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ERS**Quick**Guides

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# PR Myths

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**Preface by Vernon Bogdanor**  
Professor of Government, Oxford University

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# PR Myths

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**The facts and  
the fiction on  
Proportional  
Representation**

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# What's inside

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9	<b>Myth 1</b> <b>Small parties rule the roost under PR</b>
13	<b>Myth 2</b> <b>First Past the Post is tried and tested</b>
15	<b>Myth 3</b> <b>PR is incomprehensible</b>
17	<b>Myth 4</b> <b>PR doesn't let you kick out an unpopular government</b>
19	<b>Myth 5</b> <b>First Past the Post is best for representing a constituency</b>
23	<b>Myth 6</b> <b>PR does nothing for turnout</b>
27	<b>Myth 7</b> <b>PR creates weak coalitions</b>
31	<b>Myth 8</b> <b>PR lets in extremist parties</b>
35	<b>Myth 9</b> <b>The STV form of PR is bad for party cohesion and therefore government</b>
37	<b>Myth 10</b> <b>PR caused the problems in the 2007 Scottish elections</b>

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# Preface

No political issue attracts more fallacious arguments than proportional representation (PR). Perhaps the most foolish one is that a proportional system would be too difficult for the voters to understand. The implication must be that English voters are the most stupid in Europe. For every other European country except France uses a proportional system, and proportional representation is now used for the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish devolved bodies and for local government in Scotland and Northern Ireland. Only Westminster and local authorities in England and Wales remain as a last redoubt of First-Past-the-Post.

The weaknesses of First-Past-the-Post have become even clearer in recent years. Do we really want to continue with a system which allows a party to 'win' an election, as in 2005, on just 36% of the vote – i.e. when nearly two-thirds of voters are opposed to it? Do we really want to continue with a system which gives the Conservatives 92 fewer seats than Labour in England, even though the Conservatives won more votes than Labour in England?

The crucial weakness of First-Past-the-Post is that, under it, the number of seats a party wins depends not only upon the number of votes it receives but upon the geographical distribution of its vote. Parties whose support is geographically concentrated, such as Labour, will gain more seats for a given vote than parties, such as the Liberal Democrats, whose support is more evenly spread. The central argument for proportional representation is that it takes the element of geographical unfairness out of elections.

Lewis Baston has performed a public service in producing this trenchant pamphlet exposing the fallacies of some of the arguments used against proportional representation. I hope that it is widely read. For it is only when the fallacies have been exposed that the real debate can begin.

**Vernon Bogdanor,**  
*Professor of Government*  
Oxford University

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# Introduction

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In January 2008 the Government published its Review of Voting Systems. This was, in the main, a fair and detailed treatment of the issues around electoral systems. The review demolishes some of the arguments most cherished by opponents of electoral reform. It also provides support, although carefully phrased, for arguments favoured by reformers.

The Government's report follows ten other reports in the last ten years which assessed the merits of different voting systems. Each one furthered our understanding of how different voting systems in the UK have had an effect on the way we are represented and governed.

Despite this wealth of information, some common misconceptions are still quoted in the debate on electoral reform. This pamphlet draws on the Government's own report, previous studies, international experience and the Society's original research to counter such PR myths.

**Lewis Baston**

*Director of Research*  
Electoral Reform Society

**Myth:** Small parties rule the roost under PR  
**Reality:** Under FPTP a small group of swing voters decide who is in government.



Studies of what happens under coalition governments show that the idea that the tail wags the dog is not borne out by the facts. The smaller party achieves some of its objectives, but the programme for government is by and large more closely based on the manifesto of the larger party. The larger party has most of the executive appointments and therefore more of an opportunity to use the power of government in line with its philosophy.

Often it is perfectly clear where a small party stands, and if the electorate do not want it to be in government they can vote against it. This happened when the FDP was ejected from power by the SPD and Greens in Germany in 1998. Small parties that overplay their hand and use their power unwisely, as the New Zealand First Party did in the first PR parliament in 1996, are generally punished by the electorate in the next election. Sometimes, as in the British parliament elected in February 1974, or in the German grand coalitions, the bigger parties get together formally or informally to prevent the smaller parties gaining too much from the situation.

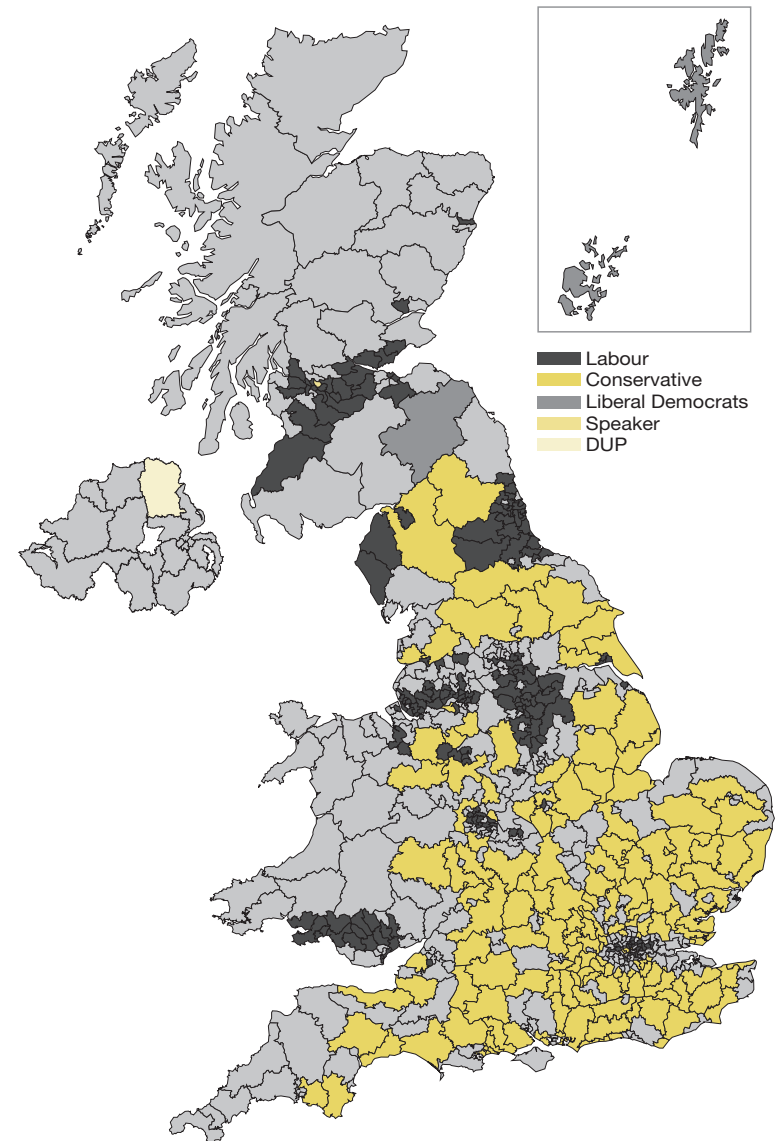
People who make the argument that small centre parties rule the roost under PR usually run out of examples after mentioning the FDP in Germany (a party that has been out of power since 1998). The idea of a small party holding the balance between two big parties is an outmoded picture in many countries, including Germany and Britain. What sort of coalition is formed will depend very much on the context of politics at a given time, and deeper differences between

political culture in different nations. Politics in most countries, even in Britain, is decreasingly about a simple left-right spectrum, and agreement on different issues can be found in the most surprising places. In the Netherlands recent governments have included the Labour Party (PvdA) in a grand coalition with the Christian Democrats (CDA), the CDA with the right-Liberal VVD, and even Labour in coalition with the VVD. Arguments against coalitions have not caught up with the reality of multi-party politics and the decline of the two party left-right monoliths.

First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) itself creates the problem of a small swing group deciding who is in government. Because election results depend on the outcome in a rather small number of marginal seats, and the number of voters who might change their mind in such seats is itself smaller, election manifestos and campaigns are crafted to appeal to this group who were estimated in 2005 to consist of only 800,000 electors out of 45 million. This small group of voters has an effective veto over a wide range of policies on taxation, public services and climate change. They are, in effect, a ruling minority but without the stated policy positions that a small party would have. ■

### Where Votes Don't Count: 'Safe Seat' constituencies held by the same party since 1970

Based on 2005 boundaries



**Myth:** First Past the Post is tried and tested.  
**Reality:** FPTP fails decisively on three counts – seats that look like the votes cast, voter choice and representing society fairly.

# 2

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It is certainly true that FPTP is an old-fashioned system. It was designed for a time when few people could vote, literacy was low and there were not many contested elections. However, some features are more recent – two MPs per seat was the norm before 1885 and single-member only representation dates from 1950.

Most countries abandoned FPTP at the same time they were embracing democracy and a mass franchise – PR is tried and tested in many other countries and the FPTP countries are the ones that are out of step.

FPTP has also produced poor results. In 1997 the government in its brief to the Jenkins Commission outlined four desirable features in an electoral system – a reasonable relationship between votes and seats, stable government, voter choice and a link between the MP and a geographical constituency. We might also add fair representation of women and minorities. FPTP fails decisively on three counts – seats that look like the votes cast, voter choice and representing society fairly. It is also pretty poor on the other two, about which there are many myths that need exploding.

British FPTP has also got the result ‘wrong’ in three out of four close elections, giving the party with fewer votes more seats. In 2000, Al Gore was the choice of American voters, but the FPTP Electoral College decided it for the popular vote loser, George W Bush. Can one look at any of these results and feel that FPTP even passes the basic test of electing the government for which people have voted? ■



**Myth: PR is  
incomprehensible**  
**Reality:**  
**Opponents of PR  
sometimes try to  
make it sound  
complicated  
when it is not.**

# 3

The recently published Government review of voting systems found that “We do not find, on balance, any evidence to suggest that voters find one voting system easier or more confusing than another voting system.”

Under most PR systems, there is a simple relationship of cause and effect for the voter. If you vote for a candidate, you increase his or her chances of getting elected. If you vote for a party, you increase that party’s entitlement to seats. By doing this, you achieve more representation for your views. This does not happen under FPTP. Many votes are wasted, and voters often have to make tactical choices because if they vote for their real preferred candidate who lies in third place, they could help the chances of a candidate whose views they strongly dislike.

Opponents of PR sometimes try to make it sound complicated when it is not. These sorts of people often find the term ‘d’Hondt’ amusing and have a bit of anti-intellectual fun talking about Belgian mathematics. But one needs a precisely defined way of allocating a certain number of seats to parties in order to make sure that the voters’ choice is most accurately represented, and ‘d’Hondt’ simply means taking some averages. It is not rocket science. ■

**Myth:** PR doesn't let you kick out an unpopular government.

**Reality:** Under FPTP by taking safe seats for granted and focusing on marginals, a party can win an election despite being unpopular

# 4

There are many examples of countries using PR where there has been a clear choice between different governments and an election has resulted in the incumbents being kicked out. Recent elections in Poland, Norway and Sweden, all highly proportional systems, have seen this sort of alternation. The same has happened in Spain, Portugal, Greece, New Zealand, Italy and Germany, and of course in Scotland.

The ability of FPTP to kick out an unpopular government is also overstated. Only in 1970 has a clear majority for one party in government been replaced by a clear majority for another in the last 120 years. All other cases of transfers of power have involved coalitions, hung parliaments or unworkably small majorities. By taking safe seats for granted and focusing on marginal seats, a party can win an election despite being unpopular. Labour's vote share in 2005 was only 36 per cent, and this was a drop of 5.5 percentage points since 2001 and 8 points since 1997. This is the largest fall in support over the term of any government since the war, with the exceptions only of the Conservative governments of 1970-74 and 1979-97. But Labour was punished only very lightly for this big withdrawal of support.

FPTP also means that governments with high support sometimes get kicked out, as with Labour in 1951 when the party polled a record high percentage of the vote and defeated the Conservatives in terms of popular support. ■

**Myth:** First Past the Post is best for representing a constituency.  
**Reality:** A constituency link established on a feeble mandate does not look that strong from the voters' point of view.

# 5

It is sometimes argued that there is something special and unique about the link between a single representative and their constituency under FPTP. This argument is often made without much reference to what the voters might want from their representatives, and without giving proper consideration to alternatives.

In some systems, such as Mixed-Member Proportionality (MMP) – known in Scotland as the Additional Member System (AMS) – every constituency keeps its local representative who has a watching brief over that area, and adds a number of regional members.

But in most areas of life competition rather than monopoly is generally thought to give a better service to the consumer. The House of Commons is one of the only public services where this is not seen to be the case. Not surprisingly, the consequence can be dissatisfaction on the part of the consumers.

The claim that single member monopoly representation is the only way to achieve good local representation has never been recognised even in British electoral practice – it was only uniformly imposed for the House of Commons in 1950. In local government, where the relationship between elected representative and constituent is even more about casework than with MPs, multi-member wards are the normal pattern.

The Government's review of voting systems concluded in 2008 that 'FPTP has the simplest direct relationship be-

tween representative and constituent. The Single Transferable Vote (STV) also allows for a direct relationship, but there are a number of potentially competitive representatives and greater choice for the electorate... Whether the connection between constituents and representative is stronger under FPTP or STV (both candidate based systems) depends on one's perspective about whether there should be single or multi-member constituencies and representatives.'

Under FPTP the election winner often does not have majority support from his or her constituents. In 2005, two-thirds of MPs returned to Westminster did not have majority support from local voters. Because of low turnout, no MPs had the support of a majority of their constituents and only three could claim more than a 40 per cent local mandate. A constituency link established on such a feeble mandate does not look that strong from the voters' point of view.

In safe seats the lack of competition at election time means that there are no incentives for incumbents to work hard at representing their constituents. The fact that many do is a tribute to their diligence and integrity, and is in spite of the FPTP electoral system rather than because of it.

A system where several members represent a ward has a number of advantages for the voter. The chances of a voter having a candidate for whom they have voted, and with whom therefore feel a sense of ownership and connection, are high under STV. In the 2007 Scottish local elections under STV, 74 per cent of voters elected their first choice candidate. This was an advance on 52 per cent in the last FPTP elections. This strengthens the link between voter and representative. STV also creates competition at a local level, encouraging a high standard of service to constituents in every seat, not only in the marginals. ■

**Myth:** PR does nothing for turnout.

**Reality:** The things that turn people off politics – the obsession with swing voters in marginal seats that makes all the parties sound alike – are all products of FPTP

# 6

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Low and declining turnout is a source of concern about the health of democracy in Britain.

One sometimes hears it said that electoral reform cannot be the answer because turnout in the FPTP elections for the House of Commons is higher than it is for proportionally elected bodies like the Scottish Parliament and the European Parliament. This is a highly suspect argument because it does not compare like with like. It is obvious that elections for the most important elected body will tend to have higher turnout than those for subsidiary institutions, simply because more people will be interested in the result. Political scientists have long distinguished between ‘first order’ elections like UK General Elections, and ‘second order’ elections that do not determine control of government, such as European Parliament and local elections, which nearly always have significantly lower turnout. The Scottish Parliament occupies an intermediate position.

Election turnout for the same body will vary depending mostly on two factors; how certain the result seems, and the perceived difference between alternative results. But there are also longer-term factors, and the steep decline in turnout (particularly youth turnout) at Westminster elections since the mid 1990s suggests that there is something more fundamentally wrong.

A comparative international study, and the research for the Government’s review of electoral systems in 2008, conclud-

ed that proportional systems tend to produce higher turnout than FPTP. This should not come as a surprise to anyone, because with PR every vote can count towards the result.

However, it would be wrong to argue that the connection is straightforward, and we do not claim that electoral reform would itself automatically raise turnout. But FPTP is implicated in many of the things that turn people off politics at the moment – the safe seats that the campaign treats as irrelevant, the targeting of swing voters in marginal seats that makes all the parties sound alike even when they are not and the adversarial posturing that goes on at and between elections. Reforming the voting system is a vital part of the process of reconnecting people and politics, but not sufficient of itself to achieve this aim. ■

### Turning out or turning off?

#### Turnout figures for legislative elections

Country	Last Election	Turnout	Electoral System
Australia	Nov'07	94.8%	AV – Single member districts (CV)
Malta	Mar'08	93.3%	STV – 5 member, compensated
Belgium	Jun'07	91.1%	List PR – regional, compensated (CV)
Luxembourg	Jun'04	90.0%	List PR – regional, open (CV)
Cyprus	May'06	89.0%	List PR
Chile	Dec'05	87.7%	List PR – two member districts
Denmark	Feb'05	84.5%	List PR – local, compensated
Turkey	Jul'07	84.2%	List PR – 10% threshold
Sweden	Sep'06	82.0%	List PR – local, compensated
Italy	Apr'08	80.5%	List PR – win bonus
Netherlands	Nov'06	80.4%	List PR – national
Germany	Sep'05	77.7%	MMP – national compensation
Norway	Sep'06	77.1%	List PR
South Africa	Apr'04	76.7%	List PR – half regional, half national
Spain	Mar'08	75.3%	List PR – local, uncompensated
Austria	Oct'06	74.2%	List PR – regional, compensated
Greece	Mar'07	74.1%	List PR – win bonus, open
Japan	Sep'05	67.5%	MMM – Regional PR seats
Ireland	May'07	67.0%	STV – 3'5 member
Finland	Mar'07	65.0%	List PR – regional, open
Portugal	Feb'05	65.0%	List PR – regional, closed
Canada	Jan'06	64.7%	FPTP – Single member districts
Czech Republic	Jun'06	64.5%	List PR
Hungary	Apr'06	64.4%	MMP' two rounds, national PR
New Zealand	Sep'05	61.6%	MMP – national compensation
UK	May'05	61.3%	FPTP – Single member
France	Jun'07	60.4%	Two ballot, single member
Poland	Oct'07	53.9%	List PR
USA	Nov'06	36.8%	FPTP – Single member districts

(CV) Compulsory voting

**Myth:** PR creates weak coalitions.  
**Reality:** The most unstable governments are often those governments with a small, or no, overall majority that FPTP throws up.

# 7

Single party governments can exist under proportional representation – all that is required is for a party to command wide support among the electorate. In Greece and Spain the normal pattern has been for single party government despite PR. In Ireland Fianna Fáil fell just short of a majority in 2002 – largely because the electorate wanted to return it to power but did not trust it with an overall majority.

In many countries, even with highly proportional systems, stable coalitions are formed which alternate in government. In recent elections in Norway and Sweden centre-right and left alliances have exchanged power in clear cut election results.

The most unstable governments are often those governments with a small, or no, overall majority that FPTP throws up – as in Britain in 1974-79 and 1992-97, and frequently in Canada. These governments tend to be threatened as much by their own backbenchers as minority parties, and are forced into short term calculations in the hope of hanging on or calling another election to win a majority. FPTP in Britain is increasingly likely to produce such weak periods of government, but without the accompanying change in political culture that enables mature and effective coalition or minority government. Changing to a situation where coalition is regarded as normal rather than a temporary aberration will mean that politicians adapt accordingly.

In many parts of the UK that adaptation has already begun and the UK Government's own review of electoral systems re-

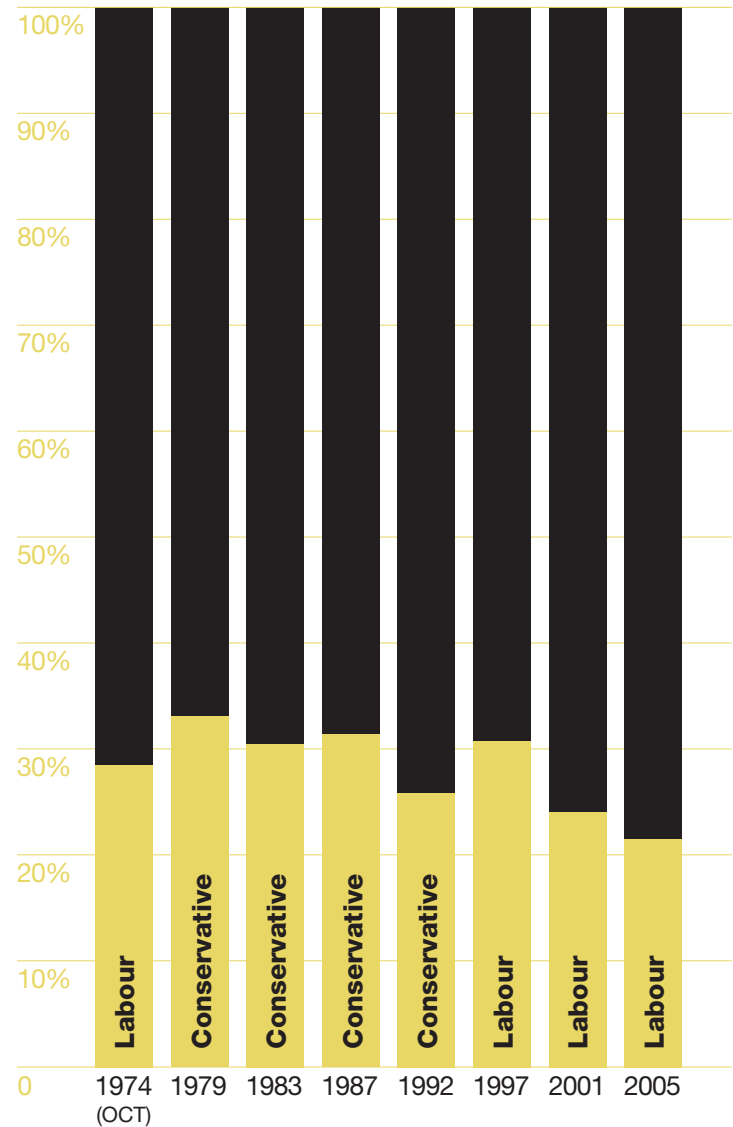
ported that “We do not find a difference between PR systems and FPTP in terms of delivering stable and effective government” and that “In the experience of the UK, coalition governments can be just as stable as single-party governments.”

It is usually a sign of underlying weakness when someone continually boasts about their strength, and the same is true when discussing government under FPTP. How strong, really, can a government be with a popular mandate amounting to just over 20 per cent of the electorate and 35 per cent of those voting? British government is a minority legislating over the heads of a majority. It is a recipe for ill-considered legislation, abrupt reversals in policy and weakness in the face of entrenched interests. True strength and lasting achievement in government depends on commanding popular consent. ■

### Minority Mandates

Votes cast for the government 1974-2005

% of electorate voting for winning party





**Myth:** PR lets in extremist parties.  
**Reality:** It is only in FPTP that there is the possibility of having representation monopolised by an extremist party.

# 8

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PR represents parties that achieve a reasonable share of the vote (ranging from 0.7 per cent support in the Netherlands to 10 per cent in Turkey). If people vote in sufficient numbers for a party under PR, their voice will be heard. This applies to small parties with democratic values and something to contribute, such as the Greens, but also to extremist parties.

Under some circumstances FPTP can also let extremist parties in. What, after all, has happened in local government in Barking, Stoke-on-Trent, Burnley and other urban areas under FPTP? Under FPTP a party can win seats by exploiting local grievances in a small area rather than trying for a broader appeal.

There is a vital difference between representation and control. While obnoxious parties can get represented under PR, it is virtually impossible for them to gain control; even in March 1933 the Nazi party did not obtain an overall majority in the German Reichstag.

It is only in FPTP that there is the possibility of having one's representation monopolised by an extremist party. The British National Party (BNP) has all the borough council seats in part of Burnley despite nowhere near a majority of the vote – where can residents there turn if they do not like that party?

Voting for extremist parties is often a sign not so much of massive popular support for their values as an indicator that voters want to make a protest against the political system.

Designing a system (like FPTP) to make sure that these votes are wasted is only likely to increase cynicism about politics

Winning representation is often a step towards political defeat for extremist parties. The public scrutiny that comes with being in office quickly exposes the inadequacy of their politicians and policies. Once the threat has been seen off the electorate are more wary of parties that offer easy answers in future.

Not all forms of PR are equally susceptible to electing splinter and extreme parties. Most have some sort of threshold to stop tiny parties winning. Because voters rank candidates in order of preference under STV, people can choose to use their lower preferences to help other democratic candidates defeat anti-democratic candidates. ■

**Myth:** The STV form of PR is bad for party cohesion and therefore government.  
**Reality:** Many voters would not feel that it is a bad thing that candidates are more dependent on their local base than the approval of head office.

# 9

The Single Transferable Vote, in particular, has been accused of leading to bad government because it weakens parties internally. The reason is that STV often involves candidates of the same party fighting a seat, with the hope that each will be elected but always with the possibility that one or more might not make it. Election campaigns are sometimes as much a battle within as between parties. Parties also lose some control over their representatives, because it is easier for them to fight and hold their seats as independents if disciplined by the party.

The evidence varies from place to place. Party discipline is fairly relaxed in Ireland but in Australia and Malta STV coexists with extremely disciplined political parties. Whether this means worse government than FPTP (or other forms of PR) is another question. While one would not wish to defend every aspect of Irish government, the Republic has run a successful economic and social policy for some time while being highly accountable to the electorate. There are also incentives for parties to avoid disunity, as divided parties are unattractive to voters regardless of how much their representatives do locally.

Many voters would not feel that it is a bad thing that candidates are freer to defy party instructions and more dependent on their local base than the approval of head office. Politicians are less inclined to pursue policies that go further than, or run contrary to, their voters' views than they are under unrepresentative electoral systems. Giving voters more choice sometimes does produce results that politicians find inconvenient, but that is what democracy is all about. ■

**Myth:** PR caused the problems in the 2007 Scottish elections.

**Reality:** Bad ballot design can happen under any system.

# 10

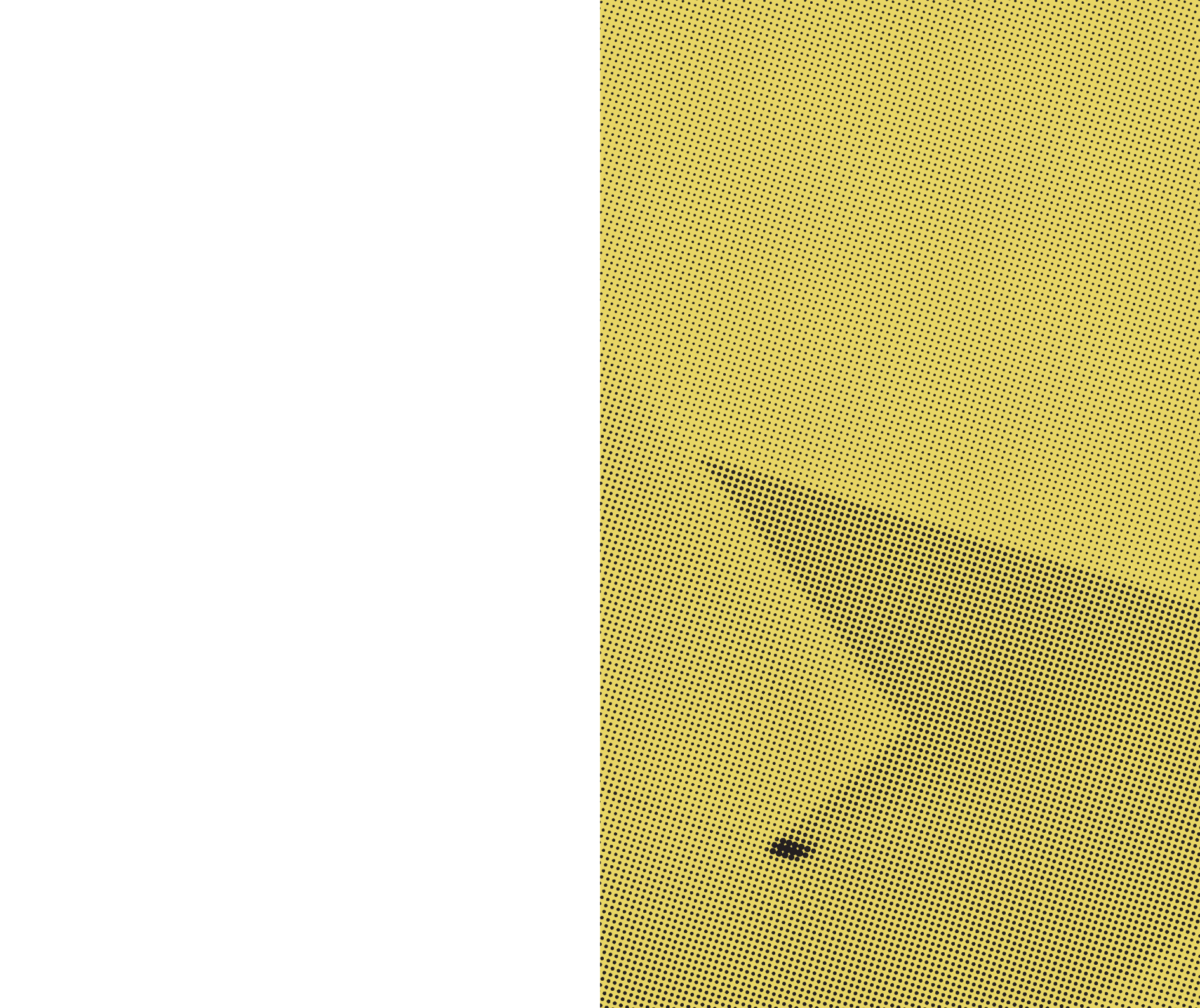
The independent Gould report into the problems with the Scottish elections in May 2007 exploded the myths about a link between PR and spoiled ballots.

The main cause of the problem was the redesign of the ballot for the Scottish Parliament elections in which the regional and constituency votes were combined on one paper. Rates of spoilage had been very low (below 1 per cent) in Scotland in previous elections when separate papers were used. In other countries using similar systems, like Wales, New Zealand and Germany, spoilage is also much lower than it was in Scotland in 2007, consistently below 1.5 per cent. A sudden change, as in Scotland in 2007, cannot be explained by a constant factor like having a PR electoral system. Nor was spoilage much of an issue in the local government elections that did use a new system, STV – the electorate coped with it very well.

Bad FPTP ballot design caused ‘hanging chads’ and votes cast in error thanks to the Palm Beach ‘butterfly ballot’ in the notorious 2000 US Presidential election in Florida. Bad design can happen under any system.

The rate of rejected votes in Scotland in 2007 is a very poor argument against a fairer electoral system. ■





# PR Myths

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**“No political issue attracts more fallacious arguments than proportional representation. Perhaps the most foolish one is that a proportional system would be too difficult for the voters to understand. The implication must be that English voters are the most stupid in Europe.”** Professor Vernon Bogdanor

Imagine a country with voting so complex that no one really understands it; where small parties rule the roost; a country plagued by extremism, lacking strong government or any meaningful connection to the voters.

Critics have conjured up a nightmare vision of Britain under proportional representation. Yet the increasing body of evidence and the Government’s own research has proved many of these fears groundless. So as the flaws in first-past-the-post politics become ever more obvious, it’s time to set the record straight – and separate the facts from the fiction.

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Electoral  
 Reform  
 Society

Thomas Hare House  
6 Chancel Street  
London SE1 0UU  
[www.electoral-reform.org.uk](http://www.electoral-reform.org.uk)  
Telephone  
020 7928 1622  
Fax  
020 7401 7789  
Email  
[ers@electoral-reform.org.uk](mailto:ers@electoral-reform.org.uk)

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