

## Anti-Conservative bias in the electoral system

It has been widely noted that the current electoral system is biased against the Conservatives. Labour won the 2001 election with 412 MPs against 166 Conservative MPs, and a landslide majority of 165, but with a lead of only 9 points in the popular vote. John Major's Conservatives had a popular vote lead of not much less – 7.5 percentage points – but a paltry majority of 21 and 336 MPs compared to Labour's 271. If the parties polled the same total of votes, and there was a uniform national swing, Labour would still have an overall majority. The Conservatives need to lead by something like 4 points to draw level in seats, and by about 9 in order to enjoy a bare overall majority. This is probably the largest degree of bias the system has ever produced.

There are several reasons for this, which are analysed in turn, along with a popular explanation 'biased boundaries' which has no substance.

### Differential turnout

This is a very important factor in explaining the current bias in the electoral system. Turnout in the very safest Labour seats has fallen dramatically in recent elections, and rather less so in marginal and safe Conservative seats. This means that, for a given share of the national vote, it makes it easier for Labour to win seats.

A simple numerical example may suffice. Suppose that there are five constituencies with 70,000 electors each, each fought only by the two main parties. Three are safe Labour urban seats, two are safe Conservative rural seats, and in each safe seat the dominant party gets 60 per cent and the smaller party 40 per cent. Turnout in election A is 80 per cent everywhere, turnout in election B falls to 75 per cent in the safe Conservative seats and 50 per cent in the safe Labour seats. There is no change in the balance between the parties in any of the seats. The votes are as follows:

	Election A				Election B			
	Lab		Con		Lab		Con	
Urban 1	33,600	60%	22,400	40%	21,000	60%	14,000	40%
Urban 2	33,600	60%	22,400	40%	21,000	60%	14,000	40%
Urban 3	33,600	60%	22,400	40%	21,000	60%	14,000	40%
Rural 1	22,400	40%	33,600	60%	20,500	40%	31,500	60%
Rural 2	22,400	40%	33,600	60%	20,500	40%	31,500	60%
TOTAL	145,600	52.0%	134,400	48.0%	104,000	49.8%	105,000	50.2%
	3 seats		2 seats		3 seats		2 seats	

Labour have slipped behind the Conservatives in the overall vote. There appears to have been a national swing of 2.2 per cent to the Conservatives although they are no closer to winning any of the Labour seats, and Labour now have a 3-2 majority in seats despite having slightly less of the vote. If the Conservatives had a swing of 5 per cent in their favour, they would be even further behind in the vote and still gain no more seats. This, in exaggerated terms, is a representation of what has been happening in Britain. This factor is nothing to do with any problems in drawing boundaries – all the constituencies are the right size and there have been no changes in population. Unless the causes of differential turnout are addressed, there is no way to solve this problem within the First Past the Post system.

## **Population drift**

The Boundary Commissions' review of parliamentary seats is a slow process. The boundaries introduced with effect from the 1997 election were based on 1991 data; those coming in with effect from the election after this one will be based on registration in 2000. The same population trends that necessitate boundary reviews also alter the size of the registered electorate in each seat as time goes on. What generally happens is that population moves out of inner city seats (mostly Labour) and increases in less urbanised areas, particularly in semi-rural areas outside the main towns. The result is that the longer has elapsed since a boundary review, the smaller the electorate in the average Labour constituency becomes relative to Conservative seats and most marginals. By 2003 English Labour seats had 67,991 electors on average while Conservative seats had 72,939 electors, a gap of roughly 5,000 votes. This factor tends to work in conjunction with differential turnout.

Population drift is nothing new, and in fact is less serious now than it has been in previous parliaments. By the mid 1970s the smallest constituency (Newcastle Central) had only around 22,000 electors, while there were other seats topping 100,000. The gap now is, leaving aside exceptional cases such as the Isle of Wight, only between about 53,000 and 85,000. Population drift cannot explain why the bias is so much greater now than it has been in the past.

A boundary review can correct for population drift, but it is out of date as soon as it is implemented. Population drift between 2000 and 2009 will not be addressed under the revised boundaries currently under development.

## **Biased boundaries**

This is not a significant factor in the current bias of the electoral system. Boundaries are drawn up by four neutral Boundary Commissions (one each for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland). The Commissions propose provisional recommendations, and if there are objections (there usually are) local public inquiries take place, presided over by Assistant Commissioners who are barristers doing a bit of public service. The political parties argue their cases at the local inquiries, using only arguments that are permitted under the Commission guidelines. By general consent, Labour did a good job in arguing their case before the last round of inquiries, but the room for manoeuvre is relatively small. The expert assessment of the new boundaries before 1997 was that it would raise the Conservatives' 1992 majority from 21 to 27 and had left Labour requiring a slightly higher swing in order to win. The Conservative government accelerated the boundary review by an amending law in 1992, on the assumption that the new lines would help them in the next election.

## **Scotland and Wales**

Both Scotland and Wales are over-represented in Parliament relative to England, although with effect from the 2005 election the English quota has been applied in Scotland, reducing its representation from 72 to 59. Wales remains over-represented, with an average electorate in its 40 constituencies of 55,904 in 2001 compared to 69,928 in England. The effect of giving representation on such preferential terms to two particularly Labour-dominated regions has generated a degree of bias in the system. However, the net effect of the Scottish changes seems to be to reduce Labour by 10 seats and the other three main Scottish parties by one each, so it reduces Labour's majority by 7. If Wales were to be cut down to size, it would have 32 seats and at least one of the disappearing seats would be non-Labour, making a maximum net effect of 7 on the majority. The effect of Scotland and Wales is quite small compared to that of differential turnout or the more esoteric factor of efficient vote distribution.

## **Tactical voting**

Election analyst Peter Kellner (of YouGov) is quoted in *The Economist* (9 April 2005) as estimating the effect of tactical voting in 2001 to have deprived the Conservatives of 43 seats. Voters in 1997 and 2001 ganged up against Conservative candidates by voting for the best-placed anti-Tory challenger. Rather than just facing defeat at the hands of Labour who had 43%, they faced a de facto popular front against them in their marginal seats, with an even higher effective share of the vote. The steady increase in tactical voting from 1992 onwards has helped bias the system against the Conservatives.

The 2005 election is expected to produce a degree of 'tactical unwind'. The growing distance between Labour and Lib Dem, and issues such as the Iraq war, should make tactical voting less attractive for many people. It is unlikely to disappear altogether, though, and paradoxically any signs of a strong Conservative showing will encourage some voters to return to their old tactical habits. In any case, tactical unwind is likely to be asymmetrical – if anything, the Lib Dems may be even more attractive in this election to people who would otherwise have considered voting Labour. This would help the Lib Dems in the seats where they and the Tories are the main contenders.

### **Efficient vote distribution**

This factor is perhaps the most difficult to quantify and explain. Back in the 1950s, when the electoral system was biased against Labour, the party suffered from inefficient vote distribution. Turnout was high everywhere and the party racked up massive majorities in its working class safe seats; safe Conservative seats were a bit less monolithic and there were fewer of them.

Labour's vote distribution in 2001 was incredibly efficient. The party's share of the vote held up best in the seats where it mattered – the marginals it had won from the Conservatives in 1997. There are several reasons for this. One was incumbency – MPs now have more resources to concentrate on constituency service than in the past, and several first-time Labour winners were clearly very hard working MPs. It was notable that in seats where the Conservatives had suffered a close shave in 1997, the Conservative majorities tended to go up in 2001 as well. Another is party organisation, which encourages people to go out and vote. Another is the extraordinary efforts the parties concentrate on voters in the marginal seats – their whole campaign, both in terms of message and in the techniques used, was aimed at these people. It is scarcely surprising that these voters felt the election was more relevant to them than other people did.

The idea of efficient vote distribution can be illustrated by comparing Northamptonshire and Liverpool between 1992 and 2001. Labour's vote in Liverpool dropped from 140,255 to 100,996 over this period, with no ill effects on the party's holdings of seats (quite the reverse - their advantage went from 5-1 to 5-0 because a Lib Dem seat was abolished in the boundary review). In Northamptonshire, by contrast, Labour's vote went up from 118,634 to 131,835 and the situation in seats went from a 6-0 Conservative win to a 5-1 Labour victory. Labour's vote fell where it didn't matter, and increased where it mattered most.

The Liberal Democrats, by taking seats disproportionately from the Conservatives, also make it more difficult for the Conservatives to draw level.

### **Conclusion**

All First Past the Post can ever promise is that the winner in each constituency has the largest single total of votes in that constituency. It is not a proportional system and need not produce a stable relationship between seats and votes. FPTP can produce severely biased and unfair results between the two major parties, as well as discriminating systematically against smaller parties whose support is fairly evenly spread. The problem of bias can only be solved by getting rid of FPTP.