatively big at the last three elections, including in 2010, despite the implementation of two boundary reviews that between them reduced the number of seats in Scotland and updated those in England and Wales. There are two main reasons for this. First, the boundary review implemented in 2010 was based (in England) on electorates that were by then already ten years old. Second, no attempt has been made to reduce the over-representation of (Labour inclined) Wales, while the reduction in the number of constituencies in Scotland failed in practice to wholly remove the disparity between the size of the average English and that of the average Scottish constituency. Thus in 2010 the average seat in

Wales contained just 56,626 voters, that in Scotland, 65,234, while the average constituency in England had 71,909. On average across Great Britain as a whole, seats won by the Conservatives in 2010 had 3733 more names on the electoral register than did those won by Labour.

However, the effective 'size' of a constituency does not only depend on the number of people on the electoral register, but also on what proportion of those registered to vote actually cast their ballot. While turnout has commonly been lower on average in Labour-held than in Conservative held seats, the gap widened markedly in 1992, and has not since subsequently significantly narrowed once again. Thus in 2010 the turnout in the average seat won by the Conservatives was, at 68.4%, some seven points higher than that in the average seat won by Labour (61.1%). This ensured that the 3733 difference between the two types of seat in the number of persons on the electoral register proved to be one of 7894 in the number of people who actually turned out to vote.

So thanks to a myriad of developments, it has become more difficult nowadays for the Conservatives to secure an overall majority than it is Labour. Labour might have been able to win a safe majority with just a three-point lead in 2005, but before the 2010 election it was anticipated that in the absence of a radical change in the electoral geography of Britain, the Conservatives would require a lead of nearly 11 points over Labour in order to secure a bare overall majority. And so it came to pass that the seven-point lead the Conservatives actually obtained proved not to be enough.

Implications

All four foundations that lie behind the claim that single-member plurality facilitates alternating single-party majority government have been seriously eroded in the UK. The system is no longer effective at denying third parties votes and is now significantly less effective than it once was at denying them seats. Meanwhile, the system now exaggerates the lead of the largest party over the second party in a systematic manner to a much lesser extent than in the past, while it certainly now fails to treat the two largest parties in an even-handed manner. In uncovering these changes, we have discovered that far from adhering reliably to any general law, the link between votes and seats under single-member plurality is in fact heavily contingent on the geography of party support.

The collective impact of the four developments on the prospects that future elections in the UK under single-member plurality might enable the electorate to choose directly between two alternative majority governments is illustrated in Table 5. This takes as its starting point the outcome of the 2010 election (shown in bold) and then shows what the outcome in seats would be for various other possible Conservative leads over Labour (based on votes cast in Great Britain only). We make

Conservative percentage lead over Labour (GB)	5. How single-member plurality works now			
	Seats (UK)			
	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat	Others
-2.7	239	326	59	26
0.0	255	306	61	28
4.1	282	281	59	28
7.3	307	258	57	28
11.2	327	233	62	28

Source: Author's calculations.

two assumptions to produce these calculations. First, we assume that support for the Liberal Democrats and other smaller parties remains at the same level in every constituency as it was in 2010. Second, in each case we assume that changes in the level of Conservative and Labour support occur uniformly in each and every constituency. Thus, for example, our calculation for what would happen in the event of a 11.2 point Conservative lead over Labour, that is almost four points above what the party obtained in 2010, is based on the assumption that the Conservative vote increases by just under two points everywhere while Labour's vote falls by nearly two points everywhere. In short, we assume that the electoral geography of Britain remains as it was in 2010.

Two features of the table are striking. The first is the extent of the disadvantage suffered by the Conservatives. On the current electoral geography Labour only needs a little under a three-point lead in votes in order to secure an overall majority. That is a more demanding target than Labour needed in the wake of the 2005 election (on the boundaries that pertained at that election)—then Labour could have secured a majority while still one point behind the Conservatives—but it is still a far less demanding target than the 11-point lead required for an overall majority by the Conservatives.

The second striking feature is the size of the gap between these two targets—a range of no less than 14 points. Following the fall in the number of marginal seats that range is even wider than the near 11 point one that obtained after 2005. Indeed it has never previously been wider. It simply means that, given the current electoral geography of Britain and levels of third-party support, single-member plurality is now highly likely to produce a hung parliament—and thus its continued use is now very difficult to defend on the grounds that it facilitates a two-party system of alternating single-party majority government.

The future

One of these features—the bias against the Conservatives—is due to be addressed by the new coalition government. It aims to reduce the disparities in the size of constituency electorates. It remains to be seen

how successful it will be, but even if it is, it should be apparent from our analysis above that it will only eliminate some of the disadvantage suffered by the Conservatives.¹⁸ Moreover, there is no reason to believe that this step will reduce the range of outcomes that would produce a hung parliament. The Conservatives might be able to win a majority on a nine- or ten-point lead—but Labour then be unable to do so on a four or five point one. The range might perhaps be narrowed a little by a second commitment of the new government—to cut the number of MPs by 50 to 600—but any effect is only likely to be small.¹⁹ Single-member plurality will still be likely to produce a hung parliament.

Meanwhile the public are due to be given an opportunity to vote in a referendum on whether single-member plurality should be replaced with the Alternative Vote. Under this system voters place candidates in the order of preference, 1, 2, 3, and in the event that no candidate secures over half of the first preference vote, the votes cast for those candidates with the fewest votes are successively eliminated and redistributed in accordance with the second and subsequent preferences expressed by those voters until someone reaches the 50% target. Far from proportional, the system would still leave the Liberal Democrats at a considerable disadvantage. Nevertheless because the party is often the second preference of Conservative and Labour voters it would sometimes manage to leapfrog into first place, and thereby win some extra seats.²⁰ And more seats for the Liberal Democrats means hung parliaments become yet more likely. But as should now be clear, they are now quite likely to occur under single-member plurality anyway.

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- 1 R. Plant, *The Plant Report: A Working Party on Electoral Reform*, the *Guardian*, 1991; G. Bingham Powell Jr, *Elections as Instruments of Democracy: Majoritarian and Proportional Visions*, Yale University Press, 2000.
- 2 See, for example, P. Norton, 'The Case for First Past the Post', *Representation*, 34, 1997, 84–8.
- 3 M. Duverger, *Political Parties: Their Organisation and Activity in the Modern State*, Methuen, 1954, p. 217. See also G. Cox, *Making Votes Count*, Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- 4 K. Benoit, 'Duverger's Law and the Study of Electoral Systems', *French Politics*, 4, 2006, 69–83.
- 5 D. Butler, 'An Examination of the Results' in H. Nicholas (ed.), *The British General Election of 1950*, Macmillan, 1951; G. Gudgin and P. Talyor, *Seats, Votes and the Spatial Organisation of Elections*, Pion, 1979; R. Taagerpera and M. Shugart, *Seats and Votes: The Effects and Determinants of Electoral Systems*, Yale University Press, 1989.
- 6 Indeed, according to the formula for the effective number of (electoral) parties developed by Laakso and Taagerpera, the UK now has as many as 3.7 effective parties. M. Laakso and R. Taagerpera, 'Effective Number of Parties: A Measure with Application to Western Europe', *Comparative Political Studies*, 12, 1979, 3–27.
- 7 It should also be noted that until 1950 24 MPs were elected (by plurality rule) in double member rather than single member constituencies.
- 8 For further details see J. Curtice, 'Neither Representative nor Accountable: First Past the Post in Britain', in B. Grofman, A. Blais and S. Bowler (eds), *Duverger's Law of Plurality Voting*, Springer, 2009, and A. Russell and E. Fieldhouse, *Neither Left nor Right? Liberal Democrats and the Electorate*, Manchester University Press, 2005.

- 9 M. Kendall and A. Stuart, 'The Law of Cubic Proportions in Election Results', *British Journal of Sociology*, 1, 1951, 183–97.
- 10 J. Curtice and M. Steed, 'Electoral Choice and the Production of Government: The Changing Operation of the Electoral System in the UK Since 1955', *British Journal of Political Science*, 12, 1982, 249–98.
- 11 Curtice and Steed, 'Electoral Choice'; J. Curtice and M. Steed, 'Proportionality and Exaggeration in the British Electoral System', *Electoral Studies*, 5, 1986, 209–28; Curtice, 'Neither Representative nor Accountable'.
- 12 Seats not won by either Conservative or Labour in 2010 are not included in this calculation.
- 13 C. Soper and J. Rydon, 'Under-representation and Electoral Prediction', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 4, 1958, 94–106. For a more complex approach see D. Rossiter, R. Johnston, C. Pattie, D. Dorling I. MacAllister and H. Tunstall, 'Changing Biases in the Operation of the UK's Electoral System, 1950–1997' *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 1, 1998, 133–64, and R. Johnston, D. Rossiter and C. Pattie, 'Integrating and Decomposing the Sources of Electoral Bias: Brooke's Method and the Impact of Redistricting in Great Britain', *Electoral Studies*, 18, 1999, 367–78.
- 14 The set of boundaries first implemented in 1955 exhibited a small bias to the Conservatives because on that occasion, unlike those created thereafter, the English boundary commission deliberately created smaller seats in rural areas. See D. Rossiter, R. Johnston and C. Pattie, *The Boundary Commissions: Redrawing the UK's Map of Parliamentary Constituencies*, Manchester University Press, 1999.
- 15 D. Butler, *The Electoral System in Britain*, 2nd edn. Clarendon Press, 1963; R. Johnston, C. Pattie, D. Dorling and D. Rossiter, *From Votes to Seats: The Operation of the UK Electoral System Since 1945*, Manchester University Press, 2001.
- 16 J. Curtice and M. Steed, 'Appendix 2: The Results Analysed' in D. Butler and D. Kavanagh (eds), *The British General Election of 1997*, Macmillan, 1997; J. Curtice, 'The Electoral System: Biased to Blair?', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 54, 2001, 803–14.
- 17 The Conservatives have also 'wasted' a higher proportion of their vote than Labour in losing in (the now larger number of) seats won by third parties. For example, in 2010 the average Conservative share of the vote in seats won by third parties was 28.4%, while that for Labour was just 16.6%.
- 18 G. Borisuyk, C. Rallings, M. Thrasher and R. Johnston, 'Parliamentary Constituency Boundary Reviews and Electoral Bias: How Important are Variations in Constituency Size?', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 63, 2010, 4–21.
- 19 Curtice and Steed, 'Exaggeration and Proportionality'.
- 20 An opinion poll conducted by ComRes for *The Independent* newspaper (27.4.10), found that 68% of Labour supporters and 41% of Conservatives would have given a second preference vote to the Liberal Democrats. If these and the other figures obtained by the poll were to have been in evidence in the ballot box in an Alternative Vote election in 2010, the Liberal Democrats would probably have won around 80 seats.