

# **The Evolution of Electoral Reform Debates: The UK since 1945**

**Alan Renwick, University of Reading**

[a.renwick@reading.ac.uk](mailto:a.renwick@reading.ac.uk)

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## **Abstract**

This paper is a preliminary report on an ongoing research project that examines the evolution of debates about political reform in the UK. The wider project is motivated partly by the desire to illuminate ongoing reform discourse in the UK and partly by a wish to answer comparative questions in political science. This paper focuses on the comparative. Specifically, it focuses on three primary aspects of electoral reform processes: first, that they are in general largely controlled by politicians who pursue their power interests; second, that those politicians are, however, constrained by both cognitive and normative limitations; and, third, that public opinion appears increasingly to be a factor in reform processes. These three points are well established in the existing literature, but there are important details regarding each on which our knowledge remains limited. The paper identifies eight particular propositions that deserve further investigation. It then offers preliminary analysis of evidence relating to these propositions from the UK. The approach of examining the evolution of debate over a period of several decades, using both quantitative and qualitative methods, allows new light to be cast on these issues compared to the more episodic approaches that have more commonly been employed in electoral reform research.

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The substantial body of literature on processes of electoral reform that has emerged over the last two decades has yielded important insights. Nevertheless, in many respects, our knowledge remains incomplete. Cases of major electoral reform being few in number, it often remains difficult to assess possible causal generalizations with confidence. This paper offers a preliminary view of a research project that employs a different approach from most existing studies in order to shed new light on electoral reform processes. Whereas most studies focus on episodes of actual major reform and seek to understand the determinants of those reforms, this project analyses change in discourse surrounding electoral reform in one country—the United Kingdom—over a period of approaching seventy years. This approach allows evidence to be gathered from times of non-reform as well as reform and it allows long-term factors that may structure debates about reform and non-reform to be considered.

The paper has four main parts. The first analyses our existing knowledge of electoral reform processes, highlighting what we know and identifying crucial questions to which we do not yet have clear answers. It emphasizes three sets of questions in particular, concerning the nature of politicians' self-interest in respect of electoral system choice, the character and strength of the ideas that may constrain politicians in their approach to electoral reforms, and the role of actors besides politicians—most notably, the general public—in reform processes. The second part very briefly presents the methodology of this project, which focuses on the evolution of discourse surrounding electoral reform as manifested principally in newspapers and parliamentary debates. The remaining two sections present preliminary empirical evidence in relation to the core questions that have been identified.

This paper relates to a wider project, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, examining the evolution in debates surrounding a range of democratic reforms in the United Kingdom since 1945. Electoral reforms are just part of that project, which also gives close attention to party reforms, Lords reform, and debates about direct democracy and other forms of enhanced citizen participation. It should be emphasized that the evidence presented here is both partial and preliminary. Our detailed coding of debates is ongoing. The propositions that are examined here will be subject to further examination as the project continues.

## **1. Electoral Reform: What We Know and What We Do Not Know**

In this section, I begin by reviewing core insights from the existing scholarly literature on electoral reform. I then examine three key areas in which our existing knowledge remains limited. This section is not intended to be a full literature review; rather, it highlights certain areas where, in my view, further research may be particularly fruitful.

### *1.1. What We Know Today*

Until the mid-1990s, literature on electoral reform was very limited. Rokkan (1970) had sought to understand the wave of shifts towards proportional representation (PR) in early twentieth century Europe. Nohlen (1984: 217) had argued—in a volume containing a range of other useful contributions—that major reforms could be expected “only in extraordinary historical situations”. Isolated cases—notably the repeated reforms in France—had been analysed in some depth (e.g., Cole and Campbell 1989; Frears 1986; Williams and Harrison 1959; Wright 1950) without much attempt at drawing out comparative insights.

The emergence of a larger and more ambitious literature followed a spate of major reforms in the early 1990s. New democracies—notably in Eastern Europe—crafted new rules for their first post-communist elections (see, e.g., Bielasiak 2002; Elster, Offe, and Preuss 1998). Several old democracies—including Italy, Japan, and New Zealand—enacted major reforms to existing rules. A special issue of the *International Political Science Review* sought to draw out general insights (Norris 1995a). Since then, several collections have gathered studies of multiple cases (notably Blais 2008; Colomer 2004; Gallagher and Mitchell 2005; Grofman and Lijphart 2002).

At first, theorizing was tentative. As Norris (1995b: 4) acknowledged, “We lack a theoretical framework to understand how political systems reform basic constitutional principles”. Over time, however, attempts to generalize across cases developed further. Boix (1999) built on the insights offered decades earlier by Stein Rokkan. Colomer (2005) and Benoit (2004) provided models based on narrow assumptions from rational choice theory. Katz (2005), Norris (2011), and Shugart (2008) suggested that things might be a little more complex. Rahat (2008) and I (Renwick 2010) both provided detailed small-n qualitative comparisons. Cusack, Iversen, and Soskice (2007) injected the perspective of political economy. The latest edited collection on the subject offered not case descriptions, but, rather, theoretically driven case studies and comparisons (Hazan and Leyenaar 2011).

Through all this research, a number of general insights emerge. First, for the most part, processes of electoral reform are dominated by politicians, and those politicians pursue their own power interests. This idea has long been more or less explicit in writings about electoral reform. Bogdanor (1983: 256), for example, observed that “Electoral systems are devised by political parties in response to political circumstances.” Such ideas were made most explicit by Benoit (2004: 373–4) in his oft-quoted stylization of the electoral reform process:

Electoral systems result from the collective choice of political parties linking institutional alternatives to electoral self-interest in the form of maximizing seat shares. ... A change in electoral institutions will occur when a political party or coalition of political parties supports an alternative which will bring it more seats than the status quo electoral system, and also has the power to effect through fiat that institutional alternative.

In my own work (as discussed further below) I have challenged the claim that this model can account for all important episodes of electoral reform (Renwick 2010). Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the logic that Benoit outlines does capture an important slice of empirical reality. In a survey of eighty-four cases of electoral reform in democratic Europe since 1945, I found that fifty-nine were clearly controlled by political elites, and in most of these those elites pursued their own interests narrowly understood. Of twenty-nine cases in long-established democracies, seventeen could be explained straightforwardly in terms of the power interests of the politicians in power (Renwick 2011). Furthermore, the fact that non-reform is more common than reform is most readily explained by the fact that the politicians with the power to change the system are generally those with the strongest interest in maintaining the status quo (cf. Nohlen 1984: 223–4). Cusack, Iversen, and Soskice (2007) offer the only significant challenge to the politician-centric account, treating politicians essentially as the stooges of wider socio-economic classes. Their account has, however, been subject to serious empirical challenge (Kreuzer 2010).

Second, politicians who think about and control the electoral system are, however, constrained by ideas. Ideas generate both cognitive constraints—what actors know and how they process that knowledge—and normative constraints—rooted in actors’ beliefs about how things ought to be. As Benoit (2004: 385) puts it:

Some self-interest-maximizing institutional changes will be excluded from consideration as being simply beyond the pale, according to the limits set by public acceptability, opposition threats to withdraw support for the democratic institutions, or the simple bounds of political propriety.

There is good reason to believe, for example, that strong norms of appropriateness shield proportional systems from attack in countries such as Germany and the Netherlands. Helms (2006: 59) points out that a shift away from PR was not even considered in Germany when the two large parties—which might be expected to benefit from such a move—formed a grand coalition in 2005: “Neither of the two major parties even dared to touch the issue, which would have been considered by many as little short of an assault on democracy itself.” Of the Netherlands, Lijphart (1978: 131–2) writes

any reform proposal that deviates from nation-wide proportional representation or from a low threshold has to contend with the pervasive and persistent notion that these deviations are violations of the *principle* of proportionality. This fundamentalist and—in view of the interpretation of proportionality in most other P.R. systems—clearly ethnocentric attitude is likely to preserve extreme P.R. in the Netherlands for the foreseeable future.

Such norms can influence outcomes through two mechanisms: either because politicians themselves subscribe to them or because self-interested politicians know that they may be punished by voters who subscribe to them.

Third, it appears that the constraints upon politicians are, over time, getting stronger. One such constraint comes from the courts. Whereas, in 1946, US Justice Felix Frankfurter could argue of the electoral system that “Courts ought not to enter this political thicket” (*Colegrove v. Green*, 328 U.S. 556, 1946), Katz (2011) finds that courts are increasingly willing to question core aspects of electoral law in Canada, and there has also been considerable recent judicial activism in countries such as the Czech Republic and Germany (Williams 2005, 2007).

Still more important is the increasing constraint that appears to be imposed by public opinion. Dalton (2004: 181) argues that declining public satisfaction with the state of established political institutions should facilitate change in those institutions:

a growing number of contemporary citizens are disenchanted with the political parties, and these sentiments are generating support for reforms to improve the system of representative democracy. This creates fertile ground for elites and other political actors to suggest institutional reform and experimentation.

Norris (2011: 531) examines the proposition that greater citizen dissatisfaction and weaker political legitimacy are factors “catalysing political pressures for electoral [system] change”. Though the indicators that she can use to test this proposition are imperfect, nevertheless she finds a significant effect. In my own work, I find that cases of electoral reform by *elite–mass interaction*, in which

popular pressures provide either a passive or an active stimulus to reform, were invisible before the 1990s but have become relatively common since then (Renwick 2011: 472).

The three general propositions about electoral reform processes just identified—that self-interested politicians are generally in control, that those politicians are, however, constrained by ideas, and that the constraints imposed by public opinion appear to be strengthening—are important. In respect of each of them, however, significant questions remain unanswered. I now analyse each of them in turn in greater depth.

### *1.2. Politicians and the Pursuit of Power*

With respect to the first proposition, we know that politicians thinking about the electoral system generally pursue their own power interests. But what exactly does this mean? Are they primarily concerned to maximize their party's seat share, as Benoit (2004) suggests? Or are they more interested in the likelihood that they will hold government office? In thinking about these issues, what time horizon do they employ? And what variation in power over time do they prefer: would they prefer to hold all of the power some of the time or some of the power all of the time?

In the context of a majoritarian electoral system such as the UK's, the difference between seat maximization and office maximization is unlikely to be significant: most of the time, office is held by the single party with most seats, leading each of the two large parties to seek the largest seat share; for the third party too, a larger seat share increases its chances of holding the balance of power and therefore winning office.

But questions relating to time horizons and variation over time are of interest. The Benoit model assumes that parties maximize their seat share at the next election. There are indeed examples of parties that have sought to maximize their short-term seat share, even to the detriment of their long-term prospects. French President François Mitterrand's move to PR in 1985, for example, was designed to minimize Socialist seat losses in the 1986 election (and to make life difficult for the centre-right by opening space for the far right). Yet it could also be expected to harm the Socialists' chances of winning a majority again in the future—as critics such as Michel Rocard loudly argued (Renwick 2010: 102–3). On the other hand, there are also many examples where longer time horizons appear to dominate. The UK's Conservative Party did not consider adopting PR when facing certain defeat in the run-up to the 1997 general election. Nor did Canada's Liberals in 1984 or Progressive Conservatives in 1993. In each of these cases, the explanation may partly lie in the existence of a legitimacy constraint: politicians knew that they would appear both self-serving and defeatist if they manipulated the system to save their own skins, and they wished to avoid such opprobrium. It is at least plausible, however, that a longer time horizon was also involved: these politicians did not want a change in the electoral system because they hoped the existing system would return them to majority power at a future election.

Thus, we have variation between cases in the time horizons that political actors exhibit. We know little about what might cause that variation. As I have argued in the past (Renwick 2010: 145–6), drawing on cases such as the Mitterrand–Rocard dispute, some variation may occur at the personal level: politicians nearing the end of their careers can be expected to show shorter time horizons than those with more of their intended career still ahead. But variation between systems is also possible. In particular, we can expect longer time horizons where electoral volatility is lower and where

parties are older: the more predictable the future, the less heavily are politicians likely to discount it. In a case such as that of the UK since 1945, where parties are old and volatility limited, it is therefore reasonable to expect time horizons to extend beyond the next election.

Turning to variation in power over time, the question is whether politicians can be expected to prefer to hold all of the power some of the time or some of the power all (or at least most) of the time. The first option implies, for large parties, a preference for a majoritarian electoral system in which single-party governments predominate and the main parties hold office alternately. The second option can generate a preference even in some large parties for a proportional system in which coalitions can be constructed after each election to keep the party in power. In Italy before 1993, for example, the Christian Democrats favoured proportional systems even though, as the largest parties, they might have expected to win more seats under majoritarianism. It seems that they preferred a near-permanent share of coalition power to the prospect of holding undiluted power some of the time.

What explains differences in preferences between these two trajectories of power? Part of the answer is likely to lie in politicians' experiences: they will tend to prefer the power game that they are familiar with. Thus, politicians who are used to playing a majoritarian game of power alternation are likely to understand that game, be comfortable with it, and prefer it to continue, whereas politicians used to a coalition game will find that more familiar and intuitive. Evidence for this comes from New Zealand, the established democracy that has seen the sharpest sustained change in its electoral system of any in the past fifty years. Before the adoption of the mixed-member proportional (MMP) system in 1993 (and its first use at an election in 1996), most politicians from the main parties opposed it. They knew how to play the existing rules of the game and wanted those rules to continue. Since the change, however, most politicians have reconciled themselves to it. The Labour Party now clearly supports the retention of MMP: it rapidly learned to play the game of coalition politics effectively, holding power with little difficulty from 1999 until 2008. The National Party took longer to adjust: it initially struggled to succeed at proportional politics and its unease with MMP contributed to its promise to hold a referendum on reversing the change. By the time National eventually held that referendum, in 2011, however, it too had learnt to play the new rules. It advocated no more than a dilution of proportionality rather than a full return to single-member plurality, and even that advocacy was lukewarm. As the new system embedded, politicians became accustomed to it and their preferences shifted. This mechanism implies that in the UK, where majoritarian politics predominates, we should expect a preference for holding all of the power some of the time to dominate too.

International experience does also, however, suggest a second mechanism. The majoritarian game implies a willingness sometimes to cede full power to your opponents. If we assume politicians to be simply seat maximizers or office maximizers, the character of that opponent should not matter. On the other hand, if we allow politicians to be at least to some degree also policy seekers, then the character of the opponent should matter: an actor should then be less willing to cede power to an opponent whose policies diverge further from his or her own. That this may indeed be the case is suggested by the electoral reforms in Italy and Japan in the early 1990s. In both cases, a dominant party had for decades held power, either on its own (in Japan) or as the permanent bedrock of evolving coalitions (in Italy). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, however, politicians from the dominant party in both countries began to advocate a shift to an alternative model of politics, in

which a majoritarian electoral system would sustain a pattern of alternation in power between two large parties. In both cases, the prospect of such a shift became easier to contemplate because the appeal of communist ideology was collapsing. Italy's Communist Party (PCI) transformed itself into the Democratic Party of the Left (PDS) after the collapse of the Berlin Wall and sought to build a new profile on the moderate left. Similarly, the Japan Socialist Party (JSP) disavowed its Marxist heritage and sought a more moderate image. Thus, a major party may be more willing to tolerate periods in opposition when the gap between itself and its principal opponent is relatively small. When that gap grows, the appeal of coalition politics—in which each party's pursuit of its own policies is constrained—can be expected to grow.

This discussion leads to the following propositions in relation to the case of the UK:

*Proposition 1:* The age of the UK's party system and the low level of electoral volatility should mean that politicians' time horizons when considering the electoral system extend beyond the immediate electoral cycle.

*Proposition 2:* The tradition of majoritarian politics should prompt politicians in general to prefer holding all of the power some of the time over holding some of the power all of the time.

*Proposition 3:* Nevertheless, politicians from the major parties are likely to be more willing to accept short-term loss of power when the policy gap between those parties is smaller and less willing when it is larger.

These propositions will be considered in light of evidence in section 3.

### *1.3. The Constraining Power of Ideas*

We turn now to our second core piece of knowledge: that politicians' pursuit of their power interests in processes of electoral reform is constrained by ideas. As indicated above, such constraints take two forms: cognitive and normative. Cognitive constraints relate to the limits of what actors know and what they bear actively in mind. Normative constraints (or legitimacy constraints) relate to what actors think is appropriate. We know that such constraints are likely to exist. But we still know too little about their strength or about where exactly they are likely to bite.

For the most part, we can expect the operation of cognitive constraints to be rather straightforward: it is reasonable to suppose that politicians, most of the time, go with what is familiar. Major innovation in reform debates is therefore likely to be rare, and we can expect considerable continuity in the kinds of reform that are discussed. At the same time, innovation does clearly sometimes occur: the second half of the nineteenth century was a period of major innovation, when most of the electoral system options that are currently prominent were first invented. We do not at present have clear propositions as to why such innovation does or does not take place.

Normative constraints, meanwhile, can apply either to reform actions or to electoral system features. In the category of reform actions, as the discussion above already hinted, politicians may be expected to recoil from initiating reforms that appear too self-interested. In some cases—as in France in 1985 or Greece in 1989 or Italy in 2005—politicians calculate (correctly) that they will be able to get away with self-interested reforms without being punished unduly by voters. At the

opposite end of the spectrum there are cases—that of Germany in 2005 was already mentioned above—where politicians themselves appear to have internalized the norm. Why such differences exist is not yet sufficiently clear. The most plausible hypothesis, however, appears to be that where the system has been manipulated before, voters become used to that manipulation. They do not like it, but when it occurs, it does not constitute new information and therefore does not prompt voters to change their perceptions of politicians—or their voting intentions. It should be noted that manipulation needs to be active: politicians may maintain the status quo for entirely self-interested reasons; but, unless that maintenance is achieved against strong pressure for change, it is unlikely to be perceived as a manipulation.

In the UK, active manipulation has—except to some degree in the case of redistricting—been largely absent since the nineteenth century. As a result, it can be expected that politicians will be able to enact reforms that further their interests without incurring significant costs only if an overwhelming case can be made for those reforms on impartial grounds.

Turning to normative constraints that apply to particular features of the electoral system irrespective of the interests of the actors involved, we can focus on two primary accounts of where these constraints are likely to lie. The first is provided by Matthew Shugart, who argues that each electoral system is judged in terms of its capacity to deliver what it is supposed to be good at. He defines “systemic failure” as “the incapacity of the electoral system to deliver the normatively expected connection between the vote and the formation of executive authority” (Shugart 2008: 13). Pressure for electoral reform is more likely to occur, he argues, when particular election results exemplify such failure. He highlights two particular scenarios that are likely to be regarded as forms of systemic failure under single-member plurality. The first is a wrong-winner election, in which the party that wins the greatest number of votes is not the party that wins the greatest number of seats. The second is “an overly lopsided majority”, in which one party wins so many seats that opposition is too small to provide an effective check upon the government. Shugart also allows the possibility that a case of minority government might be regarded as an instance of moderate systemic failure. By contrast, he argues that systemic failure will not be perceived when a party wins a majority of seats on only a plurality of votes: in this case, “The system is performing as expected, by magnifying the lead of the largest party and resulting in its clear responsibility for power.” (Shugart 2008: 13).

Shugart operationalizes lopsided majorities as cases in which the largest opposition party wins no more than one eighth of the seats (Shugart 2008: 26). By this measure, there has been no lopsided majority in the UK since 1945. But there have been two wrong-winner elections: in 1951, Labour won most votes (indeed, it won the highest vote share of any party in any post-war election), but the Conservatives won an absolute majority of seats; in February 1974, the Conservatives secured the greatest share of the votes but Labour won the plurality (though not the absolute majority) of seats. There have also been two elections—in February 1974 and in 2010—that failed to deliver a majority to a single party. And there have been multiple elections—most egregiously in 2005—where majority power was won by a party with far less than an absolute majority of the votes. Thus, there are cases that allow us to examine circumstances that Shugart argues are both likely and unlikely to exert normative pressure upon the electoral system.

Our final approach to understanding normative constraints rests on the thesis that politics—in the UK and elsewhere—has moved from a collectivist to an individualist mode. In the 1950s and early

1960s, British political culture was still widely characterized in terms of a deference towards those in authority (Almond and Verba 1963; Beer 1965). Many voters had strong party identities based in their sense of class belonging (Butler and Stokes 1974: 77; Pulzer 1967: 89). Yet this character changed rapidly. By the late 1970s, the old “civic culture” of deference had substantially eroded (Kavanagh 1980; Beer 1982) and the increasing volatility of elections showed voters’ collective identification with parties to be weakening (Crewe, Särilvik, and Alt 1977; Franklin 1984). These processes have continued over the following decades, as manifested in declining confidence in politicians (Dalton 2004: 29; Hansard Society 2010: 29), declining party memberships and feelings of partisan identity (Webb 2002), and reduced turnout at elections (Denver 2007: 27–30). We should expect such changes to lead to shifts in the sorts of electoral institution that are thought more or less defensible. In general, they should increasingly favour electoral institutions that respect the voice of each individual citizen.

In the first place, this implies a strengthening of the principle of “one person, one vote”. That principle had already to a large degree been enshrined in British politics before 1945: the reforms of 1918 and 1928 had instituted universal adult suffrage in parliamentary elections (and those of 1944 extended this to local elections); they had also reduced plural voting, such that no voter could cast more than two votes at a general election. Nevertheless, two forms of plural vote—the business vote and the university vote—did remain. The fate of these voting forms therefore deserves attention.

We can also expect an individualist conception of the vote to win out over a collectivist conception in the setting of district boundaries. MPs were originally elected to represent communities without any regard to the relative size of those communities. By 1918, this principle had been considerably modified, but, nevertheless, community ties remained central to boundary setting, and boundary review processes were biased in favour of the status quo in order to limit upset to established patterns. We can expect the process of district equalization to have continued since then.

By the same token, we should also expect the norm that a wrong winner election constitutes a systemic failure to have strengthened. Under a collectivist conception of elections, the party perceived to be the rightful winner of an election is likely to be the party chosen by the majority of communities. Under an individualist conception, it is the party chosen by the majority (or, at least, the plurality) of individual voters. The notion of a wrong winner election has meaning only under the second conception.

Beyond these two basic points, the implications of a shift from collectivist to individualist politics need to be considered in relation to the two primary dimensions of variation among democratic electoral systems: the degree of proportionality and the degree of personalization.

In respect of the proportionality dimension, a general expectation appears difficult to formulate. On the one hand, the principles of greater voter equality already referred to might be taken to imply that, so far as possible, all votes should have equal impact upon who is elected, irrespective of where they are cast or whom they are cast for. This implies growing attachment to the principle of proportionality. On the other hand, weakened faith in politicians and parties is likely to imply a desire for greater voter control over who governs and therefore, in turn, a heightened concern for government accountability. There is general agreement that accountability is likely to be clearer under majoritarian rules (e.g., Powell 2000). It is not clear, therefore, that a trend towards

individualized politics should have any net effect on the direction of debates surrounding the proportionality dimension.

In respect of personalization, on the other hand, individualization should be expected to generate an expectation of more personalized elections: of greater capacity for voters to choose among individual candidates rather than just political parties, and of greater influence for those choices upon election outcomes. In recent work, Jean-Benoit Pilet and I have found clear evidence that there is indeed a trend towards greater personalization of electoral systems across Europe's democracies (Renwick and Pilet 2012).

In the UK, personalization has always been high in two senses: voters choose among individual candidates rather than party lists; and they do so in single-member districts that minimize voter–candidate distance. In another sense, however, personalization is low: voters have no capacity to choose among alternative candidates from their favoured political party. A trend of personalization should therefore be expected to lead to pressure for greater intra-party choice, either through the electoral system itself or through procedures of candidate selection within political parties (cf. Hazan and Rahat 2010).

The common theme underlying these various posited trends is what Dalton and Gray (2003) term an “expansion of the electoral marketplace”: an expansion in the frequency with which voters can vote, the levels of government for which they can vote, and the choices they can express when they vote, as well as an expansion in the range of people who have the right to vote. In addition to the elements already mentioned, an expansion of the electoral marketplace suggests also an increase in the range of offices that are subject to election and greater frequency in voters' ability to exercise control over politicians. The latter might imply shorter legislative terms, as well as greater use of referendums (which lies beyond the scope of this paper) and the use of recall mechanisms that allow voters to hold their representative to account between regular elections.

This discussion of cognitive and normative constraints leads to the following propositions:

*Proposition 4:* Innovation in debates surrounding electoral reform is likely to occur only rarely. We have no clear expectations as to the circumstances in which it is nevertheless more probable.

*Proposition 5:* Constraints on the self-interested pursuit of electoral reforms should be high in the UK compared to countries where such manipulation has occurred more frequently in past decades.

*Proposition 6:* Following Shugart (2008), pressure for reform should grow when wrong winner elections occur, but not when elections produce winners with a plurality rather than an absolute majority of the vote.

*Proposition 7:* There should be an increase over time in the degree to which actors regard deviations from “one person, one vote” or from equal districting and wrong winner election outcomes as unacceptable and the degree to which ordinary citizens expect intra-party choice and other reforms that expand the electoral marketplace, such as the election of previously unelected offices, the shortening of legislative terms, and the introduction of recall procedures.

#### 1.4. *The Increasing Power of Voters*

The final issue to be analysed here is also the one that can be outlined most quickly: it is the proposition that we should see an increase over time in the degree to which ordinary citizens influence processes of electoral reform. In so far as normative constraints matter not because politicians have internalized them, but because politicians fear losing votes if they violate them (or they believe they can win votes by appealing to them), an increase in the role of voters implies also a strengthening of those constraints.

The proposition of growing citizen influence in electoral reform processes is relatively new. Further evidence is required to be sure of its existence and to understand the mechanisms through which it operates. How does citizen influence manifest itself? In what circumstances does it do so? What determines how politicians respond? These are all questions to which answers at present remain sketchy. In what follows, therefore, it will be valuable to consider where the evidence points us.

*Proposition 8:* The degree of popular impetus behind electoral reform debates should increase over time.

## 2. Methodology

The wider project of which this paper is a part analyses UK political reform debates through a combination of qualitative process tracing and quantitative content analysis. Qualitative work draws on a range of sources—newspaper reports, parliamentary debates, government and parliamentary papers, party archives, and so on—in order to piece together as accurately as possible what has happened: how different actors have responded to particular events; whether we can identify patterns in debates over political reforms and in actual reform outcomes that fit the sorts of propositions that were outlined in the previous section. Such qualitative analysis is primarily useful for the interpretation of specific episodes. In order to chart longer-term patterns, it is useful to supplement qualitative study with quantitative content analysis of reform discussions, though which it is possible to assess patterns in the volume and content of reform discussions, who is interested in what, and what sorts of argument are employed.

The content analysis presented here focuses on newspapers. Most major national newspapers in the UK are now available in digital archives such as Factiva and Nexis UK. Such digital archives allow full searching for a range of terms relevant to reform debates: without them, reliable quantitative analysis is very difficult. Only in a few cases, however, does coverage in Factiva or Nexis UK extend back further than the last ten to fifteen years. In order to cover the whole period since 1945, we must rely on the smaller number of publications for which lengthier runs are available. Prime among these are the *Guardian* (previously the *Manchester Guardian*, and also including the *Observer*) and *The Times* (including the *Sunday Times*), both of which are available in searchable archives back to the eighteenth or early nineteenth century.

Details of the search strings that we use and the methods of analysis that we employ are given in the relevant empirical sections below.

## 3. Electoral Reform Debates: General Patterns

We can begin the empirical examination by mapping overall patterns of discussion of electoral reform since 1945. Figure 1 provides an initial indication of this, and adds further context by taking the series back to 1900. It shows the number of articles identified by a search string designed to capture discussions relating to electoral reform in general and specific discussions relating to the core of the electoral system and the franchise. This search string does not include specific terms for all aspects of electoral reform: for example, we have included measures relating to women's representation, candidate selection, boundary setting, and recall in separate search strings, which will be analysed in later work.<sup>1</sup> The solid black line in Figure 1 covering the period from 1900 to 2003 shows the total number of articles captured each year by the search string. Though our search string went through multiple iterations to make it as efficient as possible, it is nevertheless inevitable that it captures some articles that are not related to electoral reform in the UK: some articles report on electoral reform debates in other countries; others mention the Electoral Reform Society in connection with polls that it ran for trade unions and other organizations. For the period from 1945 onwards (currently ending in 1989), we have therefore scanned manually through all the articles captured by the search string and filtered out those that are not relevant. The articles we are left with are shown by the dashed line in Figure 1. Coverage in the ProQuest database currently ends at the end of 2003. In order to include the most recent years, we therefore also include results for the *Guardian* and *Observer* from the Factiva database, which begins to cover these newspapers in 1990 (there is also limited coverage, including only article abstracts, from 1981 onwards, which we do not analyse). Unfiltered results from the Factiva database are shown by the solid grey line in Figure 1. The two databases yield broadly similar numbers of articles, though differences in the early 2000s will need to be investigated further.

[Figure 1 about here]

Figure 1 suggests that electoral reform was a significant topic of debate in the first third of the twentieth century, that it largely disappeared from view during the second third, but that it returned to the agenda over the final third; there appears to have been an unprecedented spurt of interest since 2009. These patterns broadly fit with what is already known (see, e.g., Bogdanor 1981; Renwick, Lamb, and Numan 2011).

Figure 2 provides the same information in relation to *The Times* and *Sunday Times*. Limitations in the Times Digital Archive (TGA) search engine mean that we have had to use a different and rather less comprehensive search string in this case.<sup>2</sup> The substantial gap between the solid black line in

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<sup>1</sup> The search string used in the ProQuest database is: "electoral reform" or "voting reform" or ("proportional representation" and (reform or electoral or voting or referendum)) or ("first past the post" near/5 (reform or electoral or voting or referendum or change\* or scrap\* or abandon\* or aboli\*)) or (STV near/5 reform) or (STV near/5 (electoral or voting or referendum)) or "alternative vot\*" or "transferable vot\*" or "PR voting" or (PR near/2 referendum) or ("electoral system" near/5 chang\*) or ("voting system" near/5 chang\*) or ("electoral system" near/5 reform) or ("voting system" near/5 reform) or "university seats" or "university vote" or "university franchise" or (proportional near/5 vot\*) or (proportional near/5 system) or "plural vot\*" or "plural franchise" or "business franchise" or "business vot\*" or "age of franchise" or "age of voting" or "the voting age" or "votes at 18" or "votes for 18" or "votes at 16" or "votes for 16" or "votes at eighteen" or "votes for eighteen" or "votes at sixteen" or "votes for sixteen". The syntax of the search string used for the Factiva database is slightly different, but is functionally precisely equivalent to the ProQuest search string.

<sup>2</sup> The search string in the Time Digital Archive Database is: electoral reform\* OR voting reform\* OR change\* N5 voting system\* OR change\* N5 electoral system\* OR reform N5 proportional representation OR electoral N5 proportional representation OR voting N5 PR OR referendum N5 proportional representation OR voting N5

Figure 2—representing the unfiltered results from the TGA search—and the solid grey line—showing the results of a search in the Factiva database using the same search string as for the *Guardian*—suggests that our TGA string does miss a significant amount of content: we will be probing this further as the research continues. Nevertheless, even the Factiva search shows fewer articles in *The Times* than in the *Guardian*, suggesting that the gap between the newspapers that the two figures suggest may in part be real. The overall patterns in *The Times* appear to be similar to those in the *Guardian*, though more muted: coverage of electoral reform was higher before 1931 and has been higher again since 1973 than during the intervening period. (The apparent drop in 1979 can be disregarded, as this is the period when an industrial dispute led to the suspension of publication for almost a year.)

[Figure 2 about here]

We can look at the numbers in Figures 1 and 2 in order to gain some initial impression of the accuracy of our propositions relating to general patterns in reform discussions. Talk about electoral reform was lowest during the years when the two-party system was strongest, from the 1940s to the 1960s. Increases in discussion appear to have occurred at times of heightened salience for the third party: following the very tight election results of 1950 and 1974; during the early years of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) in the early 1980s; preceding the closely fought election of 1992; and before the 1997 election, through which the Liberal Democrats hoped to win a role in Tony Blair’s new government. These patterns are compatible with the proposition that politicians’ self-interest dominates. They could, however, fit a counterproposition that justice to the third party is important: that injustice was particularly marked in the elections of 1974 and 1983.

Yet the evidence that we can glean from counting articles is limited. First, discussions of a variety of electoral reforms is included: the peak of 1948, for example, can be expected to reflect debates surrounding the Representation of the People Act of that year, which abolished plural voting; similarly, the 1968 peak coincides with another Representation of the People Act, the principal element of which was a reduction in the voting age from twenty-one to eighteen. Debates over electoral reforms such as these are unlikely to behave in the same way as debates over reform of the core of the electoral system itself. Second, as we found in our analysis of the 2011 referendum campaign (Renwick and Lamb 2012), numbers of articles and intensity of discussion do not always coincide. Electoral reform was mentioned in many articles fleetingly following the inconclusive result of the 2010 general election; it was mentioned in fewer articles during the referendum campaign the following year, but those articles typically discussed it at greater length. Third, we cannot see anything about the content of these discussions by counting articles alone. It could be, for example, that Figures 1 and 2 measure little more than the salience of the third party: whenever that party is mentioned, it may be that the probability that electoral reform is mentioned too may be high; but this tells us little about fluctuations in the importance of electoral reform as a topic unless other actors are talking about it too.

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proportional representation OR reform N5 PR OR electoral N5 PR OR referendum N5 PR OR reform N5 AV OR electoral N5 AV OR voting N5 AV OR referendum N5 AV OR reform N5 alternative vote OR electoral N5 alternative vote OR voting N5 alternative vote OR referendum N5 alternative vote OR reform N5 STV OR electoral N5 STV OR voting N5 STV OR referendum N5 STV OR reform N5 single transferable vote OR electoral N5 single transferable vote OR voting N5 single transferable vote OR referendum N5 single transferable vote.

In order to get further, we therefore need to analyse article content. This is a laborious process and we have not yet completed it. Our first major coding exercise covered nine newspapers over the period from May 2008 to May 2011 (for details, see Renwick, Lamb, and Numan 2011; Renwick and Lamb 2012). In this paper, however, we focus on a second exercise, coding all coverage from the *Guardian* and *Observer* for the twenty years from 1945 to 1964 (a total of 561 articles) and a sample of articles from *The Times* and *Sunday Times* between 1945 and 1959 (118 articles). This second exercise will be continued in order to fill the gap between 1964 and 2008.

In each case, we have coded four primary pieces of information. First, we identify the actor whose position is communicated in any given section of an article. This may be the author of the article or another individual or a corporate actor such as a political party, trade union, or pressure group. Second, we identify the topic that is discussed. We code, for example, for a variety of electoral systems, other reforms such as franchise changes or changes in voting procedures, and also for proposals such as the establishment of an inquiry. Third, we code the attitude that the actor is communicated as having: whether in favour of the given topic or against, or neutral/ambiguous, or whether the statement is merely descriptive and contains no explicit evaluation. Fourth, we code the argument that is offered (if any) as to why the actor holds the attitude they do. The following is an example, taken from a report in the *Guardian* of 18 February 1948 on the Second Reading debate for that year's Representation of the People Bill:

Perhaps the Communists will table a new clause proposing the use of Proportional Representation as the method of election. Mr. Gallacher and Mr. Piratin objected to the second reading on the ground, among others, that the measure "fails to provide a system of Proportional Representation which would ensure that all democratic parties would be represented according to their support among the electorate.

There is some contextual information here that we do not seek to code. What we are interested in is that the passage conveys (a) the position of the Communist Party in respect of (b) proportional representation, that (c) this actor is in favour of that topic, and that (d) the argument given concerns the desirability of proportional translation of popular votes into seats in Parliament. In some cases, we code more than these four points, but we do not draw on this additional coding here.

Because of the larger number of articles coded, and given that this paper is already far too long, we concentrate here on the findings for the *Guardian* and *Observer*. Figure 3 shows the number of passages ("quotations") in each article that we have coded as relating in some way to discussion of the electoral system (either in general or with specific focus on rules that are or might be used to elect the UK House of Commons). Quotations are of widely varying lengths: we treat as a quotation any unit of text in which we can code the four points just outlined without ambiguity. The number of quotations is thus not a perfectly accurate measure of the length of discussion of electoral reform: one article might contain a lengthy statement of one point that can be coded as a single quotation, while another may report the conflicting perspectives of a variety of actors, which need to be coded in separate quotations. Nevertheless, the tendency is that lengthier and more involved discussion will appear as a larger number of quotations; over a substantial number of articles, we can expect the quotation count to give a reasonable approximation of the amount of discussion. During this period, Figure 3 shows two marked peaks: in 1948, when the Representation of the

People Act was under discussion, and in 1950, when a very narrow election result increased the salience of the Liberals.

[Figure 3 about here]

Figure 4 goes a step further by breaking down the discussion into the most frequently mentioned topics. Overwhelmingly the highest peak for a single topic occurred in 1948, when considerable attention focused on the Labour government's proposal to abolish plural voting (this category includes discussions of plural voting as such as well as the two forms of plural voting that then still existed: the business vote and the university vote). Plural voting was prominent again in 1951, when a Conservative government was elected promising to restore the university franchise, but the topic fell rapidly into insignificance thereafter. In 1950, the content of debate was very different, focusing on various possible electoral systems: proportional systems, the status quo of single-member plurality (or first past the post), and other majoritarian systems (which almost always means the alternative vote). There are also frequent references to "electoral reform" in which the content of that reform is not specified. In the vast majority of these cases, it is clear from the context or from the arguments offered that "electoral reform" means departure in some way from single-member plurality. With regard, finally, to the reduction of the voting age, there were significant discussions in 1959–60 and again in 1963, but otherwise the topic was barely mentioned.

[Figure 4 about here]

Turning next to the actors who talk about electoral reform and the positions they adopt, Figure 5 shows the frequency of pro- and anti-reform statements by partisan actors (including the party as such, the party in government, ministers, MPs, and other party members), aggregated across the whole twenty-year period. This includes all statements relating to the electoral system core: the "pro-reform" category, for example, includes all statements in favour of proportional systems, majoritarian systems other than single-member plurality, or unspecified electoral reform, as well as statements against single-member plurality or the status quo in general. We see first that, as expected, electoral reform is primarily a Liberal obsession: despite the Liberals' minuscule size during this period, the great majority of statements on electoral reform—and, specifically, of pro-reform statements—came from the Liberal Party or Liberal politicians. The Labour Party and Labour politicians referred to the issue only rarely, and when they did were overwhelmingly supportive of the status quo. It may surprise followers of current debates to see that the position of the Conservatives was apparently much more equivocal: statements in favour of the status quo outnumber those in favour of reform by only a small margin. The majority of these pro-reform statements—21 out of the 37—related to one individual—Winston Churchill—who voiced opinions supportive of reform or at least investigation of reform on several occasions. The remaining 16 statements sympathetic to reform came from single individuals or from a small group calling itself Tory Advocates of Patriotic Electoral Reform. By contrast, statements favouring the status quo often related to the party as a whole. Examination of the content of these statements thus makes it clear that opposition to electoral reform was the dominant view within the party.

[Figure 5 about here]

If we break down the data in Figure 5 by year, it becomes apparent that Conservative interest appeared primarily in 1950 and the years immediately following and then again, to a limited extent,

in 1958. It was immediately following the election of February 1950 that Churchill, as Conservative Leader of the Opposition, proposed that a parliamentary select committee should be established to consider electoral reform. He was quoted as saying:

We must not be blind to the anomaly which has brought to this House 186 representatives who are returned only by a minority of those who voted in their constituencies. Nor can we overlook the constitutional injustice done to 2,600,000 voters who, voting upon strong tradition, have only been able to return nine members to Parliament. I do not think this is a matter we can brush aside or allow to lie unheeded. I make the solemn proposal to the Government that we should set up a Select Committee to inquire into the whole question of electoral reform. As to the composition of the committee I suggest it should be based upon the numbers of votes recorded by the electorate for the three parties which are represented in the House. Otherwise, I do not see how the Liberals would gain any representation. (*Guardian* 8 March 1950)

Liberal support for electoral reform, meanwhile, was consistent throughout the period (though the degree of attention this received was not).

Other than political parties and their members, the only organization to play any significant role in electoral reform discussions during this period was the Proportional Representation Society (renamed the Electoral Reform Society in 1958), whose leading members—most prominently, Enid Lakeman—were frequent contributors to the newspaper letters pages. We have coded only one statement by a trade union relating to electoral reform (a resolution favouring the reduction of the voting age to eighteen, passed by the Amalgamated Engineering Union in 1950) and none by any business organization. Many letters appeared on electoral reform topics. The degree to which their authors were ordinary citizens is, however, often difficult to tell: in many cases, pro-reform letters were clearly penned by ardent Liberals. The newspapers themselves also took some interest: we code 47 statements across all electoral reform topics in *Guardian* editorials and another eleven from the *Observer*. Yet this is below the level shown even by the Labour Party. Thus, it appears that the debate over electoral reform was overwhelmingly the preserve of party politicians.

What insights can we glean from this coding regarding the propositions put forward in the first part of this paper? The first set of propositions posited that politicians would tend to have time horizons extending beyond the current electoral cycle, that they would generally prefer to strive for all of the power some of the time than some of it all of the time, but that this second tendency would be weaker when the parties were further apart ideologically.

Evidence from this period regarding time horizons is limited: there was no election during these years when it was clear well in advance that the governing party was likely to suffer heavy defeat. We can say more, however, about the other propositions. Throughout the period, most politicians from both major parties stuck firmly to their support for the prevailing electoral system, suggesting a clear general preference for majoritarian politics and alternation in and out of power. There are limited signs, however, that ideological conflict may have made a difference. Conservative interest in electoral reform was strongest in the early 1950s. This period coincided with concern that a radical Labour party—particularly radical if Aneurin Bevan were to take over the leadership—could win majority power on a mere plurality of the votes. For example, one MP was reported as having “raised the issue of electoral reform when he spoke of the possibility of Mr Bevan and his followers

capturing the Socialist party and governing, it might be, on a minority vote. ‘Those who fear the consequences of this,’ he said, ‘should consider seriously the removal of the gross anomalies in our electoral system.’” (*Guardian*, 2 July 1951) We have coded seventeen occurrences of such arguments between 1950 and 1953, and only two throughout the rest of the period covered. Notably, there was no sign of raised Labour interest in electoral reform stemming from the repeated electoral defeats it suffered during the 1950s: the Conservative governments of this period did little to challenge the fundamentals of the expanded state that they inherited.

Yet signs that Conservatives actually considered electoral reform as a means of keeping what they saw as radical socialism from power are very limited. The quotation above referring to Aneurin Bevan in fact came from a Liberal MP, not a Conservative, as did the vast majority of the other statements that offered similar reasoning. Churchill’s own interest in electoral reform was longstanding, so his tentative advocacy of change during this period does not suggest a change of heart.

It will be valuable to pursue further evidence from later periods. Most notably, significant interest in electoral reform did emerge within the Conservative Party and Conservative-supporting business circles after the 1970 election, when the “adversary politics” thesis gained prominence. And Labour took an interest in reform in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when many within the party were repelled by Thatcherism. Nevertheless, during neither of these periods did the party leadership or the party as a whole espouse the reform cause. Thus, while there is some evidence that periodic defeat is indeed easier to accept when ideological conflict is more limited than when it is more intense, nevertheless, the preference to hold all of the power some of the time has remained dominant throughout.

Our next four propositions relate to cognitive and normative constraints. Several aspects of these will be treated in more depth in the next section, where particular episodes are examined in some detail. Some general observations about general patterns can be made here.

Proposition 4 posits that innovation in reform debates should be rare. Innovation during the period between 1945 and 1964 was, indeed, very limited. The main reform options discussed were the alternative vote (AV) and single transferable vote (STV)—the options that had also received much attention during the inter-war period. We have coded 89 more-or-less explicit references to AV between 1945 and 1964 and 49 to STV. In addition, there were 152 references to “proportional representation”. In the vast majority of cases, however, it is clear that by “proportional representation” what was meant is STV: STV was the only form of PR given any serious attention. We have identified only one mention of list PR: the *Guardian* published a letter advocating such a system on 30 October 1951. Another letter (on 15 April 1958) argued for what amounted to a mixed-member proportional (MMP) system; this letter provoked a critical response six days later. The possibility of introducing a two-round majoritarian system was mentioned only twice (again in letters, published on 13 and 21 November 1952) and on both occasions the authors criticized it. Five letters mentioned forms of Borda count, though only one of these (on 7 April 1958) was unambiguously positive.

Comparing the early post-war years with the current period, it is striking that AV and STV are the principal reform options still advocated for elections to the House of Commons. Nevertheless, other

systems have been introduced to elect other bodies: list PR for the European Parliament and MMP for the devolved assemblies in Scotland, Wales, and London.

Proposition 5 suggests that self-interested pursuit of reform should be limited in the UK. Neither of the two major parties has regarded reform to the core of the electoral system as serving its interests, so for the most part this issue has not arisen. Nevertheless, several relevant points can be made. There is one striking case where normative constraints do appear directly to have prevented a reform from occurring: this is the decision of the Conservatives not to fulfil their manifesto commitment to restoring the university seats following their election victory in 1951. We examine this episode in greater detail below.

By contrast, normative constraints appear to have been less prohibitive in relation to redistricting. This is a point that we have not yet examined systematically, and so we can do no more than sketch a hypothesis. Nevertheless, it is striking, as Rossiter, Johnston, and Pattie (1999: 2–3) note, that almost every boundary review in the UK has been subject to some political interference. The Labour government in 1948 required the Boundary Commission for England to add extra seats in certain urban areas. There was a good case here for saying that the Boundary Commission's original recommendations were unfair to Labour: the revised recommendations, when implemented in 1950 in fact secured virtual equality between Labour and the Conservatives in terms of the average number of voters in the constituencies that they won. Nevertheless, Labour clearly intervened in a manner designed to further its own interests. The most egregious interference to date occurred in 1969, when the Labour government simply refused to implement a boundary review that it knew would reduce its seat tally. The Liberal Democrats have now committed to doing the same when the current boundary reviews deliver their final recommendations. Labour was certainly subject to some criticisms in 1948; the degree to which similar concerns were expressed in 1969 and are being expressed today is a point that will require examination as the coding process continues.

Finally in relation to Proposition 5, we should consider the position of the Liberals and Liberal Democrats. Their advocacy of electoral reform, no matter how sincerely it may be felt, clearly serves the party's interests. Indeed, in the period that we have coded, between 1945 and 1964, Liberals frequently argued for electoral reform primarily for the benefit that it would bring their own party and cause: in 1949, for example, the President of the Liberals, Elliott Dodds, was reported as arguing, "With Proportional Representation neither of these two parties would have had a majority and the Liberals, with sixty seats or more, would have held the balance of power." (*Guardian*, 2 February 1949). On the other hand, the Liberals have repeatedly pulled back from pressing such demands too hard. In the period we have already coded, we find that Jo Grimond, as Liberal leader, repeatedly emphasized the need not to prioritize the electoral reform issue too highly following the closely fought election of 1964 (e.g., *Observer*, 18 October 1964). David Steel and his colleagues decided not to break the Lib–Lab pact in 1978 over Labour's failure to deliver PR for elections to the European Parliament (see Steel, 1989: 134), and today's Liberal Democrats have behaved similarly in relation to the outcomes of the AV referendum and the attempt to reform the House of Lords. In each case, it appears that Liberals have been wary of appearing more concerned with their own electoral prospects than with matters of immediate interest to ordinary voters.

We shall discuss aspects of propositions 6 and 7—relating to wrong winner elections and the content of popular pressure—in the following section. Others will be examined in future research.

Turning finally for this survey section to the volume of popular reform pressure, what is striking in respect of the 1945–64 period is that any such pressure appears to have been virtually absent. As already noted, the only civil society organization with any presence was the Proportional Representation Society. We find no report of any formally conducted opinion poll on any aspect of electoral reform in the twenty years analysed. Politicians very rarely invoked public opinion as a reason for or against any given course of action: we have coded just nine instances over the twenty-year period. This contrasts markedly with the period immediately following the expenses scandal of 2009. The degree to which the expenses scandal had any precursors still needs to be examined. Even the response to the expenses scandal appears unlikely, however, to generate any substantial real institutional changes.

#### **4. Electoral Reform Debates: Particular Episodes**

In this section, we analyse two particular episodes from the late 1940s and early 1950s, considering the insights they carry for the some of the propositions outlined in section 1. The first of these focuses on the fate of plural voting: the abolition of both the university franchise and the business franchise in 1948 and the decision of the Conservative Party not to restore the university franchise following its election in 1951. The second episode is the 1951 election itself: the first of the UK's two post-war wrong winner elections.

##### *4.1. Plural Voting, 1948–1953*

As we have already seen the discussions that surrounded the abolition of the two remaining forms of plural voting—the university franchise and the business franchise—constituted the single most voluminous electoral reform debate during the first two post-war decades in the UK. Both sides of the debate were strongly represented: in our *Guardian* sample, we have coded 108 statements in favour of plural voting and 64 against, as well as 44 statements that were ambiguous, neutral, or descriptive. This debate provides a useful opportunity to examine three issues. First, what was the nature of the normative environment within which this issue was debated during these years? Second, how did this normative environment shape outcomes? In particular, to what degree did it affect the Conservatives' decision not to restore university representation after 1951? Third, can we discern any differences between the normative environment in those days and the normative environment today? On the face of it, there appears to be a very clear normative difference between these periods: it is inconceivable that a major political party in the UK today would advocate allowing some voters more votes than others. Nevertheless, the extent of any actual difference may be more subtle than this would seem to suggest.

The dominant argument against the retention of plural voting was simply that it violated the principle of voter equality: specifically, the principle of “one person, one vote”. In the *Guardian*, of the 64 statements that we have coded as opposed to plural voting, 21 used this argument. Opening the Second Reading debate on the Bill in the House of Commons, the Home Secretary, Chuter Ede, said:

This Bill completes the progress of the British people towards a full and complete democracy begun by the great Reform Bill of 1832. From now on, every citizen of full age will have a vote, and only one vote. This Bill wipes out the last of the privileges that have been retained

by special classes in the franchise of this country. (*Hansard*, vol. 447, col. 839, 16 February 1948)

Most other supporters of the measure voiced similar sentiments. In fact, our coding of parliamentary debates surrounding the Bill contains only one other argument in favour of abolishing plural voting: that the university MPs were little different from others, and that retaining them was not therefore justified. But this argument only held force because those who voiced it presumed the plural vote was an aberration from general principles that could only be justified by special factors. The general principle they presumed was that of one person, one vote.

It is hardly surprising that Labour politicians should have used this argument. That the principle of one person, one vote was *available* as an argument that could be used was already clear from the electoral reform debates of the inter-war years. That this was the argument that Labour politicians chose to focus on does not mean it was their true motivation. While it may have been—the principle of one person, one vote was entirely compatible with Labour ideology—it is also clear that the reform served Labour’s interests: never had a Labour member been elected in a university constituency.

What is more interesting is the argumentation that was used on the opposite side of the debate, in favour of plural voting. The directly opposite argument—that one person, one vote was *not* a valid guiding principle was occasionally heard. One letter published in the *Guardian* fulminated:

“One man, one vote” has no place among the principles, explicit or implied, of English Parliamentary Government. It is a piece of cheapjack Rousseauism, a figment of the abstract academic theorising of eighteenth-century France. (*Guardian*, 29 February 1948)

Speaking in the House of Commons during the Committee Stage of debate on the Bill, a Conservative representative of the Combined Scottish Universities, said:

To my great regret the right hon. Gentleman told us that the present Government are shackled to that strange slogan, “One man, one vote,” whether the one man is a lazy, drunken ne'er-do-well, or one who has shown himself to be a leader in trade, industry or science. (*Hansard*, vol. 448, col. 1970, 16 March 1948)

Summing up the debate on the same day for the Conservative Opposition, R. A. Butler said:

I believe that hon. Members and right hon. Members opposite are putting forward this so-called improvement in our methods of representation under the pretext of the slogan of one man, one vote—an egalitarian, or equalitarian, whichever you prefer, mathematical principle which I do not believe conforms with the spirit of our Constitution. (*ibid.*, col. 1994)

Yet such statements were rare: we have coded just five from the *Guardian* over twenty years (including the three cases just quoted). The speech by R. A. Butler appears to be the only instance in which such an argument was put from the Conservative front bench. Indeed, Winston Churchill, opening the Second Reading debate for the Opposition, explicitly endorsed the principle of one person, one vote:

In regard to the representation of the House of Commons, there are two principles which have come into general acceptance. ... The first is: "One man, one vote"; and the second is: "One vote, one value." The first has been almost entirely achieved. There are only barely a quarter of a million votes out of 34 million which are not at present governed by the principle of "one man, one vote." (*Hansard*, vol. 447, col. 858, 16 February 1948)

A wide range of arguments were used to support retention of the plural vote, but two predominated. One was that the university members added a valuable extra dimension to Parliament: that their quality or their independence contributed strongly to the effectiveness of the chamber. This sort of argument was used in 31 of the 108 pro-plural voting statements in our *Guardian* sample. The other was that the Labour government had violated an agreement reached at the Speaker's Conference of 1944 not to abolish plural voting (an agreement that Labour argued applied only until the 1945 election): this argument appears 27 times in our *Guardian* sample. It was upon these two arguments that Churchill built his case when he defended the plural vote at Second Reading (*Hansard*, vol. 447, cols. 857–72, 16 February 1948).

The predominance of such arguments suggests that the Conservatives no longer regarded a defence of plural voting in terms of its intrinsic merits as sustainable. Plural voting was seen as an anomaly, but one that was justified by the benefits it brought, or one whose abolition could be rejected on procedural grounds. Thus, while the principle of one person, one vote was not universally accepted in 1948, it does appear nevertheless to have had strong force.

On the other hand, however, an anomaly was still widely seen as defensible. The *Guardian* argued for the retention of the university vote, arguing that university seats "have elected distinguished members, of independent mind, who probably would not have been elected to Parliament in the ordinary way" (*Guardian*, 31 January 1948). Even the Proportional Representation Society's Enid Lakeman preferred the retention of university representation to abolition without wider electoral reform (letter to the *Guardian*, 28 October 1947). The principle of one person, one vote was not seen as inviolable.

We can therefore conclude, with regard to 1948, that the principle of one person, one vote was strong, but not strong enough to prevent wide support for a narrow exception to it where particular justification for such an exception could be found.

There can be little doubt, however, that normative pressure was crucial in constraining the Conservatives from restoring plural voting after their 1951 election victory. Churchill declared in Parliament that, if returned to power, the Conservatives would "immediately restore university representation and hold elections in the universities at once" (*Guardian*, 24 June 1948). It repeated this pledge in its manifestos for both the 1950 and 1951 elections. Given that most university members had been Conservatives or Conservative-leaning independents, and given that there was no reason to expect this pattern would change, such restoration would serve the Conservatives' power interests. Particularly when the party's majority was small—just seventeen seats following the 1951 election—the addition of twelve or so members most of whom would support the government's broad line could have been expected to make a worthwhile difference. There can have been little reason for the Conservatives not to implement an explicit and oft-repeated policy that would have furthered their interests other than normative pressure.

In the absence of a strong normative justification for plural voting, its restoration appears to have looked just too self-interested. The Conservatives never said they would restore the business franchise, to which the argument about election of a different sort of MP did not apply. Following the 1951 election, given the government's small majority, immediate restoration of the university franchise would have looked too much like a government trying to bolster its hold on power. In addition, the anomaly of the plural vote now looked less defensible than it had before. The *Guardian*—having argued for retention of the university vote in 1948—said in 1951:

Many were reluctant to see the university seats go and the final triumph of “one man, one vote,” but they would not now wish to see them restored to give further advantage to one party and in the cause of a largely mythical independence. (*Guardian*, 3 November 1951)

The *Guardian*'s letters pages followed this pattern, largely favouring the university franchise in 1948 but opposing it in 1951. The idea that university seats could be retained without plural voting—by allowing graduates to choose between a university or a residential vote—was barely heard in 1948 but became more prominent in 1951. When Churchill declared finally, in October 1953, that the government was not going to implement its policy, he said that “time” had “move on” (*Guardian*, 21 October 1953). We have recorded no opposition to this decision.

This episode appears to point to a noteworthy status quo bias in normative reasoning: arguments can be used to defend an existing institution that cannot be used to defend adoption or readoption of the same institution where it is not already present.

This has implications for the degree to which we should say that the normative environment of today differs from that of the late 1940s: the absence of advocacy of plural voting today may suggest less a shift in underlying norms than simply a change in the institutional status quo. Indeed, it is noteworthy that the arguments that were used in 1948 to defend university seats—based on the qualities of the members elected—look very similar to those used over the past year to defend retention of the unelected House of Lords. Democratic norms have had significant constraining power throughout the period since 1945. But they constrain deviation from the status quo more strongly than they do its maintenance.

#### *4.2. The Election of 1951*

Our second episode focuses on reactions to the wrong-winner election outcome of 1951. As we saw above, Shugart (2008) predicts that such an outcome should generate heightened pressure for electoral reform in single-member plurality systems. The question to ask is whether the outcome in 1951 in fact did so.

The short answer is that it did not. In addition to our analysis of *Guardian* and *Times* articles captured by our electoral reform search strings, we have surveyed all coverage of the 1951 election result in these two newspapers. Both of these newspapers reported nationwide vote totals in their editions of 27 October 1951 (with a few constituency results still outstanding), but the fact that the party with most votes was not the party with most seats was barely mentioned. The *Guardian* twice noted that the Secretary of the Labour Party had “made much of the fact that the total number of votes cast for Labour was higher than the Conservative figure” (*Guardian*, 27 October 1951), but offered no comment of its own. *The Times* put a forthright spin on the result in its editorial:

The scourging of the Liberals, the victories of Mr Bevan's group, and the high Labour poll are interesting but secondary features of the election. Its real importance lies, first and last, in the return of a Conservative Government with a majority which entitles and obliges them to govern. The narrowness of their victory calls for the highest qualities of statesmanship. With a lead of so little the new Government cannot speak with the authority which a majority of eighty or 100 would have given. Such authority as they can command will derive from the candour with which they seek the cooperation of the nation and of different sections of the nation in their tasks. (*The Times*, 27 October 1951)

A *Guardian* article the following day noted that "the Conservative majority was obtained with fewer votes than those cast for the Labour Party", but made no comment on this (*Guardian*, 28 October 1951). Another article reported a speech by Labour's Herbert Morrison that alluded to the wrong winner outcome (*Guardian*, 2 November 1951). Otherwise, we have found no mention of that aspect of the result in the two weeks that followed the election. *The Times* during the same period carried only two allusions to the wrong winner outcome, both in letters to the editor. One argued that, once uncontested districts were taken into account, Labour's plurality of votes would in fact have been a plurality for the Conservatives; the other pointed out that the calculations in the first letter were spurious (*The Times*, 29 October 1951 and 1 November 1951).

It may reasonably be objected that both of these newspapers had (with reservations) backed the Conservatives in the 1951 election and that they might therefore be expected to have glossed over any doubts as to whether that party's victory had been fairly won. Yet other sources present a similar picture. The Nuffield study for the 1951 election noted, "Despite their majority in seats, the Conservatives received 231,000 votes fewer than Labour; but both got a greater total of votes than any party had ever secured before." (Butler 1952: 237). But it made no further comment upon the wrong winner outcome at all.

Turning to the responses from Labour politicians and supporters, the anomaly in the result was noted, but largely accepted. Herbert Morrison, in the speech already mentioned said, with regard to the wrong winner outcome:

I do not make too much of a grievance of this, for unless we have proportional representation, to which, for good constitutional reasons, our people are opposed as are the Conservatives, we can hardly expect elections to produce an exact mathematical result.

Nevertheless, the Opposition in the new Parliament will have behind it great moral authority. In the election we won the battle of the platform, we won the battle of the broadcasts, and the new battle of television. (*Guardian*, 2 November 1951)

Four days after the election, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) issued the following statement:

The General Election has brought to an end for the time being a period of Labour rule during which quite remarkable improvements have been made in the working and the living conditions of British people.

The result of the Election, though it can hardly be called decisive, has nevertheless given to the Conservative Party a Parliamentary majority.

It is our long-standing practice to seek to work amicably with whatever Government is in power, and, through consultation jointly with Ministers and with the other side of industry, to find practical solutions to the social and economic problems facing this country. (*Daily Herald*, 1 November 1951)

As in the cases of the *Guardian* and *Times*, we have reviewed all reporting on the election result in the *Daily Herald*, which was strongly allied to the Labour leadership. Its front-page editorial on 27 October—printed alongside a nationwide results tally—did not question that Labour had lost the election:

Although defeated, the Labour Party has no reason to feel downhearted. On the contrary it should feel very proud, for its supporters throughout the land have given a wonderful demonstration of their strength and loyalty. ... It is the party's task to prove to the people that Thursday's verdict was a mistaken one." (*Daily Herald*, 27 October 1951).

The newspaper took a slightly different line two days later: "The Tories rule the land – despite the fact that more people voted for a Labour Government than for a Tory one." (*Daily Herald*, 29 October 1951). It continued, "It may seem unbelievable that the Tories, having secured fewer votes than Labour, would dare to rig the Constitution by restoring the graduates' extra vote. But it is a trick of which I believe them to be thoroughly capable." (*ibid.*). But still it did not question the legitimacy of the Conservative government. Four further articles mentioned the wrong winner outcome, but none dwelt upon it at any length.

*Tribune* magazine, which voiced the views of Labour's Bevanite wing, was similar. Its first post-election issue discussed the election results in considerable detail, and included analysis of the vote totals,<sup>3</sup> but it made no mention of the wrong winner result at all. The issue's lead editorial referred to "the Tory victory at the polls".<sup>4</sup> The following issue two weeks later did contain an article that condemned the wrong winner result. But it pinned the blame for this failure on the Labour leadership and its handling of the boundary review: addressing Clement Attlee, it said, "You were so determined to be fair to the enemy that you bent over backwards and gerrymandered yourselves out of office."<sup>5</sup>

Our final indicator of reactions to the wrong winner outcome is an analysis of parliamentary debates. We searched Commons *Hansard* from November 1951 to December 1952 for references to the wrong winner outcome, and found a total of nine.<sup>6</sup> Most of these were fleeting taunts from Labour to Conservative members. There were many more occasions on which the government's mandate was questioned—either its general mandate or its mandate on specific measures, most prominently the denationalization of the iron and steel industry. But this questioning focused on the fact that the government had not secured a majority of votes and on whether a measure had been contained in the Conservatives' election manifesto, rather than on the wrong winner outcome.

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<sup>3</sup> Ian Mikardo, "The Smear that Didn't Stick", *Tribune*, 2 November 1951, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> "Mr Butler's Dilemma", *Tribune*, 2 November 1951, pp. 1–2.

<sup>5</sup> Hugh Jenkins, "Dear Comrade Attlee", *Tribune*, 16 November 1951, p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> Our search string was "more votes" OR "14 million" OR "majority of the votes" OR "majority in the country" OR "number of votes" OR "most votes" OR "mandate". We then read manually through all the debates retrieved.

This extensive survey of the evidence suggests that, while the wrong winner outcome was noted and, to some degree criticized, it was not thought seriously to undermine the government's legitimacy. This finding is compatible with the proposition that a wrong winner outcome was less strongly proscribed normatively in 1951 than we might expect it to be today: that the norm still held sway that the rightful election victor was the party that had secured the support of most communities, rather than most voters, at the election.

In fact, however, we find no evidence of any such norm: we find no explicit mention that this was the basis on which elections should legitimately be won and lost. By contrast, we do find sporadic evidence from the years before 1951 of a norm that elections should be won by the largest party. In his contribution to the 1945 Nuffield study, David Butler identified a pro-Labour bias in the operation of the electoral system. He commented:

The implications of Diagram IV are somewhat startling: a 4% swing in the overall votes or a 4½% swing in the net Labour and Conservative votes would have given the Conservatives the same number of votes as Labour: but such a swing if universally equal would only reduce Labour to 332 seats – still an absolute majority – and increase the Conservative representation to 278 seats. If this had happened, there would have been an unprecedented outcry against the injustice of the electoral system, “the wanton hazard of the electoral gamble”. (Butler 1945: 282)

This suggests a presumed norm against wrong winner outcomes. There was also extensive negative coverage in British newspapers of the election result in South Africa of 1948, in which the National Party under D. F. Malan defeated Jan Smuts's United Party, even though the latter won substantially more votes. And a Labour MP commented in Parliament in the Second Reading debate on the Representation of the People Bill of 1948, that “the whole basis of Parliamentary government in this House has been that the party which gets the greatest number of votes is the majority party and carries on” (Ronald Mackay, in *Hansard*, vol. 447, col. 1046, 17 February 1948).

We therefore have something of a conundrum. On the one hand, an expectation does appear to have been present that the party winning most votes should be the party winning most seats. On the other hand, when this norm was violated in 1951, barely anyone questioned the legitimacy of the outcome. One possible resolution of this conundrum may simply be that the result in 1951 was very close, so that the violation was seen as insignificant. It seems surprising, nevertheless, that the issue was barely discussed. We might expect to find more than a single exchange of letters in *The Times* on the issue of the four uncontested Northern Irish constituencies.

Another explanation may be that there were no actors whose interests might have been served by highlighting the norm violation. The Conservatives were the beneficiaries of the anomaly, so they clearly had every reason to keep silent. Labour was the immediate victim, but, as Herbert Morrison's words quoted above indicate, Labour believed in single-member plurality and did not want to undermine confidence in it by questioning this result. The Liberals were much more concerned about unfairness to themselves than unfairness between the two main parties: as always,

they argued for electoral reform after the election on the basis of their own underrepresentation rather than any other aspect of the result.<sup>7</sup>

But why, we should ask, did supporters of electoral reform not seize on the opportunity that might have been created by the wrong winner result to attract new converts to the reform cause? It was not until September 1953, almost two years after that result, that (so far as we have found so far) the Proportional Representation Society or any of its spokespeople used the wrong winner outcome as an argument for electoral reform.<sup>8</sup>

It is likely that a range of factors contributed to the silence over the wrong winner outcome in 1951. It appears that, while there was some expectation that the largest party in votes should be the largest party in seats, this expectation was not yet deeply entrenched as an inviolable norm. Whether such a norm has strengthened in the years since 1951 is an issue that will require further investigation as this research continues. Preliminary research indicates that, much as the February 1974 election results provoked a major upsurge in discussion of electoral reform, little attention focused on the wrong winner aspect of that election. It is too early in the research process, however, for us to be confident in this finding. Similarly, comparison with the 2010 election—when the possibility of a wrong winner result was widely discussed—awaits further detailed research.

## 5. Conclusions

As I have emphasized throughout, the evidence offered in this paper is very preliminary. No clear evidence from the period covered allows us to assess Proposition 1, on long time horizons. The evidence does clearly support Proposition 2, that actors should tend to prefer all of the power some of the time to some of the power all of the time. There is also evidence regarding Proposition 3: there appears to be a limited tendency for ideological distance to make a difference to how readily political actors accept ceding power to the other side. During the period covered, however, the majoritarian logic of alternation in power dominates overwhelmingly. Turning to Proposition 4, we indeed found little sign of change in the content of debates over electoral reform, at least for the House of Commons. Clearly, however, it will be necessary to examine debates since 1964 in detail before this can be confirmed. On Proposition 5, normative constraints on self-interested reform do appear to have been powerful, at least away from the realm of boundary setting. Labour was able to enact a reform that conformed to its self-interest in 1948, when it abolished plural voting—but it was able to offer a strong principled defence of this move. Lacking such a defence, the Conservatives felt unable to restore plurality voting when they returned to power three years later. The Liberals have also shown caution in pushing electoral reform too hard. In respect of Proposition 6, our detailed examination of reactions to the 1951 election result revealed no impetus towards discussion of the electoral system: the perceived norm violation in this result was apparently very weak. Whether that would be different today—as Proposition 7 predicts—is an issue to be examined through further research. Proposition 7 also posits a strengthening of the norm of one person, one vote. We see evidence of this, though most of the change here took place before 1945. Whether we also see growing demands for intra-party voter choice will be examined in future research. Finally, in respect of Proposition 8, we find that ordinary voters' voices and the voices of civil society were virtually absent from electoral reform debates before 1964. This looks very

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<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., "If the Tories Make One False Move ...", *Guardian*, 2 November 1951.

<sup>8</sup> See "Our London Correspondence", *Guardian*, 25 September 1951.

different from the debates that followed the MPs' expenses scandal of 2009, and future research will examine the proposition of change in further detail.

In addition to these specific points, I hope that the analysis presented here begins to give some sense of the utility of the methods that are employed. As the period that is intensively studied is extended, it will be possible to say much more about evolution in different actors' interest in reform and the ideas and norms that constrain them, allowing propositions such as those outlined in the first part of this paper to be assessed more fully.

Figures

Figure 1. Electoral Reform Discussion: Article Count: *Guardian* and *Observer*, 1900–2011

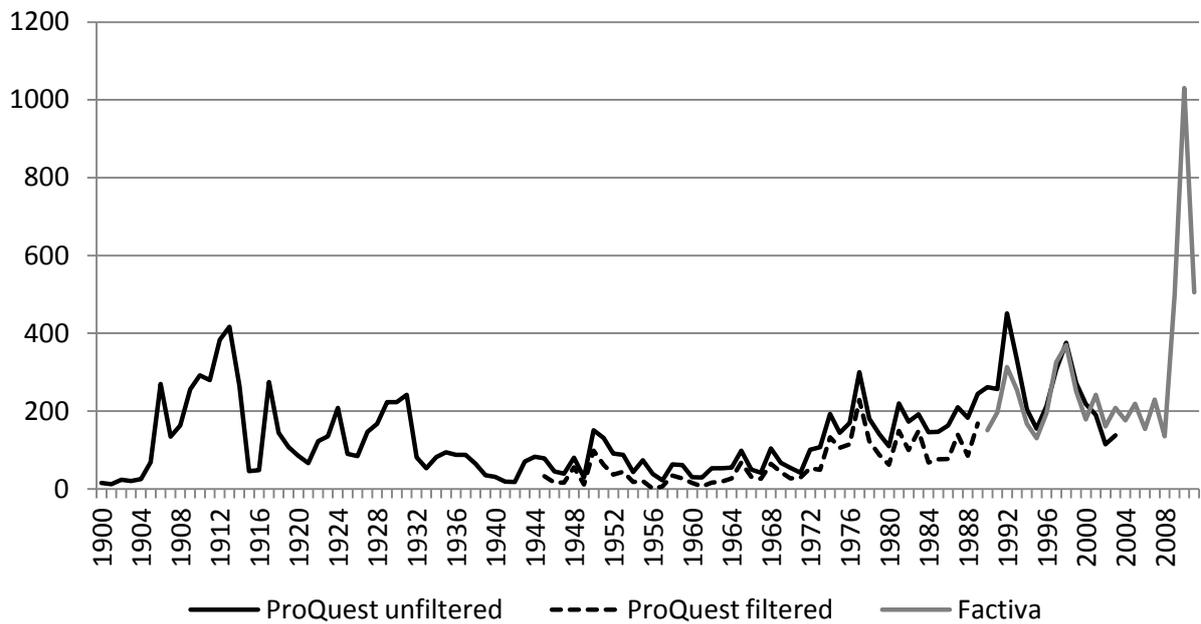


Figure 2. Electoral Reform Discussion: Article Count: *The Times* and *Sunday Times*, 1900–2011

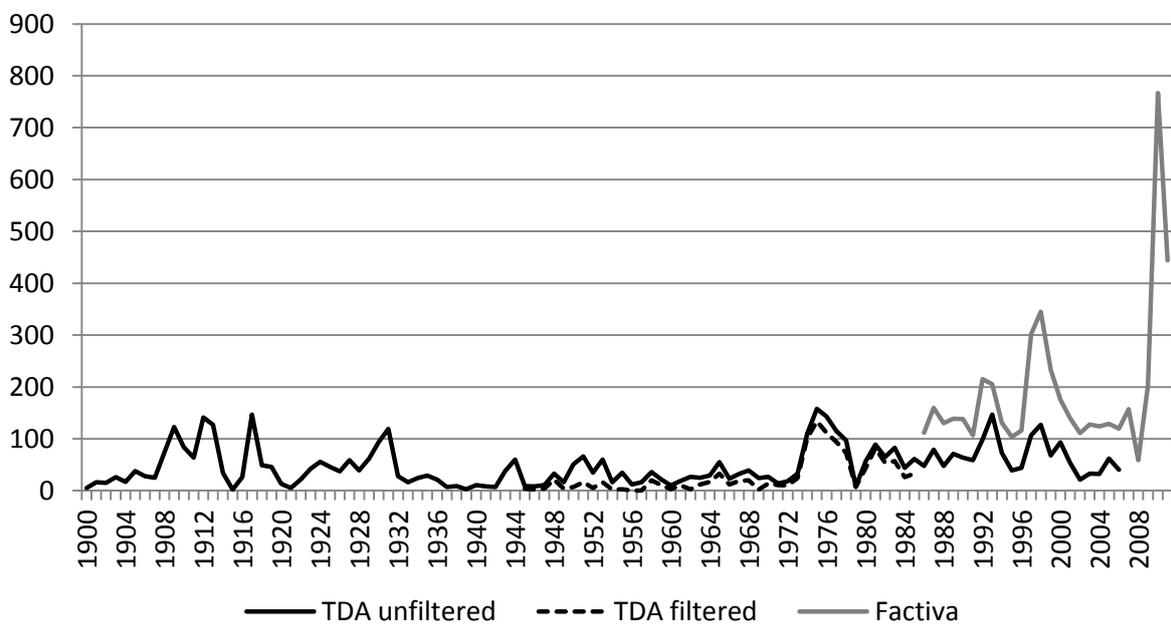


Figure 3. Electoral Reform Discussion: Quotation Count: *Guardian* and *Observer*, 1945–64

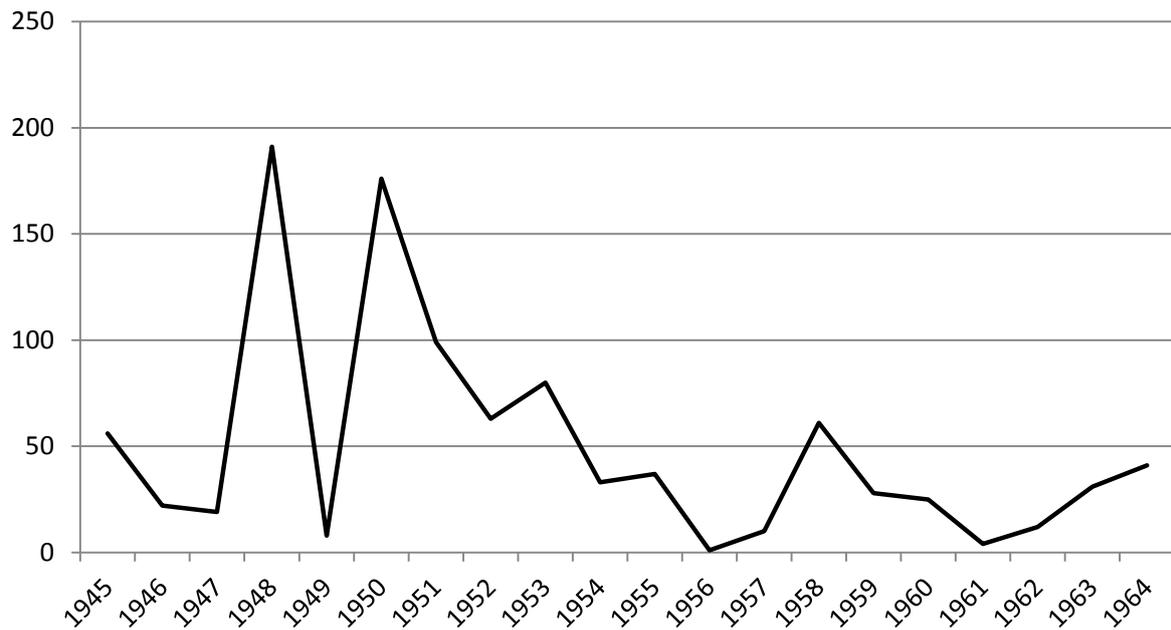


Figure 4. Electoral Reform Discussion: Principal Topics: *Guardian* and *Observer*, 1945–64

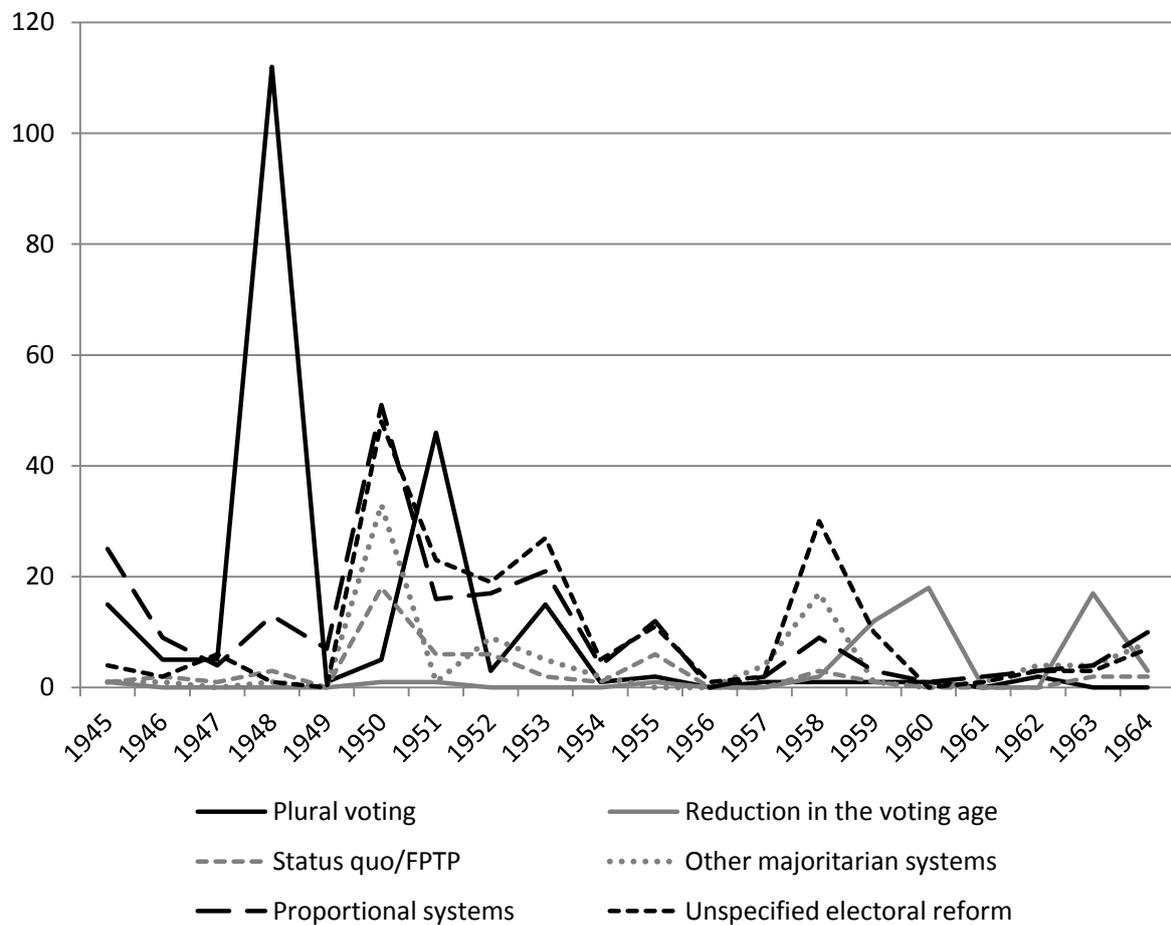
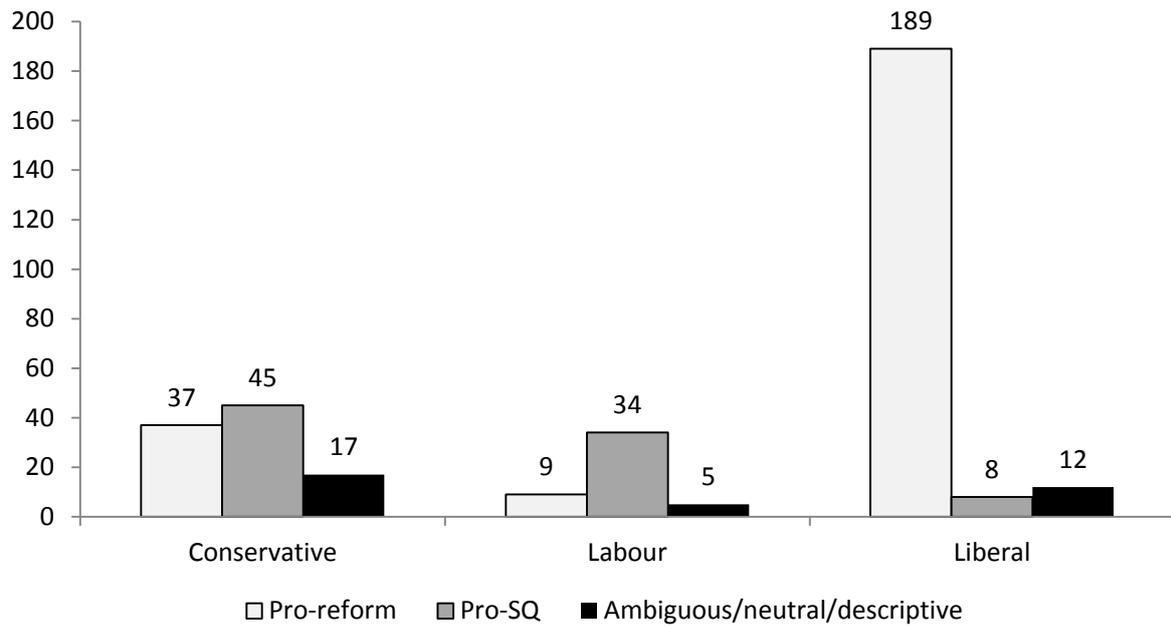


Figure 5. Electoral Reform Discussion: Principal Actors: *Guardian* and *Observer*, 1945–64



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