

The nearly iron laws of FPTP Reinforcing the grip of the big two

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When someone uses the phrase “that’s all down to an iron law of history”, I tend to get a bit twitchy. It sounds like the person is saying that history is all pre-ordained, that people can’t change things, that people and their actions are all rather irrelevant. The “system” alone determines whether things should happen or not happen.

Take our voting system, commonly called first-past-the-post (FPTP). Why is it that, since 1922, only two parties have ever won elections in the UK? Ditto for the United States...and has been so since 1848. And similarly for Canada which is a third country still using the archaic FPTP voting system created long ago in aristocratic Britain and exported across the empire. Couldn’t it have been different? (Not sure how it happened, but FPTP also ended up in Belarus, the only other country in Europe still using it. Hardly an endorsement!)

And why is it that every attempt by any party other than the big two in these countries has never *even* come second, let alone win, in the past century. Was it pre-ordained?

USA: A CLASSIC TWO PARTY COUNTRY

Look at the USA, perhaps the classic two-party country. There is now talk, for example, of the “Trumpites” forming a third party.... and actually expecting to win in 2024. Haven’t they heard what happened to the last serious third party presidential challenge? That was Ross Perot in 1992. Perot did rather well at the polls. He came out of nowhere and got an amazing 18.9% of the total presidential vote as an independent. And how many all-important Electoral College votes (out of 538) and states (out of 50) did Perot win? Zero. That’s FPTP in spades.

In the UK, the last serious challenge to the two-party duopoly came in the 1983 general election. Labour finished second to Thatcher, got 27.6% of the total vote and 209 seats. The Alliance (Liberals and Social Democrats) were just behind at 25.4%, but very far behind in seats with a mere 23. (There were “good election years” for the LibDems in 2005 and 2010, but never even got close to the second-place party in terms of seats.)

As for Canada, trust me: no party has ever challenged the electoral chokehold of that country's big two either.

So why does one of the big two *always* win in all three countries? Is it because they are just better and smarter parties? Or because they have policies most people endorse? Or is it just a coincidence?

CREATING TWO-PARTY PRIVILEGE

It's for none of these reasons, explained French political scientist Maurice Duverger in papers he wrote during the 1950s and 1960s. After detailed study of voting patterns across the world, Duverger concluded that **the surest way to produce a two party system was to create a FPTP/ "winner takes all" voting system based on single member constituencies or districts. This two party privilege arises from the very structure of this particular electoral system itself. The result is indeed all but preordained.**

Winners in elections are not decided primarily by what voters want, but by whichever of two parties wins the most seats — and **ONLY** two parties ever have a chance to win. And the so-called "winner" can win with only 35% of the overall vote, as we learned in 2005 after Tony Blair won a huge majority in parliament with that total. In 1951, we even had a so-called "wrong winner" election. Labour got the most votes; the Tories got the most seats. It could happen again.

By comparison, Duverger also found that jurisdictions using proportional representation (PR) had governments that far more closely reflected the democratic wishes of their voters; they were not based on the downright crooked maths of FPTP. Indeed, PR creates more parties that reflect the views of actual voters and does not try to fit voters into party strait-jackets. Just the reverse.

NOT AN ABSOLUTE IRON LAW...BUT ALMOST

Duverger's findings are today called "Duverger's Law." They are not an absolute "iron law" of electoral results...but they nearly are. FPTP voting = two party rule. Yes, there are some exceptions. A regional/ national party like the SNP can potentially do well under FPTP at Westminster. A few FPTP-based countries sometimes escape the two party domination. But they are rare.

Here's how the causal relationship works: voters come to appreciate, election after election, that there is very little point to vote for parties other than the big two. The "little guys" seldom seem to get anywhere. And even if the "little guys" might get increased votes over time, they seldom get increased seats. Let's say the Green Party vote increased five-fold in the next general election compared to 2019. That would put the Green total at about four million votes. Yet that is about what UKIP got in 2015...and won one MP in Parliament. Demoralised millions will ask: "what is the point of voting Green?" And decide: "better to vote for one of the big two parties that I dislike least under FPTP".

The negative consequences of FPTP are deserving of a blog by themselves. A short list:

- 1) minority rule (as we have today in the UK);
- 2) where you live often determines the worth or power of your vote;
- 3) millions are forced to vote tactically for the party they least dislike; see above;
- 4) voters to the left (or right) of the big two have no meaningful alternatives as a political home;
- 5) the big two become cauldrons of dissent (especially when out of power; look at Labour today) ;
- 6) the big two often become puffed up citadels of swaggering self-importance and protected by FPTP maths;
- 7) voter turnout tends to be lower.

So the questions this blog poses are: why is the British Labour Party the only democratic socialist party in the so-called "developed world" that supports FPTP voting system? What is either democratic or socialist about FPTP? And when will Labour break from this system of institutional inequality that ties it to the Tories ... and which the Tories have been rather more skilled at using of late?