

REVIEW: MAKING VOTES COUNT

John Curtice

Martin Linton and Mary Southcott (1998), **Making Votes Count: the Case for Electoral Reform**, London: Profile Books, ISBN 1861970870, pb, £6.50, 166+ix pp.

With the publication of the report of the Independent Commission on the Electoral System chaired by Lord Jenkins, the issue of electoral reform for the House of Commons is set to become central to British political debate. The existence of the commission is the product of Labour's 18 years in the political wilderness, an experience that lead some to despair whether the party could win another election again. What this book tries to do is to show Labour supporters why they should still back reform even though their party managed to win a landslide majority under the current system in 1997. In so doing it provides an insight into some of the arguments that are likely to be used by the pro-reform camp in the promised referendum campaign.

The authors, new Labour MP and secretary of the Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform respectively, have one major concern about the current system. They write, 'Although many people identify lack of proportionality as the main problem of our voting system, it is the lack of what might be called instrumentality that is far more destructive' (p.118). By this they mean that so few votes appear to contribute towards the election of an MP. All votes cast for losing candidates and those cast for winners which are more than they need for victory are either wasted or are surplus to requirements. By these criteria, just 29% of voters cast an effective vote in 1997.

The result, the authors claim, is distortion of electoral choice and geographical polarisation. Parties, they argue, increasingly focus their campaigns on and tailor their policies towards the small minority of floating voters living in no more than 100 constituencies. Voters, meanwhile, increasingly resort to tactical voting so that they can at least ensure that their

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least preferred candidate cannot win. As a result, Labour in particular is still relatively weak in the south of England, even after its success in 1997, and is unlikely ever to be able to recover its former strength there under the current system.

If the last of these arguments is not sufficient to disturb Labour supporters' confidence in the system in the wake of the party's 1997 victory, they are reminded that between 1919 and 1997 Labour was in office for less than half as long as the Tories despite on average winning only 3% less of the votes cast in general elections over the same period.

Under proportional representation, in contrast, the authors claim that voters will be able to vote sincerely. Because seats are simply a reflection of the distribution of votes, all votes will count. Neither voters nor parties have to act strategically. And Labour would avoid the danger of being permanently excluded from power for long periods.

Alas, many of these arguments are not as powerful as they might appear. Debates about rational voting theory long ago demonstrated that if voters were motivated to go the polling station by the effectiveness of their vote no-one would bother to make the journey at all. True, turnout was low in the 1997 general election, but that appears to reflect the fact that the outcome on that occasion appeared to many voters to be a foregone conclusion rather than because of any secular decline in turnout induced by the electoral system. For most voters voting is an expressive not an instrumental act.

True, tactical voting has indeed increased at the last two elections. But recent research from the British Election Study demonstrates that even in 1997 no more than one in ten voters behave in that way. A more effective criticism of the system would be to argue not that so many voters are unable to express their real views, but rather that so few voters could have such a disproportionate impact on the outcome. Moreover, the rise in tactical voting that has occurred does not reflect an increase in the willingness of voters to vote tactically but rather changes in their perceptions of the parties. As Labour and the Liberal Democrats moved closer to each other, so voters have simply found it easier to switch tactically between them.

The claim that proportional representation will necessarily banish strategic considerations is also dubious. Under the Additional Member System most favoured by Labour reformers, voters face exactly the same dilemma in casting their constituency vote as they do at present. But to that may be added the possibility that their second vote has no impact because their preferred party is too strong in the constituency contests, while a potential coalition

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ally may be in need of a boost in the second vote to ensure it can help the voters' preferred party into power.

Meanwhile to argue that because Labour appears to have lost out from first past the post in the past it is therefore in danger of doing so in future misses the real lesson of our recent experience with the single member plurality electoral system. For it implies that the system has regular and predictable consequences when in truth its operation is irregular and unpredictable.

Thus, for example, in 1992 the Conservatives failed to secure a safe overall majority despite securing a larger lead over Labour than they did in 1955, 1959 or 1970. Meanwhile, in 1997, Labour's overall majority was greater than that of the Conservatives in 1983 even though its lead over the Conservatives in 1997 was less than Margaret Thatcher's lead over Michael Foot in 1983. The system operates not according to fixed laws but does so variably, depending not just on how many votes a party wins but on where they are won. Quite how this is consistent with the claim that the system allows voters to choose between alternative national governments is the Achilles heel upon which a critique of the current system would be more adequately focused.

The book is not devoid of some good arguments. The authors argue effectively that the claim that single member constituencies ensure that individual MPs are accountable to their voters is inconsistent with the claim that the system allows voters to choose between alternative governments. If voters are doing the latter they must be influenced by candidates' party labels, not their individual merits. Yet overall the case made is a rather confused one, helped not least by the fact that not until p.122 do the authors entertain any discussion of what an electoral system is expected to achieve. If the pro-reform campaign is eventually to win public backing one suspects it will have to come up with a better case than is presented here.

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