

Lecture VI

First-Past-The-Post: Analytical Study

The First-Past-the-Post electoral system has a long history in Britain, dating back to the 18th century. Under FPTP, each constituency elects a single representative, and the candidate who receives the most votes wins the seat, regardless of the margin of victory. The system operates on a winner-takes-all basis, where the candidate with the plurality of votes secures the seat.

1. Advantages of FPTP:

- a) **Simplicity:** FPTP is a relatively straightforward system, easy for voters to understand and participate in.
- b) **Strong and Stable Governments:** FPTP often produces governments with clear majorities, allowing for decisive decision-making and stability.
- c) **Constituency Representation:** FPTP ensures that each constituency has a dedicated representative, fostering a direct link between constituents and their elected officials.

2. Criticisms of FPTP:

- a) **Disproportionate Seat Allocation:** FPTP can lead to a discrepancy between a party's share of the popular vote and its representation in Parliament. Parties with significant levels of support may not secure a proportionate number of seats, resulting in a potential lack of representation for certain segments of the electorate.
- b) **Wasted Votes:** FPTP can lead to "wasted votes" for candidates who do not win in a constituency, as those votes do not contribute to the final outcome.
- c) **Limited Choice:** FPTP tends to favor the two major parties, potentially marginalizing smaller parties and reducing voter choice.

3. FPTP in Practice

A prominent example of FPTP failure to represent majority votes in Britain is the 2015 general election. In that election, the conservative party won an overall majority of seats in the House of Commons, even though they received only 36.8% of the popular votes. This means that more than 63% of voters did not support the conservative party, but they still formed the government with a majority of seats.

Another example is the 2017 general election, where the Conservative Party again won the most seats, but failed to secure a majority. They received 42.4% of the popular vote, but this was not enough to form a majority government. Conversely, the Labour Party received 40% of the popular vote but ended up with fewer seats overall.

In both examples, FPTP did not accurately reflect the will of the majority of voters and created discrepancies between the percentage of seats won and the percentage of votes cast. Critics argue that this kind of discrepancy undermines the democratic principles of representation and fairness.

4. Impact on Party Politics:

FPTP has influenced the behavior and strategies of political parties in Britain. The system encourages parties to concentrate their efforts in key swing constituencies, often leading to a focus on targeting competitive seats rather than campaigning nationwide. Additionally, FPTP has historically favored the Conservative and Labour parties, making it challenging for smaller parties to gain significant representation.

5. Alternative Electoral Systems:

Critics of FPTP have proposed alternative electoral systems, such as Proportional Representation (PR) or a hybrid system like the Additional Member System (AMS). These

systems aim to address the perceived shortcomings of FPTP by ensuring a more proportional allocation of seats and greater representation for smaller parties.

Conclusion:

Overall, the FPTP system has its advantages in terms of simplicity and constituency representation, but it also has significant drawbacks in terms of disproportionate results, limited party representation, and discouraging voter turnout. These criticisms have led to calls for electoral reform in Britain, with proponents advocating for alternative systems such as proportional representation to ensure a fairer and more representative democracy.