

Proportional Nonsense

The Liberal Democrats are pushing for **Proportional Representation** (PR) again.

One of the reasons given in support of this catastrophic move is that PR makes your vote "count" and that people might be staying away from elections because they think their vote does not count.

The irony is that the actual effect of PR is systematically to ensure that your vote, and the voting process as a whole, counts as little as possible. How so? Well, PR involves counting the votes for each *party* and then picking *candidates* from a party list in proportion to the votes that each party received. This means there isn't any such thing as a local MP who can be held responsible for his behaviour in Parliament. Furthermore, PR gives grossly disproportionate power to the third-largest party, for they are typically the kingmakers who, by choosing which of the two largest parties to ally with, get to choose the real outcome of a typical election under PR. The fourth-largest and even smaller parties often get lucky too. Thus the outcome is highly insensitive to votes, and highly sensitive to the whims of (literally) third-rate politicians. This, in turn, makes it easier for fringe parties – like Britain's third-largest party, the Liberal Democrats – to get a larger share of the votes, thus making it even more difficult to exclude them from the government. Karl Popper's overarching principle of politics is that the issue of who rules is less important than the issue of how bad rulers and bad policies can be eliminated. Well, PR makes it as hard as possible to choose good rulers in the first place, and well nigh impossible to vote, or campaign, or argue, to keep any party out of government.

This should hardly be surprising, for the notion that you can create good policy by taking the average of everyone's opinions is ridiculous. Should we allow decent people seeking asylum from persecution into the country? Well, the **neo-fascist right** wants to exclude all asylum seekers, so would it be right to exclude 5% of them? Should we have marched 62% of the way to Baghdad?

As for voter turnout, the difficulty in the last election in Britain was that there was no realistic prospect of removing Labour. Hence the drop from 71.5% turnout in 1997 to 59% in 2001. This can only be fixed by having a worthwhile opposition party – something that our present electoral system is giving the politicians powerful incentives

to create – not by sabotaging the electoral system to make sure

that no worthwhile party is ever in power again.

Fri, 12/26/2003 - 17:45 | [digg](#) | [del.icio.us](#) | [permalink](#)

too bad more ppl don't understand this

v good post.

-- Elliot Temple

<http://www.curi.us/>

by [Elliot Temple](#) on Sat, 12/27/2003 - 10:42 | [reply](#)

Proportional Nonsense?

I've lived both in Holland (where they have a proportional system) and in America (with a district system). Therefore, I've been able to make some comparison. Though I am not for democracy, I think the proportional system is a bit better. Contrary to the above criticism, I think it is correct in an important sense that the proportional system makes your vote count more. That is, in a district system your vote doesn't "count" if you vote for a small party. Because of the typically homogeneous country wide distribution of political views, small parties tend not to get a single seat in district systems. Hence, your vote doesn't "count" if you vote for a small party in the UK/US, while it does in a proportional system (where small parties get a part of parliament proportional to their country wide vote proportion). This fact biases district systems to 2 party (US) and 3 party (UK) systems. This in turn means that in a country like Holland the political system is much more sensitive toward new ideas, new parties and has a larger margin of debate. In short, it makes the system more dynamic and self-correcting. Case in point: the Libertarian Party in the US typically get's 0.5% of the vote but no seats in congress. With PR they would get a few seats in Congress and have at least an influence on the debate. (Also, more people would vote for the LP in a system in which their vote would no longer be "wasted".)

Your theory that PR gives grossly disproportionate power to the third-largest party sounds logical at first, but turns out to be untrue in practice, for a variety of reasons. One of which is that there are often several "third parties" that can be used to help create a majority, which counteracts any monopoly power. And a second reason is that it is simply an empirical fact (explainable by both economic bargaining theory and gentlemen's agreement) that coalition agreements tend to favor each party's programme in proportion to their size.

You are right that the notion that you can create good policy by taking the average of everyone's opinions is ridiculous. But that's an argument against democracy in general, not against PR.

An important point to be made (but which is rarely made) is that countries that wish to keep their district system nonetheless **must**

change to the [Condorcet voting system](#), which is a potent cure

against the "wasted vote syndrome".

Henry Sturman

by [Henry Sturman](#) on Sun, 12/28/2003 - 12:49 | [reply](#)

Not Average

'That is, in a district system your vote doesn't "count" if you vote for a small party. Because of the typically homogeneous country wide distribution of political views, small parties tend not to get a single seat in district systems.'

This is as it should be. Or are you suggesting political cranks with unworkable policies, or people who are incapable of arguing convincingly for good policies should have an influence on policy? When socialists are in the minority, as they will be eventually (I hope) do you want their cranky minority opinions to blunt the force of reforms in the direction of capitalism, or do you want to be able to ignore their whining?

'Your theory that PR gives grossly disproportionate power to the third-largest party sounds logical at first, but turns out to be untrue in practice, for a variety of reasons.'

No, in practise it's true. Israel has a problem with religious parties putting in irrational legislation largely because of the disproportionate influence given to them by PR. If they didn't have PR they could ignore the religious parties.

'You are right that the notion that you can create good policy by taking the average of everyone's opinions is ridiculous. But that's an argument against democracy in general, not agains PR.'

Democracy does not take the average of everyone's opinion if you do it in a way that is even mildly sensible, i.e. - if you don't use PR. The policy of Parliament in Britain is not the average of everyone's opinion because the party in power can usually get legislation through on the strength of their own seats in Parliament. This is not the average in any sense of that word. Did the American and British governments half go to war against Saddam and half not? No. Did they compromise with their opponents? No. As such, political debates actually have a large effect on what happens, since they can ensure that one party rather than another gets its policies through. Under PR this is generally impossible to arrange, so every policy is a compromise and nobody has any responsibility for anything and cranks like Charles Kennedy can't be excluded from power.

There are good arguments that anarchocapitalism would be better than democracy, your averaging objection is not one of them.

Lastly, you say 'I am not for democracy'. Do you have any preference between dictatorship and democracy?

by [Alan Forrester](#) on Mon, 12/29/2003 - 01:38 | [reply](#)

PR Gives power to the third largest party

To those who doubt that PR gives grossly disproportionate power to the third largest party, I have only one word to say: Genscher.

by a reader on Mon, 12/29/2003 - 01:51 | [reply](#)

Just noticed this

Two accused war criminals could take Serbia parliament seats after weekend vote

Jailed former Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic and another accused war criminal could become members of Serbia's parliament after their extreme nationalist allies swept weekend elections, according to results released Monday.

...

Although the Radicals did not garner a majority that would allow them to form a new Cabinet -- even in coalition with Milosevic's Socialist Party, which won 22 seats -- they will be a tough opposition for any new government.

David Schneider-Joseph

President, **Americans for a Society Free from Age Restrictions**
Chief, **Tewata**

by **DavidSJ** on Mon, 12/29/2003 - 15:26 | [reply](#)

Re: Not Average

Or are you suggesting political cranks with unworkable policies, or people who are incapable of arguing convincingly for good policies should have an influence on policy? When socialists are in the minority, as they will be eventually (I hope) do you want their cranky minority opinions to blunt the force of reforms in the direction of capitalism, or do you want to be able to ignore their whining?

I think you're missing the point. Of course it's better that cranks don't have political influence. But if by disposing of that we also dispose of the influence of good small groups it's not a good idea. We don't want to throw away the baby with the bath water. It's like saying let's abolish scientific freedom and keep only the good scientists who say good things. The cure would be worse than the disease, since by keeping bad scientists out you're also keeping new good scientists with good ideas out. In the end truth does better in a free and open debate, even if that means allowing the bad parts in as well. So too in politics. Of course, you're right that in a PR system you'll get idiot communist minorities influencing debate. But by abolishing that you also lose the libertarian minorities who can influence the debate. If I have a choice between only the status quo or status quo plus communist minority plus libertarian minority I think the latter is better.

No, in practise it's true. Israel has a problem with religious parties putting in irrational legislation largely because of the

disproportionate influence given to them by PR. If they didn't have

PR they could ignore the religious parties.

Of course you can always give examples where this does happen. I guess I should have been more precise and claim that in my experience in most systems (certainly in the Dutch system) this is relatively rare. But even if you are right about this being a problem sometimes or even more often, that doesn't mean we should immediately abolish PR. When choosing between two systems, both of which are less than perfect, we should balance both systems' pros and cons. A possible disproportionate representation by some small party in PR has a counterpart in the disproportionate **disrepresentation** of minorities in a district system.

Democracy does not take the average of everyone's opinion if you do it in a way that is even mildly sensible, i.e. - if you don't use PR.

Yes it does. And so there's much less difference between PR and district system than you might think. It is no coincidence that both parties in the US are almost equal and in the UK you're seeing more and more of that as well, with Labor adopting formerly Conservative policies. Big parties have an internal dynamic not unlike that of the PR system. In a district system the compromise comes not from the coalition agreements, but rather from the fact that parties have to market their policies toward a compromise gaining most votes. The results are really not very dissimilar. Therefore the main difference between both systems is really that the debate is larger, which I've argued is a good thing as it is in science.

PR and district do both have their advantages and disadvantages. On balance I prefer PR for the reason explained.

Lastly, you say 'I am not for democracy'. Do you have any preference between dictatorship and democracy?

Well democracy is just another form of dictatorship, but I think you mean whether I have a preference between democracy and other forms of dictatorship. My fundamental principle is freedom, so I would favor that system which gives more freedom. I'm an anarcho-capitalist, but given the choice I'd choose democracy over other dictatorships, because I think democracies tend to have more respect for freedom. Though it's interesting to note not everybody agrees. In particular Hans Hoppe argues that the wildly oppressive welfare state originates from democracy and would have been less extensive under absolute monarchism. We're obviously much better off in the West than say the Middle East. Interestingly even in a brutal dictatorship such as Iraq's Baath party, there was more freedom in some things than we have here. One didn't have any freedom of speech, but one did have the right to build say a shed in one's own garden, a freedom which is typically lacking in a Western country such as the Netherlands. They were so busy killing off their political enemies, that they really didn't have time to care about non-political life style choices that are overregulated in the West. (For the casual reader: I'm not defending Saddam's rule. I think the liberation by the Allies is a great improvement for Iraq and for the world.)

Alan, I think you might learn a bit more if you spend slightly more

time on looking at issues from your critic's points of view and slightly less time on contemplating how you can attack your critics views.

Henry Sturman

by **Henry Sturman** on Wed, 12/31/2003 - 00:01 | [reply](#)

alan rocks

"Alan, I think you might learn a bit more if you spend slightly more time on looking at issues from your critic's points of view and slightly less time on contemplating how you can attack your critics views."

funny, we could say the same to you. i think it's an unfair line of attack in either case, though.

i'd also like to personally vouch for Alan's integrity and openness to persuasion. you will find few people better.

-- Elliot Temple

<http://www.curi.us/>

by **Elliot Temple** on Wed, 12/31/2003 - 01:41 | [reply](#)

Suppressing Debate?

I think you're missing the point. Of course it's better that cranks don't have political influence. But if by disposing of that we also dispose of the influence of good small groups it's not a good idea. We don't want to throw away the baby with the bath water. It's like saying let's abolish scientific freedom and keep only the good scientists who say good things. The cure would be worse than the disease, since by keeping bad scientists out you're also keeping new good scientists with good ideas out. In the end truth does better in a free and open debate, even if that means allowing the bad parts in as well. So too in politics. Of course, you're right that in a PR system you'll get idiot communist minorities influencing debate. But by abolishing that you also lose the libertarian minorities who can influence the debate. If I have a choice between only the status quo or status quo plus communist minority plus libertarian minority I think the latter is better.

First of all, it is perfectly within the power of those who do not get elected to publish their views, they just don't get to use other people's money to attempt to implement them.

A second point is that since at present the government monopolises certain services it is very, very important that the people in power be subject to the most severe criticism possible under such a restraint, i.e. - the district system. If this means chopping off parties with low, thinly spread amounts of votes, then so be it.

Well democracy is just another form of dictatorship, but I think you

mean whether I have a preference between democracy and other forms of dictatorship.

False, there is a fundamental difference, under democracy people have a chance at elections to get rid of bad or incompetent leaders, also votes of no confidence, impeachment, free press and so on play a similar role. Democracy is properly understood as a means of criticising governments, where in dictatorships criticism is deliberately suppressed. Democracy is very imperfect, but it is an improvement on dictatorship.

by [Alan Forrester](#) on Wed, 12/31/2003 - 02:39 | [reply](#)

Democracy

I vote for Henry Sturman.

I think his points about the pros and cons of PR are well taken. While small parties may be free to publish their opinions, they are not free to vote on laws. There is no good reason for this. It means that people who support them are not represented in the legislature at all.

It seems to me that people who oppose PR really prefer elitist rule over honoring the people's choices (while paying lip service to democracy). If having members of more parties voting will make it harder to pass new laws, then I say "great". Most new laws suck. If there's an important new law that's worth passing, it should be possible to convince a majority to vote for it.

There's no reason we couldn't have PR in the legislature and a Condorcet-style election for a single chief executive who is not required to form a coalition. The idea of marching 62% of the way to Baghdad is really a silly argument. If the chief executive places his political ambition above principle, then he's unlikely to do the right thing no matter what system is in place.

And I don't think democracy is or isn't dictatorship. Democracy is about how to choose leaders, and dictatorship is about how much power leaders wield. You can have democratically elected dictators, and you can have leaders limited by a constitution chosen by other methods.

Gil

by [Gil](#) on Wed, 12/31/2003 - 08:04 | [reply](#)

Clarification

I didn't mean to imply that I am in favor of PR. I think I'm against it, but not for the criticisms given above.

My main objection is that I think people should vote for individuals rather than parties. I'm not sure that the law should do much to recognize the existence of parties at all. I'm not against potential

candidates organizing into parties, but that shouldn't be the concern

of election laws or constitutions (I think).

But, I do like the Condorcet-style voting method. It's very similar to one that I (and probably many others) have suggested in the past. It would allow people to vote for their actual first choice without worrying about wasting their vote. Their preferences would still be represented in the outcome. And, the election results would provide much more information about voter preferences.

Gil

by **Gil** on Fri, 01/02/2004 - 02:17 | [reply](#)

Re: Clarification

Gil wrote

> My main objection is that I think people should vote for individuals
> rather than parties.

I think first past the post systems are better than PR mainly because it is better that people vote for parties than individuals.

In an old culture like Britain or the US there exists certain political traditions each containing much evolved knowledge. Each tradition has had many writers and politicians contribute to it's history. Therefore with a little research a person can learn more about the beliefs of a party (embodying one of these traditions) than he could ever learn about an individual. Because of the history it is easier to predict what a party will do in government that what an individual will do.

For similar reasons first past the post is better because it is preferable to be ruled by any one of these evolved traditions than by some amalgamation of several of them.

A parallel is to say, if you are an organism in an environment, it is better to be an elephant or an eagle than some mixture of the two.

by a reader on Sat, 01/03/2004 - 12:17 | [reply](#)

A Better Analogy

In any particular, changing, environment: are we likely to see better adaptation from two species of organism, or twenty?

Gil

by **Gil** on Sun, 01/04/2004 - 21:09 | [reply](#)

Not such a good analogy

This analogy only works if each of these organisms is allowed to execute all it's genes independently, as would happen in 20 seperate countries each governed by one political tradition.

If the genes are combined into one organism as in PR it is much

worse.

If for example one party gets the Treasury while another gets the home office we are talking about something with the trunk of an elephant and the wings of an eagle. As I'm sure you know, such an organism will survive worse than either an elephant or an eagle.

by a reader on Mon, 01/05/2004 - 13:39 | [reply](#)

I have never seen an impeachment in reality.

I think almost all modern western democracies fail to pass the Popper's test. I am not very good at history, I must admit. But it seems to me that it is so-so-so difficult to remove a leader from power that only very few examples are out there.

Even notorious Nixon resigned himself before the impeachment has taken place and only under heavy pressure of an imminent trial court. There had still been no way of de-electing him without a trial court or judge's orders to give out tapes etc.. Even in this case people (americans en masse) didn't have any choice of removing him. USA got rid of him only with a great luck, to my view.

There was no impeachment for Clinton either. Not even a slightest chance of it. Recent re-elections in Israel - the same story. Barakh resigned himself and put himself forward for the next election. He wasn't evicted from the government because of bad handling of intifada problem. People voted for Sharon because they wanted protection - but only after Barakh resigned voluntarily.

I don't argue that western democracies are better or worse than middle east life-long "presidentships". But to my point of view none of the modern democracies are closer to Popper's principle of ability to remove a bad leader than, let's say, 100 years ago.

And in his own words, this principle has to be a pre-condition for a proper democracy, not the other way around. I.e., if people have an ability to get rid of evil president, then they could build up an open society.

by a reader on Mon, 06/28/2004 - 08:52 | [reply](#)

elections not impeachment

ummm d00d, the main mechanism for removal is elections. if you look at US history, you'll see lots of former presidents who lost elections, and were thus removed.

-- Elliot Temple
<http://www.curi.us/>

by [Elliot Temple](#) on Mon, 06/28/2004 - 15:58 | [reply](#)

PR vs first past the post

Isn't this a pro free-market website? If so, why do you favor

competition in the marketplace but seek to severely limit it in the political arena? Parties that have no chance of being elected to office quickly become laughingstocks and their ideas are ignored. This leads to complacency and lack of imagination in the dominant political culture. They start to see the present arrangements as immutable laws of the universe. There are many different ways to implement PR; the Israeli case with the whole country as one constituency and only a minimal number of votes needed to elect an MP is an extreme example. Some notion of a perfect democracy is not the issue, competition is.

by a reader on Fri, 12/03/2004 - 21:07 | [reply](#)

There are a infinite number o

There are a infinite number of ways to adapt the electoral system to a more complicated and diverse society. What would be the argument against say, electing half of parliament via the very simple "approval" system and half via party-list PR in five-member districts? A very simple system that would not give representation to marginal cranks. The only argument against such a change, or something like it, is blind adherence to tradition.

by seelow heights on Fri, 12/03/2004 - 21:31 | [reply](#)

an arg

The point of government policies is not to have compromises that partially enact the policy of every political group (or every person!). There must be one, unified policy (at a time). It cannot be a matter of averaging.

Democracy is not about giving everyone a fair share of control over policy, it's just a way to choose a policy, that allows for changes in policy.

Even if my argument is wrong, it is not "blind adherence to tradition".

-- Elliot Temple
<http://www.curi.us/>

by [Elliot Temple](#) on Fri, 12/03/2004 - 22:43 | [reply](#)

Somehow I thought democratic

Somehow I thought democratic politics was about compromise. The "approval" method is the most objectively pro-majoritarian voting system conceived by the mind of man. The type of PR I referred to would allow at least some degree of input by ideological minorities. In the end, unlike the basically judicial supremacist systems of the USA and EU, an authentic majority would rule.

by seelow heights on Sat, 12/04/2004 - 04:44 | [reply](#)

Re: PR vs First Past the Post

A reader wrote:

'Isn't this a pro free-market website? If so, why do you favor competition in the marketplace but seek to severely limit it in the political arena? Parties that have no chance of being elected to office quickly become laughingstocks and their ideas are ignored. This leads to complacency and lack of imagination in the dominant political culture. They start to see the present arrangements as immutable laws of the universe. There are many different ways to implement PR; the Israeli case with the whole country as one constituency and only a minimal number of votes needed to elect an MP is an extreme example. Some notion of a perfect democracy is not the issue, competition is.'

First Past the Post isn't about limiting competition, it is about allowing it. If you are going to have a state then, as a matter of fact, there is going to be one set of laws in place at a time, laws that the state gets to make. (I think we ought to move away from this monopolistic situation but that isn't likely to happen anytime soon.)

Let's contrast this with the case of, say, providing coffee. There are many different brands of coffee and many different coffee shops. Each coffee shop has distinctive policies and products, some only carry 'Fair Trade' coffee, some carry brands that are not so labelled. It's not the case that coffee shops get together and compromise on what they are going to do. they set a policy and if it makes a profit they keep going with it and try to improve it. They don't care if they offend the owners of other coffee shops with their policies, nor should they. They don't give some portion of their shops over to promoting the wares of other coffee shops, nor should they. As a result people can easily see what they're getting and don't have to calculate that maybe this product from Starbucks is actually something that got smuggled in from Pret a Manger.

In order to have competition in politics we must have distinctive parties and they must be able to have a clear legislative agenda. Now, unfortunately, if you're going to have a state you can't have the situation where you have lots of parties all passing laws at the same time in the way you can have lots of different coffee shops selling coffee at the same time. There is one set of policies at any one time and only one. So either one party is clearly in control at a time and clearly accountable for their mistakes, including those that make it impossible to pass particular legislation. Or you have a policy that's a compromise between many different parties so that all and none of them are responsible for the results. As a result the voters can't be sure from whom they are buying this policy, nor can they be sure who ought to get the chop if it turns out to be a failure. PR almost always leads to the coalition and compromise and First Past the Post does not inevitably lead to either. So First Past the Post allows competition and PR does not.

by [Alan Forrester](#) on Mon, 12/06/2004 - 02:39 | [reply](#)

What's wrong with PR?

I live in Poland. Since 1989, when we are a free country again, we have PR voting system. During those 17 years we had 12 prime ministers. The link between MP's and voters is almost lost. Nobody understand how the votes are translated into seats in parliament and nobody knows who is representing who. We had MP's with less then 500 votes! There is always a need for a coalition to form a government and the resonsabilty is always fuzzy.

There is not ideal voting system but First Past the Post is MUCH better than PR. I know it from my life.

Bartek (37).

by Bartek Michalowski on Fri, 05/04/2007 - 19:35 | [reply](#)
