

PR & the Far-Right - Key Lines

One concern you might hear about Proportional Representation (PR) when you're campaigning for electoral reform is that it can make it easier for far-right parties to win power, or that First Past the Post is a safeguard against extremist parties winning power.

When this concern is raised it's important to acknowledge the fundamental concern here is about extremism and the far-right. Tackling the far-right is a critical, live issue, and people, especially those targeted by the far-right and the populist right, have every reason to be primarily concerned about extremism. That being said, our research shows that, as currently constituted, in the UK First Past the Post in fact makes it easier for our Populist-Right party, Reform UK, to win power, whereas PR in European countries has acted as a brake on Populist-Right parties even where they are in government.

Here are some points that you can use to challenge the misconception that PR creates an advantage for extremists, or "lets them in".

FPTP is the Fuel for the Right

It's clear that the far-right have appeal, influence and power in FPTP systems - e.g. the UK, or USA. Consider the stratospheric rise of Reform's popularity and the way the Conservative Party lurched to the right during the last government - on immigration, Europe, Net Zero, cultural issues and protest rights to name but a few - in attempts to protect their vote-share from parties like UKIP and Reform UK.

Under FPTP, the far-right don't gain representation through winning parliamentary seats, but they gain power and influence by pressuring and co-opting other parties. Though Nigel Farage failed to get elected to Parliament several times under FPTP (until 2024), he still managed to set the agenda on the major political issues of the last decade, and arguably set the terms on which the last 3 elections were won (Brexit in 2017, 2019 Stand-aside pact, Split of the Right vote in 2024).

They never needed seats to have power. Instead, the last 15 years have shown how they have forced the Conservatives, and now Labour, to continually bank to the right for fear they lose vote share.

Now, because of the fragmentation of the electorate and the surging popularity of Reform, with 5-parties polling in double-digits, FPTP means that Reform could win total power with a majority of seats in parliament with ~30% of the vote.

Because FPTP wastes 70%+ votes, denying millions of people a voice, **people have rarely felt their vote makes a difference**. They're ready and willing to roll the dice and vote for change - whatever baggage that comes with because any change feels better than things staying the same. Coupled with the fragmented voter base, and 5-6 parties polling in double digits, under FPTP the threshold to win seats is terrifyingly low - e.g.

recent by-election results with winning vote shares under 20%. Tiny fluctuations in vote share can cause massive political rupture and instability. Given the need for structural, long-term policy changes, not least on climate, housing and inequality, that is largely a bad thing for progressive policy outcomes.

Because it falsely imposes a two-party duopoly, and has thus far kept Reform out of parliament, FPTP legitimises Reform's anti-establishment positioning. Under PR, the Populist-Right may become ministers and presidents, but as such they are judged not by the ferocity of their complaints, but by what they deliver. PR exposes anger to accountability. FPTP leaves it to accumulate unchecked.

How PR Works - A Counterbalance:

Having representation and influence does not equal having control: proportional representation allows Populist-Right parties into parliament as a reflection of voters' demands, but stops them from governing unchecked. First-past-the-post keeps them out of parliament, but forces their policies to be co-opted by mainstream parties. In the UK, Brexit, harsh anti-immigration and asylum measures, austerity and the watering down of net zero policies embody the gravitational pull of the populist right despite their lack of parliamentary representation. If Reform win a majority of seats at the next election on 30% of the vote, they are handed the keys to power and all the control. Think of the difference of the opposition faced by Trump in the USA when enacting policies as opposed to Meloni in Italy, or Wilders in the Netherlands.

PR does not enable or suppress extremes, it moderates and mitigates them. It doesn't do this by keeping them outside the room but by making them share it, forcing them into collaboration, coalition-building and joint policy formulation. Where FPTP either risks building a pressure cooker impact by denying fair representation or handing the entire machinery of state to a party on a third of the vote, PR makes even the most radical or anti-consensus actor answerable to democratic negotiation just for a seat at the cabinet table. The price of being at the table is sharing it. PR forces cooperation and therefore consensus.

Dilution of Extreme Ideas: Coalition negotiations demand compromise. In practice the need to maintain support within a governing coalition dramatically reduces the attractiveness/likelihood of radical, extremist, divisive policies.

Increased scrutiny & accountability is generally bad for the far-right: Support for Populist-Right parties tend to decline sharply after they enter government as in Austria, Finland, and the Netherlands. This is in large part because of a failure to deliver on their voters' expectations. By having entered government and bearing responsibility for the choices and the faults of the state it is harder to play the outsider - a significant part of their appeal to voters.

[You can read the full paper on our website here.](#)