

The British Electoral System

First Past the Post

The electoral mechanism employed for UK general elections, by-elections, and local council polls across England and Wales is commonly designated as First Past the Post (FPTP). Under this system, the electorate casts a single vote by making a mark adjacent to their preferred candidate's name. Essentially, FPTP is a simple plurality system: the individual who garners the highest number of votes within a given constituency (or 'seat') is duly elected. Crucially, securing an absolute majority of the votes cast is not a prerequisite for victory. Consequently, the political party commanding the greatest number of seats nationally—notwithstanding its national share of the popular vote—retains the prerogative to form a government. Indeed, historical precedents, notably in 1951 and February 1974, saw the party assuming power having garnered a smaller share of the popular vote than its primary opposition, a phenomenon which underscores FPTP's capacity to significantly distort the electorate's collective will.

Enduring Contention and Parliamentary Representation

The perpetuation of FPTP for Westminster elections has precipitated intense controversy spanning several decades.

The UK's contemporary parliamentary architecture is predicated upon single-member representation, whereby each constituency is tasked with electing a solitary Member of Parliament (MP). Prior to 1948, however, a number of constituencies were empowered to return multiple members (for example, several towns in Lancashire, such as Blackburn and Bolton, operated as dual-member constituencies).

The average constituency electorate hovers around 70,000, though the disparity in size remains considerable. The boundaries of these constituencies are subject to the oversight of the independent

Boundary Commission, which periodically recommends adjustments in response to demographic shifts. For instance, the number of Scottish constituencies was curtailed from 72 to 59 ahead of the 2005 general election, an effort to bring Scotland's parliamentary representation into closer alignment with the remainder of the United Kingdom.

Boundary Reviews and the Quest for Equivalence

A proposal to reduce the total number of UK constituencies from 650 to 600 was agreed upon prior to the 2015 general election, but its implementation was forestalled due to internal discord within the coalition government. Although the subsequent election of a Conservative government momentarily resurrected the reform, it was ultimately abandoned in 2020.

A fresh, formal review was subsequently initiated in 2021 and was formally ratified in 2023, taking effect for the 2024 elections. While the aggregate number of seats was maintained at 650, the apportionment among the four constituent nations underwent a notable recalibration reflecting population movements: England gained 10 seats (bringing its total to 543), while the constituency allocations for Scotland and Wales were diminished by two seats each (resulting in 57 and 32 seats respectively, with Northern Ireland's 18 seats remaining untouched).

The overriding imperative of this review was to ensure that the electorates of most constituencies fell within a deviation of +/- 5% of the specified electoral quota of 73,393 electors. This mandate established a stringent permitted range of 69,724 to 77,062 electors. This more rigorous criterion is designed to guarantee that individual votes are accorded a broadly equivalent weight.

As a result of these adjustments, the vast majority of existing constituencies—over 90%—experienced some modification: seats with electorates previously deemed too sparse were expanded, while those considered overly populous were contracted. Furthermore, a significant number of constituencies were re-designated with new names to more accurately reflect their amended geographical scope.