

Electoral Systems of the United Kingdom and Germany: A Case Study Comparison of Single Member Plurality and Popular Representation

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The two main tasks of an electoral system are “to produce an elected assembly that is representative of the people, and a government that is effective and accountable to them.”¹ There are many different approaches as to how these goals can best be achieved, and the systems present in the United Kingdom of Britain and Northern Ireland (UK) and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) present prime examples of two of the most significant opposing methods. The simplest way to categorize the different types of electoral systems is to divide them into non-proportional systems and systems of proportional representation (PR).² These systems are explained below. A form of non-proportional plurality representation commonly referred to as single member district ‘first-past-the-post’ is practised in the UK while a unique form of PR, the additional member system (AMS), has been in place in Germany for the past half century. Each system has its own advantages and disadvantages, and these have been and continue to be the subject of widespread debate. For this reason, and in order to understand what it is that fuels such debate, an examination should be carried out concerning the similarities and differences between the British and German electoral systems and the implications of each. This discussion has direct implications to the electoral system of British Columbia, which is the same as that of the UK.

There are significant differences between systems of proportional and non-proportional representation. Although the aim of each is to provide representative government, the two systems offer differing views of the form this representation should take. The main source of disagreement arises from the purpose itself of having an electoral system. That is, the methods of achieving proper representation and effective government often conflict with each other to some degree.³

The focus in a plurality system is on the concentration of power in the hands of one single party in order to clearly place responsibility for government on that party. The argument is that “proportionality is not a goal in itself.”⁴ Under the plurality system that exists in the UK, (as well as Canada on the provincial and federal levels) the land is divided into territorial areas, termed ‘constituencies’, which are very roughly equal in population. One Member of Parliament (MP) in the House of Commons represents each constituency. Come election time, voters in the UK have one vote each and use it to name the candidate of their choice from the list of candidates competing in their constituency. “The winning candidate is simply the one who receives most votes”⁵ in the constituency, regardless of the percentage of the total vote he or she receives. This is the meaning of plurality. The party with the most seats in the House of Commons forms the government, and all other members of parliament are assigned to the opposition benches.

Advocates of the first-past-the-post system, such as the members of the Conservative Party in the UK, assert that this system is justified because it means the government can be held directly accountable for its actions.⁶ They also put forth the idea that plurality elections result in more stable government. This argument, however, has been weakened by the relative stability found in Germany’s political system and elsewhere.⁷ Furthermore, the claim that a first-past-the-post system creates a closer connection between electoral districts and their MPs because of the territorial nature of the electoral system has been rebuked by a 1972 survey that “found that most voters in Britain knew little or nothing about their MP, almost half being unable even to name him or her.”⁸ This brings to mind the question, how many British Columbians can recall the

name of their current MLA? How many British Columbians know what their MLA has done for them since the 2001 election?

This system is one of disproportional representation. “In order to win a substantial number of seats in the House of Commons, a party must either win at least one-third of the popular vote nationwide or concentrate its votes in a limited number of constituencies.”⁹ The large parties benefit from this disproportionality by concentrating votes in a limited number of constituencies, while the smaller parties tend to have more evenly spread support around the United Kingdom. At times the discrepancy between percentage of the popular vote received and percentage of the seats in Parliament for a given party is simply outrageous. For example, in the British election of 1983 the Liberal-Social Democrat Alliance received 25.4% of the popular vote nationwide while the Labour Party pulled in 27.6% of the vote. However, the Liberal-Social Democrat Alliance won only 3.5% of the seats in the House of Commons, while Labour won 32.3% of the seats – a difference of 186 seats with a difference in share of the vote of only 2.2% (which translates into a proportional difference of only 15 seats!).¹⁰ This resulted from a very evenly spread countrywide support base for the Liberal-Social Democrats, while Labour concentrated their votes in key areas.¹¹ In a plurality system, “even quite large minorities can be deprived of a voice over large parts of the country. This is true of the Greens throughout the United Kingdom, and of Liberal Democrats in most of England.”¹² It is this system that resulted in what most deem an unfair majority in the current British Columbia legislature.

Since the transformation of the French electoral system in 1985, Britain has become the only member of the European Community not to use proportional representation.¹³ Proponents of a PR system in the UK are numerous, with special interest in this system held by the smaller parties that would gain the most from a switch in electoral process, such as the Liberal Democrats and the Greens. Of significance is the fact that, in the 1997 UK election, “in a PR system New Labour’s vote would not have given it a majority of seats in the Commons, and it would have had to govern in coalition with the Liberal Democrats.”¹⁴ With the current system in place, no party winning a parliamentary majority has won a majority of the popular vote since 1945.¹⁵ Backers of the push for electoral reform to a PR system see this as hard evidence for the need to change the system.

The focus in a PR system is on the awarding of seats in direct proportion to each party’s share of the popular vote. In this way, the people’s representatives reflect the preferences of the people in terms of party rather than territory.¹⁶ This system is seen as more fundamentally democratic than nonproportional systems, but has its opponents as well. Plurality supporters argue that, because PR creates coalition government, this in turn “leads to a reduction in the accountability of governments to the electorate.”¹⁷ This fear is not completely absurd, as it is possible for parties in a coalition government to try and lay the blame for the country’s problems on the other members of the coalition.¹⁸ However, the occurrence of this type of political charade has not occupied the spotlight in Germany, demonstrating that it is more a theoretical fear than a realistic one.

The framers of the Basic Law designed the German electoral system in 1949 with two goals in mind: to create a proportionally representative government and to prevent the fragmentation that plagued the Weimar party system (this system, following WWI, led directly to Hitler’s rise to power). In order to accomplish these goals, they developed a new and unique hybrid electoral system – the additional member system (AMS). This version of PR is special in that “it combines the geographical representation of the plurality method with the party representation of PR [...] while also delivering a proportional outcome overall.”¹⁹ The AMS method seeks to have the best of both worlds, and in doing so looks also to create a more ideally representative democratic system than can be provided by other systems.

“The electoral law of 1956 [...] has become definitive and remains valid until today, apart from minor amendments.”²⁰ This demonstrates the lasting power of an AMS style electoral process. It also shows the high level of respect held for, and acceptance of, this system by the people and their representatives. There are 656 seats in the lower house of the German parliament, the Bundestag. When an elector participates in an election, he or she has two votes. With the first vote, the elector makes his or her choice of candidate at local constituency level. In this way, half of the Bundestag seats are awarded to the 328 candidates who come first in their constituencies. The second vote is used to express preference on a party list at the federal level. This second vote determines the share of the seats in the Bundestag allocated to each party. It is important to note that only the second vote determines the *number* of Bundestag seats awarded to each party – the first vote does not affect this number, only how they are distributed. The number of seats obtained by each party out of the 328 constituencies is subtracted from the total number of seats due that party according to the second vote. Candidates from party lists fill the difference between this number of seats and the proportional number determined by the second vote.

In Germany, which uses a closed party list system, the party list allows the voters no choice of candidate. The candidate’s position on the list determines the likelihood of him or her being elected. In this way political parties maintain a degree of control over their own members, rewarding party faithful by placing them near the top of the party list, and disciplining party mavericks by placing them at the bottom of the list with no realistic chance of being elected.²¹

There are a few oddities in the German electoral system. For instance, there is a clause that excludes any party receiving less than five percent of the second vote from holding seats in the Bundestag. This clause, an exception to the principle of proportionality, was introduced in order to keep the number of small parties down, and in particular to keep extremist parties out of the legislature. One significant effect of the five percent clause is to contribute to the development of a few large parties that tend to be relatively centred on the political spectrum.²² Having said this, there is a simple way to get around the five percent clause: if a party wins three or more seats, that party gains the right to sit in the Bundestag regardless of the percentage of the popular vote it receives. This ‘side-entry’ into the legislature should not exist, according to some political scientists, such as Jesse Eckhard. He states that it is not logical that a party with 4.9 percent of the vote cannot enter the legislature, yet a party with a lower share of the vote may enter the parliament as long as it wins three constituency seats. The constitutionality of both this clause as well as the five percent clause has been challenged and upheld by the Federal Constitutional Court.²³ A third peculiarity of the German PR system is the existence of surplus seats in the Bundestag. It is possible for a party to win more constituency seats than the number of seats it would receive according to its share of the second vote. In such a case, the party is allowed to keep these seats, termed ‘surplus’ seats. Still, the fundamental nature of the proportional representative electoral system must be preserved. In accordance with this guiding principle, the proportion of surplus seats may “not exceed five percent of the normal number of seats.”²⁴

In the German system, coalition government is the norm, as is common in countries employing PR systems elsewhere. With the one exception of Konrad Adenauer’s third term in office (1957-61), no party has held an absolute majority of seats in the Bundestag.²⁵ This means that the existence of coalition partnerships is an accepted part of German politics, and an influential part of German politics as well. As a result of its crucial role in forming coalitions on numerous occasions, the Free Democratic Party (FDP) has had influence on its coalition affiliates in disproportion to its share of the vote. Although this goes against the ideal of proportionality, it has been beneficial in that “the FDP generally acted as a moderating influence,

limiting the leftist leanings of the SPD and the conservative tendencies of the CDU/CSU.” As the disruptive swing from leftwing NDP government to rightwing Liberal government in BC demonstrates, we really do need something to balance out these differences, as both have proven unpopular in their own rights among wide segments of the population.

Having examined both the UK and Germany individually, they should also be studied together. One important aspect in the comparison and contrasting of these two systems is the nature of the differing goals of representative democracy presented by each country’s electoral system. The existing electoral system in the United Kingdom bases itself on the concept that “Parliament should be representative of the geographical distribution of the population.”²⁶ However, a strong case is made against this system on the grounds that “it is a system of disproportional representation that manufactures a House of Commons majority for one party, even though the party has a minority of the popular vote.”²⁷

In Germany, the system is based on the idea that the Bundestag should be representative of national popular opinion. Proportional allotment of seats in the Bundestag is vital in this system. This system results in a relative majority for one party, and necessitates the formation of coalition partnerships to govern with a majority. Thus power does not lie squarely in the hands of one party, and responsibility for government actions is diffused among the coalition partners.

A second aspect is the degree of fairness that each system affords to competing political parties. In the UK’s plurality electoral system, there are significant disadvantages for smaller parties such as the Liberal Democrats or the Greens. Even with an important percentage of the popular vote across the country, if these votes are not concentrated in certain areas they will not win seats. “It is manifestly undemocratic for the supporters of smaller parties to be effectively denied representation in the legislature by the workings of the electoral system”²⁸ according to Anthony Birch. In Germany, unfair treatment of small parties is not nearly as harsh as in the UK. The five percent clause denies the right of parties with little popular support to sit in the Bundestag, at the cost of perfect proportionality but in the pursuit of more stable, less fragmented government – an acceptable balance of principle and practicality.

In this vein, another characteristic worth examining is the stability of government resulting from each system. The United Kingdom has enjoyed stable government under the plurality system for many years. The disproportional nature of the first-past-the-post electoral system has been credited with this stability as a result of the concentration of power in the hands of a small number of parties. In Germany, “the political system of the Federal Republic is characterised not only by continuity of political leaders, [...] but also by the remarkable stability of government coalitions.”²⁹ This is evidence that coalition government resulting from PR also produces stable government; stable government does *not* require concentration of power. This is especially appropriate in the case of British Columbia, in which successive parties have mismanaged their power, producing significant dissatisfaction in the electorate.

A fourth feature of the electoral systems of the UK and Germany worth investigating is the effectiveness of governments elected by each method. Measuring the effectiveness of government is by no means a simple thing to do. However, a surface look at both the United Kingdom and Germany shows that both countries are relatively well off both socially and economically. The extent to which the electoral system contributes to the effectiveness of government is limited, as the government is elected based at least somewhat on potential performance that may or may not be met.

In the UK, government is effective in that the absolute majority in the House of Commons currently held by the Labour Party leaves the government few obstacles in passing legislation. In Germany, the coalitions that come about as a direct result of the use of the PR electoral system “lead to more broadly-based and representative government, which should

ensure that policy outputs will enjoy greater consensus than the outputs from governments elected in non-PR systems on less than half of the votes.”³⁰ Thus, in the sense that consensus is often difficult to achieve and yet a significant degree of consensus is reached in Germany, the PR system produces effective government there.

Lastly, the accountability of governments elected in the UK and Germany should be looked at, simply because this is one of the main purposes of electoral systems. In the United Kingdom, “the Conservative and Labour parties regularly alternate in office, offering clear accountability to the electorate.”³¹ In Germany, although the government is a coalition of parties, these tend to work closely and cautiously together and can easily be held accountable for their actions.³²

While the current first-past-the-post electoral system has been in place in the United Kingdom for a significant period of time and has proven functional, it does not present as democratically fair an outcome as the additional member system variation of proportional representation practised in Germany. “Several polls since 1983 have shown that a majority of British electors believe that PR would be a fairer system.”³³ The Jenkins Commission, appointed by Tony Blair in 1998 to recommend electoral process changes, decided to endorse a system similar to that used in Germany. However, this has produced a counter-mobilization against changing the system, led by traditional Labour MPs who fear that coalition governments resulting from a PR system “would be less sympathetic to Labour interests.”³⁴ The effect of this reaction is that a change to PR will not likely be made any time in the near future in the UK. However, in British Columbia, where the people are being given this choice rather than the government deciding unilaterally, this change can and should be made.

The Federal Republic of Germany’s additional member system is a model example of proportional representation. It has been adopted in one form or another in twenty-five countries around the world because of its compromise nature, including New Zealand, which switched from the UK system in 1993.³⁵ However, the three seat alternative to the five percent clause and the surplus seat provision are not justifiable in a system that claims to aim for proportional representation. As there are no sound explanations of the purpose of either of these two abnormalities in the system, they are likely to be disposed of.³⁶ The current worldwide trend is toward PR³⁷ and it seems likely that countries will continue to adopt systems similar to the German AMS model in favour of their current systems. This transformation in domestic politics around the globe makes plain the appeal of the additional member system, and provides an indication of future trends in domestic politics worldwide.

After examining these two systems in depth, it is clear that the present system of UK-style plurality in the province of British Columbia, Canada, should be changed to a system similar to that of Germany. New Zealand’s successful transition from the UK plurality system to the German system of proportional representation shows that this can be done without trouble.³⁸

As an additional note, the original version of this essay did not take into account the equality of representation of minorities and women in either system. It is worth mentioning that the German system has consistently been more evenly representative of the population. In New Zealand for instance, the percentage of female MPs rose from just over 20% to just over 30%.³⁹

We can certainly emulate this wise choice, and help set a precedent for change in other provinces, as well as at the federal level – something that has been advocated by leading experts for years.⁴⁰ This, members of the assembly, is what is needed to give the citizens of this province the power they deserve and to create a government in British Columbia that is more democratically representative and more accountable.

Notes

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- ¹ David Beetham, "Political Theory and British Politics," Developments in British Politics 4, ed. Patrick Dunleavy, Andrew Gamble, Ian Holliday, and Gillian Peele (Houndmills, UK: Macmillan, 1993) p364.
- ² Hague, p134.
- ³ Beetham, p365.
- ⁴ Richard Rose, "Politics in England," European Politics Today, ed. Gabriel A. Almond, Russell J. Dalton, and G. Bingham Powell Jr., 2nd ed. (New York: Longman, 2002) p122.
- ⁵ Hague, p135.
- ⁶ Rose, p122.
- ⁷ Gert-Joachim Glaeßner, "Government and Political Order," Developments in German Politics 2, ed. Stephen Padgett, William E. Paterson, and Gordon Smith (Houndmills, UK: Macmillan Press, 1996) p33.
- ⁸ Michael Gallagher, "Electoral Systems and Voting Behaviour," Developments in West European Politics, ed. Paul Heywood, Martin Rhodes, and Vincent Wright (Houndmills, UK: Macmillan Press, 1997) p121.
- ⁹ Rose, p122.
- ¹⁰ Anthony H. Birch, The British System of Government, 10th ed. (London: Routledge, 1998) p88.
- ¹¹ Jürg Steiner, European Democracies 2nd ed. (New York: Longman, 1991) p67.
- ¹² Andrew Knapp and Yves Mény, Government and Politics in Western Europe: Britain, France, Italy, Germany 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) p155.
- ¹³ Birch, p87.
- ¹⁴ Rose, p122.
- ¹⁵ Beetham, p364.
- ¹⁶ Hague, p135.
- ¹⁷ Birch, p87.
- ¹⁸ Ibid, p87.
- ¹⁹ Hague, p136.
- ²⁰ Jesse Eckhard, "The Electoral System: More Continuity Than Change," Institutions and Institutional Change in the Federal Republic of Germany, ed. Ludger Helms (Houndmills, UK: Macmillan Press, 2000) p129.
- ²¹ Gallagher, p117.
- ²² Russell J. Dalton, "Politics in Germany," European Politics Today, ed. Gabriel A. Almond, Russell J. Dalton, and G. Bingham Powell Jr., 2nd ed. (New York: Longman, 2002) p233.
- ²³ Eckhard, p137.
- ²⁴ Ibid, p137.
- ²⁵ Glaeßner, p30.
- ²⁶ Beetham, p365.
- ²⁷ Rose, p122.
- ²⁸ Birch, p87.
- ²⁹ Glaeßner, p33.
- ³⁰ Gallagher, p124.
- ³¹ Hague, p177.
- ³² Ibid, p240.
- ³³ Birch, p87.
- ³⁴ Rose, p123.
- ³⁵ Hague, p137.
- ³⁶ Eckhard, p137.
- ³⁷ Birch, p87.
- ³⁸ For an in depth look at the process of change in New Zealand, see http://www.aceproject.org/main/english/ei/eiy_nz01.htm
- ³⁹ Paul Harris, "New Zealand's Change to MMP," Administration and Cost of Elections Project, Joint endeavour of the Institution for Democracy and Elections Administration and International Foundation for Electoral Systems and the United Nations, 7 December 2003 <http://www.aceproject.org/main/english/ei/eiy_nz01.htm>.
- ⁴⁰ Keith Archer et al., Parameters of Power (Scarborough: Nelson, 2002) p399.