

Support 110 years of independent journalism.

Subscribe | Sign In

THE NEW STATESMAN

☰ All Sections | 🔍

UK Scotland Wales Northern Ireland Polling Media Brexit Society

Comment | 21 July 2023

Would proportional representation really doom the Tories?

The centre right has regularly governed in western European countries with proportional systems.

By Rob Ford



Illustration by Gary Waters / Ikon Images



Rob Ford

Rob Ford is professor of political science at Manchester University and the co-author of *Brexitland*.

Related



Enthusiasm for electoral reform is running high. Supporters of all progressive parties now favour the reform of our voting system, as do most of the largest trade unions. Last year the [Labour Party](#) passed a conference motion backing proportional representation (PR) by an overwhelming margin. The issue will be on the conference agenda again this year when Labour’s National Policy Forum meets to agree a “party programme” from which the party’s election manifesto will be drawn. Yet while calls for reform are growing, the case for change is often misunderstood.

[Ardent advocates](#) sometimes portray electoral reform as a means of installing a permanent “[progressive majority](#)”. Right-wing opponents of reform ironically take a similar view, arguing that PR is [a partisan tool](#) meant to lock the centre right out of power. We don’t have to look hard to see that such claims aren’t true. Most of [Europe](#) uses some form of proportional representation in its elections, and nearly all the western European countries that do have large centre-right parties frequently win elections and lead governments. [Germany](#) was governed for most of the past half century by two centre-right chancellors – Helmut Kohl and Angela Merkel. Centre-right prime ministers have headed every Dutch government for the past two decades. And so on.

The value of electoral reform is not that it “keeps the Tories out for good”. A more proportional electoral system would help progressives by levelling an electoral playing field that is skewed to the right. But reform also has deeper, more important effects. It changes the incentives faced by every party, and therefore changes how politicians behave, and what the political system delivers. Progressive reforms on a wide range of outcomes – from poverty reduction to climate action to gay rights – have happened more often, gone further and lasted longer in countries with proportional electoral systems. Progressive change becomes easier to achieve and easier to entrench.

A more diverse political system changes how both voters and parties behave. Voters are no longer forced into a binary choice, an all-or-nothing gamble on one of two often alien options, but can instead choose a smaller party closer to their preferences, safe in the knowledge it will achieve fair representation. The presence of these smaller parties in parliament means the biggest parties cannot dictate the political agenda on their own but instead have to build coalitions and alliances across party lines.

[See also: [Inside the 1922 Committee](#)]



Comment

Politicians should never wear trainers



Scotland

The problem with the SNP’s “well-being economy”



UK Politics

LIVE: Triple by-election results

THE NEW STATESMAN

Subscribe to
the Saturday

Your new guide to the
best writing on ideas,
politics, books and

The Saturday Read

[View all newsletters >](#)

culture each weekend –
from the New
Statesman.

[Sign up here](#)

The bargaining this produces is more important to the centre left because to achieve their goals of redistributing resources and power more fairly across society, progressives need to build an alliance of diverse interests, from socialists and trade unionists to farmers and liberal professionals. As the academics David Soskice and Torben Iversen have shown, many of these groups are more willing to back left governments when they have a fair voice in parliament, through smaller parties which can bargain to protect their interests and deliver a share of the gains. But when first-past-the-post forces an all-or-nothing choice, some are bound to fear losing out from redistribution, and cross-pressured groups have more often backed the right – who will at least keep their taxes low. The historical record is clear: centre-left parties govern more often and for longer in countries with PR, while countries with first-past-the-post experience more and longer periods of centre-right rule.

New Zealand provides a recent case study in the impact of electoral reform. The Kiwis switched their electoral system from first past the post to a more proportional, mixed-member PR system in 1996. The left has since governed more often and achieved more income redistribution and more generous welfare policies than would have happened under the old voting system.

Content from our partners



**How software will
make or break
sustainability**

**In partnership with DXC
Technology**



**Can redesigning cities
boost economic
growth? – with PwC**

In partnership with PwC



**What next for
businesses after the
Budget?**

**In partnership with
NatWest**

Electoral reform has produced neither the chaotic fragmentation nor the “permanent progressive majority” that critics fear. The system remains organised around the traditional parties, with the New Zealand Labour Party and the centre-right National Party leading every government since

1996. The New Zealand right is still potent, with the Nationals governing nearly half of the time under PR (down from three quarters in the decades before reform). But reform has changed the Kiwi right. The risks of alienating coalition partners have made Kiwi conservatives more reluctant to roll back popular left-wing policies. Electoral reform makes progressive governments delivering left-wing policies more likely. But by ensuring conservative governments have to listen to a broader range of constituencies, electoral reform also makes such reforms harder to reverse when the electoral pendulum swings, as it always does.

Like New Zealand Labour before PR, the British Labour Party has governed for barely a third of the last century. Our Labour governments have been more like “interruptions”, as [Andrew Marr recently put it](#), to a system dominated by and skewed towards the Conservatives. Some of Labour’s proudest achievements have lasted little longer than its terms in office, unravelled soon after by long periods of unrestrained Conservative government.

When Labour’s National Policy Forum meets, its priority will be to agree a policy programme to address the defining issues of this moment – the surging cost of living, creaking public services, stagnant economic growth and the climate crisis. But it could turn out to be the choices taken on electoral reform that determine whether the legacy of the next Labour government merely lasts for years – or is secured for decades to come.

[See also: [Why the Tories should back proportional representation](#)]

Topics in this article : [Proportional representation](#) , [Tories](#) , [UK General Elections](#) , [UK Government](#)



More from this author

[See All](#)

Rob Ford

The Big Two beware: when political realignments happen, they do so with brutal speed

More of this topic



Comment

Politicians should never wear trainers



Comment

Will Labour dare embrace Tony Blair’s

Recent Podcasts



Sponsored

Energy and Climate Change

How to make energy savings in a cost-of-living crisis – with Honeywell



Long reads

How I fell for women’s football



Rob Ford
 The Tinkerbell effect:
 is British politics on
 the brink of a Brexit
 realignment?

agenda?



Comment
 How Dele Alli exposed
 the trauma that
 accompanies success
 in elite sport



Environment
 Why climate despair is
 a luxury

New Statesman

[About us](#) [History](#) [FAQs](#) [Contact us](#)

[Advertising](#) [RSS](#)

Social



Legal

[Privacy policy](#) [T&Cs](#)

[New Times](#)
[New Ideas](#)
[New Statesman](#)

© 2023 New Statesman

