

A Theoretical Account of Electoral Reform in the UK

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Abstract

The United Kingdom, a nation that utilizes the plurality electoral system of First Past the Post (FPTP), has proposed electoral reform twice over the past twenty years, in 1997 and 2011 respectively, under two different governments. Despite reaching a referendum in 2011, electoral reform was an utter failure on both occasions and FPTP prevails in the UK today. This article utilizes salient theories of electoral reform to provide an in-depth analysis of both occasions of reform proposition. The article ultimately concludes that given the complex circumstances under which reform initiation has occurred in the UK, electoral reform theories accounting for both the institutional conditions *and* the interests of relevant political actors are necessary in explaining why parties proposed electoral reform in both 1997 and 2011.

Introduction

First Past the Post (FPTP), the electoral system utilized by four of the eight largest democracies, has come under scrutiny in recent decades. FPTP was one of the earliest mechanisms for electing legislative representatives and uses relatively straightforward logic (the first person to a plurality wins); nonetheless, academic specialists in electoral systems rate it as one of the least desirable electoral systems and many voters have come to agree. Of the many new democracies that emerged during the “Third Wave of Democracy¹,” virtually none of them adopted FPTP as their electoral system. Furthermore, in the small wave of electoral system reform movements over the past quarter-century, none have moved to a FPTP system, instead either transitioning from FPTP to a PR system or from a PR system to a Mixed-Member System.

The United Kingdom has proposed electoral reform twice in the past twenty years: first under the Labour Party in 1997 and then under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition in 2011, which went as far as to issue a popular referendum in 2011. However, electoral reform failed both times; it never moved beyond the proposal phase in 1997 and was overwhelmingly rejected by voters in 2011. Thus, FPTP prevails in the UK today.

Given the advent of reform movements across democracies and the increasing scholarly disdain for FPTP, electoral systems scholars have analyzed the cases of electoral reform initiation in an attempt to analyze and determine the causes necessary first to stimulate a reform proposal and then to actually enact reform. Shugart (2008) and Blau (2008) have both created explanatory models to account for why parties propose and endorse electoral reform. However, Shugart’s theory only accounts for the inherent and contingent conditions sufficient to produce a reform proposal, which fails to explain why

1 The “Third Wave of Democracy” refers to the global trend whereby over 60 countries throughout Europe, Latin America, Africa and Asia have undergone some form of democratic transition since Portugal’s “Carnation Revolution” in 1974.

parties in the UK proposed reform both in 1997 and 2011. Blau's theory, which takes into account the interests and attitudes of party elites and members, provides a much more comprehensive explanation for reform initiation in both cases in the UK.

This paper will first provide an overview of First Past the Post as an electoral system, including scholarly critiques of the system. It will next put forth conceptual theories of the factors necessary and sufficient to initiate electoral reform and then to actually enact actually reform. Then, the paper will provide an in-depth analysis of the reform proposition in 1997 and in 2011 using both Shugart and Blau's conceptual models of reform. This paper will ultimately argue that given the complex circumstances under which reform initiation occurred in the UK, theories accounting for both the institutional conditions *and* interests of relevant political actors are necessary to explain why parties proposed electoral reform, as evidenced through the 1997 and 2001 reform initiation in the UK

First Past the Post versus Proportional Representation

First Past the Post is one of the oldest and most simple electoral systems. The logic behind the system is that in each district, the candidate with the most votes wins, the party that wins the most seats forms the government, and the governing party governs the nation and creates policy until the next election, when it is either re-elected or voted out of office.² FPTP usually utilizes single-member districts, further distinguishing it FPTP from other electoral systems.³ FPTP is incredibly widespread – it is used by four out of the eight largest democracies in the world and is the electoral system under which forty-three percent of the world's population lives.⁴ All legislative elections in Canada, the United Kingdom, the United States (except for Georgia and Louisiana), India, and most Caribbean islands take place under FPTP.

The basic argument in favor of FPTP is that it produces stability and accountability among governments.⁵ FPTP tends to produce one-party majority governments, as the seat bonus awarded to the party with the plurality of the votes is almost always enough for that party to form a majority government. One-party governments are argued to be more durable and stable because they lack the need to bargain with other parties in the cabinet as coalition governments do and thus do not need to manage as many conflicting interests. Governments formed under FPTP are thought to be more accountable because it is relatively easy to vote governments out of office if they are not performing to the standards expected by the voting population. Furthermore, FPTP gives rise to a "coherent opposition in the legislature,"⁶ meaning that the opposite acts as a check to the government in power and acts as a viable alternative to the governing party in the next election.

2 Ben Reilly, Andrew Ellis, and Andrew Reynolds, *Electoral system design: the new international IDEA handbook*. International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (2005), 28.

3 Reilly, Ellis, and Reynolds, "Electoral systems design," 28.

4 Andre Blas, "Introduction," in *To Keep or Change First Past the Post*, ed. by Andre Blais (Oxford: OUP, 2008), 7.

5 Blas, "Introduction," 2.

6 Reilly, Ellis, and Reynolds, "Electoral systems design," 36.

Additionally, arguments have been put forth that the presence of single-member districts, as utilized by FPTP, provides voters with a close relationship to their representatives, as the representatives are held directly accountable to the voters instead of a party apparatus as is the case under PR systems. The presence of single-member districts also allows voters to vote for specific candidates rather than just the parties themselves, as voters are not subjected to some party list which potentially unknown candidates. Finally, scholars praise FPTP for being relatively simple and easy to understand – all voters must do is simply mark the name of their preferred candidate.

Despite these qualities, FPTP has numerous disadvantages that cause scholars to rank it as one of the less desirable electoral systems.⁷ FPTP's winner-take-all system makes for rather disproportional legislatures as it means that a party winning only forty percent of the vote, if this constitutes a plurality, could end up with a much higher percentage of seats in the legislature. Conversely, a party winning 40 percent of the vote, if this forty percent does not constitute a plurality, could end up with zero seats in the legislature. Furthermore, FPTP largely limits politics to a two-party system, which precludes smaller parties from fair representation as they fail to meet the exorbitantly high threshold for representation. Additionally, scholars criticize FPTP as it largely excludes minorities and women from representation. Parties under FPTP generally put forth a "broadly acceptable candidate" in particular districts to avoid alienating certain voters, meaning that parties are often dominated by white males and minorities and women are rarely put forth as candidates in most districts.⁸

Proportional Representation (PR), on the other hand, is another electoral system that aims to reduce the disparity between a party's share of the vote and its share of the parliamentary seats. While there are numerous types of PR systems, the general logic behind this electoral system is that voters will vote for the party and/or candidate they prefer in multi-member districts, then those candidates' parties will receive around that share of the seats in parliament as won by its members. For example, if one party wins thirty percent of the vote, then its candidates occupies around thirty percent of the seats in parliament.⁹ The greater the number of representatives from a district (and thus the lower the vote-share threshold), the more proportional a legislature will be. PR is usually achieved through one of two methods: List PR or the Single-Transferable Vote (STV). Under List PR, political parties present a list of candidates to the voters on a national or regional basis, and the voters then vote on the party lists. Under STV, voters rank order candidates in multi-member districts.

PR possesses numerous advantages as an electoral system. Arguably, the most important advantage of PR is that the system avoids the "anomalous results of plurality/majority systems" and thus is better able to produce a representative and proportional legislature.¹⁰ Along this line, PR gives rise to very few wasted votes as lower thresholds make it so that nearly all votes cast actually go towards electing a candidate of choice, which in turn increases voters' perceptions that their votes actually count. Further, PR makes for a more inclusive system, as parties need to obtain a much smaller percentage of

7 Blas, "Introduction," 7.

8 Reilly, Ellis, and Reynolds, "Electoral systems design," 37.

9 The percent of seats won is subject to the district magnitude.

10 Reilly, Ellis, and Reynolds, "Electoral systems design," 57.

the vote-share, which facilitates minority and female representation. Additionally, PR has been praised for leading to greater continuity and stability of policy. The regular switches in government between two ideologically polarized parties in PR makes long-term economic planning more difficult, whereas the broad coalition governments formed under PR enable stability and coherence in long-term decision-making.¹¹

Nonetheless, there are still important critiques of PR as well. The most salient criticism is that PR systems give rise to coalition governments and a fragmented party system, which can create gridlock among coalition cabinets, insufficient grounds for policy platforms among coalitions, and a diffuse party system. Additionally, some argue that PR enables the proliferation of extremist parties, as these smaller parties are able to gain representation in government.¹²

Given the relative advantages and disadvantages of FPTP and PR, those democracies that prioritize the values of inclusion, proportionality and stable policies would do well to transition from FPTP to a PR system. In the next section, I will provide a conceptualization of the conditions necessary for a successful transition from a FPTP system to a PR system.

Theories of Electoral Reform

Proposing electoral reform is difficult enough in and of itself; but moving from mere proposals to actually initiating referendums on reform presents a whole other slew of challenges. This section will analyze what factors are necessary first to produce a reform proposal and then to actually translate the proposal to a bid for electoral reform.

Shugart argues that there are both inherent and contingent factors in reform initiation. An inherent condition for reform is regarded as a tendency of the electoral system to produce a systemic failure from the normative expectation.¹³ Examples of such a systemic failure include the election of the second largest party in terms of vote share to a position of full executive power or the decimation of the opposition in the form of an overly lopsided majority for the largest party. According to Shugart, the inherent conditions for electoral reform have been met when such a visible systemic failure has occurred. Furthermore, Shugart argues that inherent conditions for systemic failure provide two ‘assists’ to a reform process by making the occurrence of an anomaly more likely because the system is not providing the normatively expected relationship between votes and seats and because the presence of inherent conditions may lead to public criticism of the system itself.¹⁴

For an inherent condition to occur, the electoral system must be seen as having a systemic failure, which then begs the question: what constitutes a systemic failure? Technically, a systemic failure is any deviation from the expected normative outcome. Plurality systems are normatively expected to have a clearly identifiable and accountable majority for the plurality party and a strong opposition to monitor that majority and serve

11 Ibid, 58.

12 Ibid, 71.

13 Mathew Søbreg Shugart, “Inherent and contingent factors in reform initiation in plurality systems,” in *To Keep or Change First Past the Post*, ed. by Andre Blais (Oxford: OUP, 2008), 29.

14 Shugart, “Inherent and contingent factors,” 29.

as a potential prospective majority at the next election. However, plurality systems have further limitations in that votes are translated into seats in dozens of local district contests, not on a jurisdiction-wide basis, meaning that anomalous outcomes such as spurious or lopsided majorities may result when the variance in party votes across districts is either unusually high or unusually low.

A contingent factor for reform is regarded as something that produces an impetus for a party that just come into power to take initiative and advocate for reform. According to Reed and Thies, there are two types of contingencies that may occur: outcome-contingencies and act-contingencies.¹⁵ Outcome-contingent factors are those that spur incumbents to vote for reform because they prefer the anticipated outcome of the new rules over maintenance of the status quo. Act-contingent factors are those that are present when politicians expect to benefit from the very act of voting for reform because the concept of reform is popular in public opinion. According to Renwick, public pressure is central to all cases of reform by elite-mass interaction.¹⁶ While these factors are almost always necessary to produce electoral reform initiation, they are not sufficient to produce reform in all cases. Shugart argues that the path to reform often involves both inherent and contingent factors, as an anomalous outcome in the form of an inherent condition, which turns public opinion against the current system, provides the impetus for the act-contingent condition of the ruling party to advocate for reform. In his analysis of 191 elections in a plurality system, Shugart found that five of the seven instances of reform initiation following elections occurred when the election produced an anomalous outcome in the form of a spurious or lopsided majority. However, he further found that the anomalous outcome by itself was not sufficient for the reform initiation; rather, reform required an alternation to the party that had been disadvantaged by the previous anomalous outcomes as the previously disadvantaged party may perceive an outcome-contingent benefit to electoral reform in that it perceives the current electoral system as biased against it.¹⁷

The paradox of reform in parliamentary FPTP systems is that reform must be initiated by the very party that was advantaged by the existing system in the most recent election and is thus currently benefiting from the system. It follows that this party may be less inclined to initiate a reform effort unless it perceives an electoral advantage from taking up the cause of reform or fears electoral retribution from dropping the cause of reform if it previously endorsed itself as a reformist party.

While Shugart provides an electoral analysis for reform, Blau offers a supplemental political analysis using veto player theory to help explain how electoral reform is proposed. In traditional veto player theory, an instrumentally rational agenda setter should propose a policy that is capable of defeating the status quo – FPTP election in this case. Path-setting is another component of veto player theory in which the agenda setter chooses not only what goes onto the agenda but the legislative path it will take, which can make a significant difference to translating a reform proposal into a reform initiative, as well as the success

15 Reed, Steven R., and Michael F. Thies. “The causes of electoral reform in Japan,” in *Mixed-member electoral systems: the best of both worlds* eds. Matthew Shugart and Martin Wattenberg (Oxford: OUP, 2001), 152-172.

16 Alan Renwick, *The Politics of Electoral Reform* (Cambridge: CUP, 2010), 45.

17 Shugart, “Inherent and contingent factors,” 53.

of the initiative.¹⁸

Blau argues that preferences are based not only on *interests* but also on *attitudes*, such as normative beliefs about legitimacy. An attitudinal preference is based on what an individual believes is good, independently of how she thinks the policy affects her interests, and an interest-based preference as a preference based on how she thinks the policy affects her interests, independently of her attitudes.¹⁹ Self-interest and party-interest, involving votes, seats, policy or office (which may not align in the same direction) are especially relevant in the case of electoral reform proposition. Blau thus argues that reform is most likely when there is an ‘intersection’ between normative attitudes and self-interest.²⁰

Looking first to party-interest, Blau proposes four key reasons why a major party’s leadership would propose electoral reform: if the leaders believe, attitudinally, that reform is right on outcome-based grounds (i.e., that a different system would lead to better governance), if they believe a reform proposition would achieve them minority-party backing in a hung parliament (act-based reason), if they believe that initiating reform would help the party in votes (act-based reason), and if they believe that the new electoral system would help the party in votes or seats (outcome-based reason).²¹ In one or more of these cases, it would be rational for party leaders to propose reform to advantage their own party.

However, moving from a reform proposition to an actual reform enactment is an entirely different story, though one that can still be explained using veto player analysis. In this case, the veto player has negative power to reject reform while the agenda setter (usually the party that has just come into power) is a veto player who also has the positive power to push a reform proposal to a final vote in the legislature. The agenda setter also has path-setting powers. The agenda setter’s path-setting power can both help and hurt reform. The probability of veto interacts with both the likelihood of a particular path being set and the type of electoral reform proposed, all of which bear upon the probability of electoral reform defeating the status quo.

The agenda-setting party may propose reform and determine its path if it so deems reform to be in its interest; however, the party must still attain majority support for reform to pass, which could clash from individual MPs’ self-interested and attitudinal preferences.²² Blau notes that the key problem for MPs is incumbency, which involves the outcome-based self-interest that most electoral reforms would threaten their chances of reelection.²³ However, two types of electoral systems could overcome this problem: Alternative Vote (AV) and certain forms of Mixed-Member Systems. Thus proposing one of these two systems for reform would overcome the self-interest issue of incumbency; however, such systems might present other aspects that do not align with the self-interest or attitudes of MPs.

Party leaders could also induce MPs who oppose reform on interested-based

18 Adrian Blau, “Electoral reform in the UK: a veto-player analysis,” in *To Keep or Change First Past the Post*, ed. by Andre Blais (Oxford: OUP, 2008), 63.

19 Blau, “Electoral reform in the UK,” 63.

20 Ibid, 63.

21 Ibid, 75.

22 Blau, “Electoral reform in the UK,” 82.

23 Ibid, 82.

or attitudinal grounds to vote for reform. Blau suggests that a manifesto commitment to reform, a public referendum before the reform reaches the legislature, and/or whipping party members into the party hardline as potential options for ensuring the passage of reform despite conflicts with MPs' contrary interests and/or attitudes.²⁴

In conclusion, from a veto player political analysis, a rational party leader must determine whether reform is in the party's interests, if reform is in MPs' interests and/or how he could induce MPs to vote for reform. Furthermore, he must do so during the winset of opportunity; i.e., when reform could actually defeat the status quo.

Having analyzed the reform proposal and the reform selection process from both an electoral and a political perspective, I will now apply these theories to the cases of reform in both 1997 and 2011 in the UK.

Case 1: 1997 Reform Proposal

Looking first to the history of FPTP in the UK, from 1885 onward, all constituencies were single-member districts except for two that were removed in 1948. Interestingly, two-party Westminster politics has been the exception rather than the rule during the course of the twentieth century as governance alternated between Labour, the Liberal Democrats, and the Conservatives. Only from 1945 to 1970 has the UK actually fit the classic image of two-party Westminster politics.²⁵ Discussion of electoral reform was prevalent during much of the twentieth century, especially after two elections in the 1970s produced anomalous outcomes, which undermined claims for the superiority of FPTP. Calls for reform have come mainly from outside the major-party duopoly of Labour and the Conservatives with the Conservatives more heavily opposed to reform than Labour.

The 1997 election brought Labour to power, ending eighteen years of Conservative rule. Prior to this, Labour had campaigned on the promise of electoral reform, including it in its party manifesto. Once in power, Labour set up the Independent Commission on the Voting System (the Jenkins Commission) to recommend a new electoral system for the House of Commons, which recommended a mixed-member system (MMS). However, Prime Minister Tony Blair sensed opposition to MMS among his party so instead presented a proposal on the alternative vote to the House of Commons, which Labour then quickly shelved, renegeing on their promise of reform.

In analyzing the 1997 electoral reform, one finds that only one of Shugart's conditions for reform proposal was present: the act-based contingency condition. An inherent condition was not present as the 1997 election resulted in no systemic failure – simply a Labour victory after a long period of Conservative rule. An outcome-based condition was similarly not present: Labour had actually been over-represented in terms of the estimate of the seat-vote equation during Conservative rule and had just won an election by FPTP;²⁶ thus Labour was the wrong party to initiate reform according to the model. An act-based contingent condition was present in that Labour had campaigned on the promise of electoral reform (and had done so throughout the 1990s), thus Labour could have sensed that it would be electorally disadvantageous to renege on its promise of reform

24 Ibid, 84-85.

25 Blau, "Electoral reform in the UK," 66.

26 Shugart, "Inherent and contingent factors," 45.

initiation. However, after creating the Jenkins Committee, Labour did nothing more than shelve its recommendation for reform, which could be viewed as a nullification of its own act-based condition. Given that Labour's proposal of reform in the absence of an inherent condition contradicts Shugart's theory of reform, this theory does not fully explain the initiation of reform in 1997, though it does help to explain its failure. Nonetheless, it is necessary to employ Blau's framework to provide a more comprehensive explanation of the reform proposal and its failure.

Blau's framework maintains that we must also take into account the interests and attitudes of the relevant actors - Labour Party leaders and MPs - and posits that if any one of the four reasons (based on his aforementioned model of attitudes and interests) is fulfilled, it is rational for a party to propose reform. First, Labour leaders, particularly Tony Blair, attitudinally believed that reform was right on outcome-based grounds of better governance. When Tony Blair assumed Labour leadership in 1994, he proclaimed the twenty-first century to be a "Progressive Century," realigning and unifying the Left through PR, thus reflecting this inherent attitudinal preference among party elites. The second act-based reason of trying to get minor-party backing in a hung parliament is not wholly applicable here as there was no hung parliament; however, Labour did envision a partnership with the Liberal Democrats on electoral reform as a means for keeping the Conservatives out of power.²⁷ The third act-based reason that reform could help party in votes was present as Labour had campaigned on the platform of reform. However, the fourth outcome-based reason of a party performing better under a different system is not applicable given that, as stated previously, Labour was actually overrepresented in terms of seats during Conservative rule. Given that at least one of Blau's conditions has been met, his model of attitudes and interests can fill in holes of Shugart's model, helping to explain why Labour proposed reform.

However, interests can also explain why reform failed to move beyond a recommendation: the individual interests of Labour MPs in the cabinet, unions and the "heartland" party were heavily opposed to reform, making it likely that reform would fail if brought before Parliament, leading Blair to shelve the recommendation. These MPs thus served as negative veto points to the success of electoral reform. Thus, Blau's framework helps to explain why Labour first proposed (against Shugart's hypothesis), and then shelved, reform.

Case 2: 2011 Reform Referendum

In 2010, following an anomalous outcome in the UK national parliamentary election in the form of a failure for FPTP to produce a majority government, the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives formed a coalition government for the first time during peacetime since the 1930s. This coalition government held a referendum on electoral reform that would entail transitioning from FPTP to the Alternative Vote electoral system. The referendum failed, with only 32.1% of voters voting in favor of electoral reform, and FPTP prevails to do this day. This rejection of electoral reform begs two key questions: why were these reforms proposed in the first place and why did they ultimately fail?

We again require a combination of theories to fully explain reform proposal and

27 Blau, "Electoral reform in the UK," 70.

failure in 2011. The 2010 election produced a hung parliament in that no party received a majority of the votes; thus, elite bargaining in coalition formation was a crucial factor in how electoral reform got on the agenda and tapers our analysis of the process.²⁸ Briefly, since neither party won a majority of votes, it was necessary to form a coalition government. The Conservatives and Liberal Democrats were at least somewhat aligned on all of the issues except electoral reform, making a coalition between the two parties politically feasible and expedient so long as they could reach an agreement on the reform issue. The Liberal Democrats had promised to open negotiations over reform with whichever party had the most seats in the case of a hung parliament – the Conservatives, in this case. Thus, the success of the Coalition Agreement between the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives hinged on their compromise on the reform issue, which I will now proceed to analyze using Shugart and Blau’s frameworks to describe the reform support of both parties.²⁹

Based on Shugart’s framework, we find that while it accounts for the LibDem proposal of reform, it fails to account for the Conservative’s allowance of reform. The inherent condition of a systemic failure was clearly present in the form of a hung parliament that deviated from normative expectations, thus providing grounds for the both parties to propose reform. The outcome-based condition was also present for the Liberal Democrats in that even though they preferred STV, they would still gain more seats under AV than under the status quo.³⁰ The Conservatives; however, would be disadvantaged in terms of seats under AV. Furthermore, the act-based condition was present as well for the Liberal Democrats as they had long been campaigning for electoral reform and included it in their manifesto, though they initially advocated for the even more proportionate system of STV. The Conservatives; however, were vehemently opposed to electoral reform, as included in their manifesto as well. Thus, Shugart’s theory certainly accounts for the Liberal Democrats support of electoral reform but wholly fails to account for Conservative endorsement.

Blau’s framework; however, provides more fully an explanation for both parties’ at least endorsement of reform proposition through his use of interests and attitudes. Analyzing Blau’s four sufficient conditions of party interests and attitudes, we find that three of the four apply to the Liberal Democrats. First, the Liberal Democrats supported reform on the outcome-based grounds that reform would provide for better and more equitable governance, although STV would have better served their desire for more proportionality. The second act-based reason does not apply here as the Liberal Democrats were not interested in supporting reform to gain the backing of a minority party – they

28 Christopher Miller, “Rethinking Majoritarian Modification: Toward an Explanatory Theory of Electoral System Reform in Canada, the UK, and New Zealand” (Master’s Thesis, Western Washington University, 2015), 62.

29 While I recognize that the Conservatives were ideologically opposed to support, they nonetheless did submit to reform proposal as part of the Coalition Agreement, which I take as an endorsement, at least on political grounds, of electoral reform. Even though the Conservatives campaigned against reform, by allowing it in the Coalition Agreement, they were implicitly accepting the possibility of it taking effect, which constitutes at least a degree of support for the measure.

30 It was estimated that they would have received 80 seats had the 2010 election been conducted using AV instead of the 57 seats they received under FPTP. John Curtice, “Politicians, voters and democracy: The 2011 UK referendum on the Alternative Vote,” *Electoral Studies* 32 (2013): 217.

were the minority party being courted. Third, the act-based reason of garnering more votes based on their reform platform applies, as does the fourth outcome-based reason that AV would help the Liberal Democrats in terms of seats. Since, as Blau argues, only one of these conditions must be present, such a framework certainly explains the Liberal Democrats reform proposal.

When applied to the Conservatives, Blau's framework explains their initiation of reform as well as at least one reason for supporting reform applies. The Conservatives argued that FPTP presents the best form of governance (nullifying reason one), the Conservatives did not view supporting reform as electorally advantageous (nullifying reason three), and the Conservatives would not do better in terms of seats under AV (nullifying reason four). However, in line with reason two, the Conservatives did in fact help initiate reform to get the backing of a minor party – the Liberal Democrats – in the case of a hung parliament, thus making Blau's theory a valid explanation for their initiation. In fact, the only reason the Conservatives initiated reform was because it was in their party's interest to gain the support of the Liberal Democrats to form a majority coalition government.

Thus, Blau's theory of party interests accounts for the crucial point that Shugart's theory neglects: there are cases in which it may be politically expedient to initiate reform even if it is not in the party's ideological or contingent condition's interests. The Conservatives, despite their opposition, were able to compromise with the Liberal Democrats, whereby a referendum would be presented to the public on whether to replace the current FPTP system with AV. From the perspective of the Conservatives, AV gave the Liberal Democrats just enough to keep them in a coalition but prevented too much damage from being done (in terms of estimated votes lost) to the Conservatives themselves.

Blau's theory of party interest also helps to explain the path-setting agenda of the two parties for the AV proposition. As Blau notes, the path electoral reform takes is extremely relevant to the success of reform given the varying veto points inherent in each path. In this case, both parties decided to hold a referendum for the voters on the reform question, rather than putting the legislation before Parliament or issuing an executive fiat, a referendum aligned with the interests' of both parties. Holding a referendum enabled the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives to agree to differ on an issue on which they were fundamentally divided: both could propose reform, then the Conservatives could campaign against it so as not to alienate its own voters while the Liberal Democrats could campaign in its favor, so as not to alienate its own voters. Thus, holding a referendum and allowing the parties to campaign on opposing sides forced the voters to decide on a politically contentious issue and recuse either party from blame.

It is important to note that the individual MPs' self-interest was not as relevant in this case given that the issue was put to a vote by the voters themselves, thus the MPs were not voting on the issue as legislation in parliament.

The referendum was held on 5 May 2011 and was a resounding failure, with only 32.1% of voters voting in favor of reform. Turnout was abysmally low at only 42% as well. A poorly managed pro-reform campaign, information gap and turnout were all cited as explanations for the failure; however, this issue belongs in the realm of voting behavior rather than electoral systems.

Conclusion

While the United Kingdom has experienced two propositions of electoral reform under all three major parties in the past twenty years, FPTP still prevails. This paper discussed the two dominant theories of electoral reform proposition (Shugart's and Blau's frameworks respectively) in an attempt to apply them to the reform initiation movements in the UK in 1997 and 2011. Given that both of the reform proposals occurred under complex circumstances with the 1997 proposal serving as a seemingly-anomalous case and the 2011 proposal serving as the result of elite bargaining, a model that encapsulates both inherent and contingent conditions *and* interests and attitudes.

While Shugart's model was the first major theoretical framework for the factors that would initiate electoral reform proposition, it failed to account for Labour Party's interests and attitudes in the 1997 reform initiation and the Conservative Party's interests in 2011. Thus, Blau's theory, which includes both components, provides a much more comprehensive explanation of proposal.

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