# Pointmaker

# THE EVAPORATING CASE FOR ELECTORAL REFORM

**FABIAN RICHTER**

**WITH FOREWORDS BY WILLIAM HAGUE AND VERA BAIRD**

**SUMMARY**

- Proponents of electoral reform make three arguments: that the current electoral system leads to governments elected by a minority of the popular vote; that it discriminates against the representation of smaller parties; and that it disenfranchises the majority of voters who live in safe seats. While the first two arguments are widely debated, the third argument has never been properly tested empirically.

- Original research undertaken for this paper refutes the third claim made by advocates of electoral reform: it shows that, today, there are in fact surprisingly few 'safe seats' where people's votes don't count.

- When the debate about PR first gained wider prominence 30 years' ago, only a quarter of constituencies were marginal seats. In 2010, over a third of seats were highly marginal.

- The same trend can be observed for 'safe seats' (those which cannot be realistically expected to be captured by another party in a single contest). Their proportion has fallen from more than a quarter of all seats in 1979 to just 15% of constituencies in 2010.

- That means 85% of constituencies representing approximately 39 million voters in the UK today are either marginal or give voters at least a reasonable chance of changing their Member of Parliament.

- Over time, even some of the safest seats in the country have changed hands. During the past 30 years, five of the 20 safest seats in 1979 have been captured by another party.

- Even electoral fortresses can crumble with time.

## FOREWORD BY RT HON WILLIAM HAGUE MP

There is no such thing as a 'safe seat'. Any politician who thinks otherwise is fooling themselves and heading for a fall, and deservedly so.

I was first elected to Parliament with a majority of 2,600. At the last election, it was 23,000. But the job I was elected to do was the same each time: to represent everyone in my constituency, whether they voted for me or not – or even if they did not vote at all. In every parliament I have been privileged to serve in, I have never treated the voters of Richmond any differently: I know they have the power to get rid of me at the next election if that's what they decide to do.

As Fabian Richter shows in this paper, it is in fact quite common for seats with large majorities to change hands if that is what the voters want. The Conservative Party saw this very clearly in 1997 – and the last election proved no different, as Lembit Opik and Vera Baird can attest. It is the voters, not the voting system, that decide which seats are 'safe' and which ones change hands.

That is why the debate before the referendum this May is so important: a lot of enticing claims are being made about the Alternative Vote, and a lot of serious charges are being levelled at our First Past the Post system. Before the nation goes to the polls, these need to be examined carefully; Fabian Richter's punchy analysis is an important contribution to that debate.

*William Hague has been MP for Richmond since 1989 and is Foreign Secretary.*

## FOREWORD BY RT HON VERA BAIRD

On 6 April last year – the day that Gordon Brown went to the Palace to ask for a dissolution of Parliament – the Electoral Reform Society released a list of 382 'safe' seats which they confidently predicted would not change hands at the election. 'These winners will take their seats in Britain's Safe Parliament,' cried their press release, 'voters will never be able to boot these MPs out under our present system.'

The seat I had represented for nine years, Redcar, was one of these 'safe' seats.

On 6 May, it was lost with a 21.8% swing away from Labour.

Redcar had traditionally returned a Labour MP, and in 2005 I won re-election with a majority of 51.8%. But, as my experience shows, dismissing some seats as unchangeable is to disregard a fact that no sensible politician ever forgets: that a seat is only safe as long as the people living there want it to be safe. Assuming that local voters will always vote one way or another insults them – as though they were the powerless prisoners of the voting system, not its masters. In Redcar's case the electorate reacted angrily to the closure of the local steelworks and blamed Gordon's government for not saving it. Hardly a Redcar family does not have a current or former steel worker. Not only jobs but proud heritage was being lost.

Moreover, simplistic generalisations about 'safe seats' don't take into account that such changes can occur remarkably quickly. From the famous 'Portillo-moment' – when the 1997 national election tide swept away a 15,563-vote Tory majority – to equally dramatic losses like Redcar that result from painful local issues, so-called 'safe' seats can, and do, change hands.

Taking a more dynamic look at changes over time, as this paper does, demonstrates how over a small number of elections a seat can move from a strong majority to a razor-thin marginal. And the change can also go the other way, of course, as diligent MPs representing marginal seats win their constituents' support over time and the national wind blows in their direction.

A virtue of our First Past the Post system is that it preserves the ability of the people to change their MP – or a government – when they elect to do so. Supporting AV on the false premise that it will eliminate safe seats would be incorrect.

*Vera Baird was MP for Redcar from 2001 to 2010 and served as Solicitor General from 2007 to 2010.*

## INTRODUCTION

*"For years, politicians and parties have courted the votes of a few thousand people in marginal seats and ignored the rest… Research has found that the result of the last election was decided by fewer than 500,000 votes."*

Nick Clegg MP, speech 18 February 2011.

This argument in favour of electoral reform is well-rehearsed and widely known. What is surprising is that so far nobody has bothered to check whether it is true.

Are elections really won and lost in just a small minority of seats, and with just a few thousand votes? If so, is this an immutable fact or are there certain trends over time? And are the same voters always affected?

Electoral trends over the last 30 years suggest a far more fluid political environment than is commonly assumed; and that maybe the current system has a tendency to throw up far more surprises and changes than advocates of electoral reform realise.

## THE THREE ARGUMENTS IN FAVOUR OF ELECTORAL REFORM

There are three lines of argument in favour of electoral reform:

1. **The 'minority argument':** Under the current First-Past-The-Post (FPTP) electoral system, Governments are frequently elected with a minority of the popular vote. As a result, Governments do not necessarily reflect the popular will of the majority of voters.

2. **The 'representation argument':** Under FPTP, it is claimed that the votes for smaller parties are nearly always 'wasted' if they even get cast in the first place. Supporters of the Green Party, for example, face a high hurdle to have one of their candidates elected to Parliament. The Green Party vote is also artificially suppressed because many of its supporters will be voting tactically for another party because 'they know their party cannot win' in the constituency where they live. As a result, smaller parties such as the Green Party are taken less seriously in public debate and it may take them longer to gain representation in Parliament (the first German Green Party MPs were already elected in 1983 while in the UK the Green Party had to wait until 2010).

3. **The 'disenfranchisement argument':** This is the argument made in the quotation above. FPTP, it is claimed, results in large numbers of very safe seats which never change hands. Millions of voters are therefore effectively disenfranchised.

## THE COUNTER-ARGUMENTS

*Do Coalitions represent the will of the people better than FPTP?*

The obvious riposte to the 'minority argument' is that coalition governments – the standard outcome under proportional representation (PR) – are not truly representative either. Many governments in countries using PR systems have also been elected with less than 50% of the vote.[1] In addition, it is often unclear to voters of a particular party which kind of coalition will emerge after an election. The most famous example here is the German Liberal Party (FDP) which switched coalition partner from the Social Democrats towards the Conservatives in the middle of a parliamentary term in 1982. Even short of such a dramatic change, smaller parties function as 'kingmakers' because they can form

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[1] For example, German coalitions often only capture around 45% to 48% of the vote.

coalitions with either a centre-right or a centre-left party. Voters are often left unclear as to what kind of government they will get by supporting such a party.

The reluctance of the Liberal Democrats to state their preferred coalition partner ahead of the general election in May 2010 illustrates this problem well. One important reason why poll Lib Dem ratings have halved in the six months since election day appears to be that some Lib Dem voters did not expect (and are critical of) a Conservative-Lib Dem Coalition. During the campaign Lib Dem candidates across the UK frequently argued that a vote for them was the only way of preventing a Conservative-led Government. Many people consequently cast a tactical anti-Tory vote for the Lib Dems. However, their votes are arguably not being represented by the current government.

The same problem would occur in reverse were the Lib Dems to switch towards Labour after the next election, at which they might potentially attract millions of votes from people who rather like the Conservative-Lib Dem Coalition. Under a proportional electoral system, this would become a near permanent problem, not the rare exception it currently is.

A variation of this argument stresses the importance of manifestos in British politics. Because of the prevalence of single-party government, manifestos provide a good yard-stick for measuring the 'electoral honesty' of governments. Did a Government implement what it promised in their manifesto? Did it introduce radical new policies not advertised to the electorate in advance? The need for compromise in coalition government dilutes the importance of party manifestos. With that disappears an important measure by which the electorate and the media can hold a government to account.

### *Is FPTP more representative than PR?*
The strongest response to the 'representation argument' is that, by lowering the electoral threshold, proportional representation boosts the presence of extremist parties in Parliament. Even hardened supporters of PR become defensive at the prospect of their preferred voting system providing a bigger platform for the BNP. In addition, supporters of FPTP can point to the important trade-off between ensuring a fully proportional reflection of the will of the people and creating strong and efficient government. The latter is far more likely under FPTP, not least because single-party governments offer fewer distinct access points for vested interests and lobby groups. In that sense, FPTP could even lead to *more* representative government because its normally clear majorities make it less beholden to small, but powerful single-issue groups.

## THE 'DISENFRANCHISEMENT ARGUMENT'

### *The lack of evidence*
There is little hard evidence relating to the 'disenfranchisement argument'. The House of Commons Library published a paper on British election statistics dating back over a period of nearly 100 years, but this only looked at turnout, overall number of votes polled and the share of the vote achieved by each party.[2] The British Election Study unit at Essex University again looked mainly at party choice, turnout and voter agendas.[3] David Butler and Dennis Kavanagh's long-running Nuffield British General Election Series contained a long statistical annex, but again did not include a longitudinal analysis of

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[2]   House of Commons Research Papers, *UK Election Statistics 1918-2004*, 2004.

[3]   See for example: http://www.bes2009-10.org/ or http://www.esds.ac.uk/findingData/bes.asp

safe versus marginal constituencies.[4] Likewise, the extensive research undertaken by Michael Thrasher and Colin Rallings at Plymouth University does not look in close detail at the issue of marginal seats.[5]

*A new IPPR report*

Given this dearth of empirical evidence, the recent contribution to the electoral reform debate from the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) was welcome. There do appear, however, to be some problems in regards to its definitions of what a marginal seat actually is.

For, strangely, the IPPR report employs two completely different definitions of what constitutes a 'marginal seat'; and uses them interchangeably. On one definition, marginal seats are "defined as seats with a majority of less than 10%",[6] but no rationale is given for that particular threshold. That definition is then applied against the analysis of a single general election (2010), ignoring the fact that the marginality of seats often changes over time.

The IPPR paper then uses a different definition to arrive at its dramatic claim that "the number of such marginal seats has halved since the 1950s".[7] This second definition draws on the work of John Curtice of the University of Strathclyde, who is also Deputy Director of the Centre for Research into Elections and Social Trends (CREST). Curtice's definition of marginal seats may be appropriate for the academic purposes of his research. But it is surely both counter-intuitive and leads to examples which are downright absurd.

Curtice claims that "by marginal we mean a seat that, in the event that Conservative and Labour were to have the same share of the vote nationally, the majority of the winners locally (leaving aside any votes cast for smaller parties) would be less than ten per cent."[8] On that definition, the number of marginal seats has actually been falling from over 160 in the 1950s down to 86 at this year's general election.

However, Curtice's definition is too narrow. Looking only at the two largest parties is less relevant in an age when their combined share of the vote has fallen from nearly 90% in the 1950s to around 65% in 2010. Next to the classic Lab-Con marginal, we have seen the emergence of Lib-Con, Lib-Lab, Lab-SNP and Lab-PC marginals, to name just the most important forms that local electoral contests now take. Curtice's definition ignores these. Also, elections are becoming increasingly localised so that comparisons between national shares of the vote and individual constituency results are increasingly problematic.

To illustrate how weak this definition of a marginal seat is, consider the following two examples from the 2010 general election: first, the constituency of Ceredigion. Here, the Liberal Democrats won with 50% of the vote but the Conservatives and Labour were within ten percentage points of each other at 12% and 6% respectively. Ceredigion would therefore have to be classified as a marginal seat. Second, the Liberal Democrat-held seat of Wells would *not* count as marginal because the Conservative (43%) and Labour (8%) shares of the vote are far apart – notwithstanding the slender 800 vote majority of the incumbent

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[4] For the most recent, see D Kavanagh and P Cowley (eds) *The British General Election of 2010*", Macmillan, 2010.

[5] See for example: M Thrasher and C Rallings *British Electoral Facts 1832-2006*, Ashgate, 2007.

[6] Ibid., p.10

[7] Ibid., p.7

[8] J Curtice, *The Last Post*, Parliamentary Brief Online, May 2010. http://www.parliamentarybrief.com/2010/05/the-last-post#page__1

Liberal Democrat MP.[9] Curtice may of course object that his definition explicitly excludes "votes cast for smaller parties", but that simply makes his argument circular. His definition of marginal excludes the reason why constituencies have become *more*, not *less* marginal and competitive in recent decades: the emergence of the Liberal Democrats (and regional parties). Curtice defines away the very trend he is purporting to measure.

The IPPR paper's bold claim that the number of marginal seats has halved since the 1950s is therefore based on a definition of marginal which ignores the votes of 5.7 million eligible voters who happen to live in seats held by neither Labour nor the Conservatives.[10] It also ignores the millions of additional voters who live in Labour and Conservative seats where the main challenger is the Liberal Democrats (or another smaller party). Such a definition of marginal is clearly neither helpful nor illuminating.

*A new look at the evidence*
What happens to the 'disenfranchisement argument' if you use more conventional definitions of marginality? In particular, if a 'marginal constituency' is defined as a seat where the incumbent MP holds a majority of less than 5,000 votes?

Why 5,000? The 2010 general election, far from a landslide, recorded a 5% swing from Labour to the Conservatives.[11] On that kind of negative swing, an incumbent MP with a 5,000 majority would, assuming a uniform swing, narrowly lose

his seat.[12] Therefore, this seems a reasonable definition of what constitutes a marginal constituency.

So, how many constituencies are marginal by this definition, and has their number changed over time? The period from 1979 until 2010 has been analysed as it contains a large variety of different results (Conservative and Labour landslides, small majorities for either governing party as well as a hung parliament). In addition, the period also represents roughly half the 'voting life time' of an average elector.[13] Finally, the period marks the end of the electoral dominance that Labour and the Conservatives have been able to exercise in post-war Britain, and the re-emergence of an electorally credible third party in the shape of the Liberal Democrats.

Between 1979 and 2010, the number of marginal seats (i.e. those with a majority of less than 5,000) increased by 32%, from 168 in 1979 to 221 in 2010 (see Figure 1 overleaf).[14]

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[9] For both examples, see: *The Guardian* (2010 general election spreadsheet).

[10] There are 84 such seats in the current 2010 Parliament, representing 5,707,313 voters. (Source: Ibid.)

[11] Source: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/election 2010/results/

[12] This assumes an average-sized constituency and turnout (75,000 voters, with a 65% turnout) in which a 4.8% swing would reduce a 5,000 vote majority to zero.

[13] Assuming an average life expectancy of 78 which translates into 60 years during which a citizen possesses voting rights.

[14] Sources for this and all subsequent graphs: *The Guardian* (2010 general election spreadsheet), *Electoral Commission*. 2001 and 2005; Compilation of results by Iain Outlaw sourced from *The Daily Telegraph General Election Supplement* (1979-2001), *The Times General Election Supplement* (1979-2001), F W S. Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results 1983-1997,* Ashgate, 1999, The Electoral Commission, 2001.

This means that over one-third (34%) of constituencies in the 2010 House of Commons can be described as marginal. In 1979, only around a quarter of seats (26%) could be thus described. In other words, the last 30 years have seen a dramatic increase in the number of seats where voters have a very good chance of changing their MP – and these seats now cover a third of the country. This disproves Nick Clegg's claim that "the result of the last election was decided by fewer than 500,000 votes."

Crucially, the growth in marginal seats cannot be explained away in terms of protest voting against incumbent MPs of all parties who have been tainted by the parliamentary expenses scandal in the run-up to the 2010 general election. This year's election is *not* a one off. The 30-year data series shows two separate trends. The first period, coinciding roughly with the Conservative period in government in the 1980s and 1990s, shows a stable level of high average parliamentary majorities of more than

10,000 votes (except for 1983 where the average was only around 9,000).

The second period, starting with the 2001 election, sees a dramatic fall in the average parliamentary majority to below 8,500, reaching a low point in 2005. Some of that may have been affected by declining voter participation across the country, but this cannot have been a major variable for explaining the fall in average majorities. Turnout reached a historic post-war low in 2001 at 59.4%, before recovering to 61% in 2005 and climbing back to 65.1% in 2010.[15]

By contrast, average majorities are higher in 2001 than in 2005, and also higher in 2001 than in 2010, despite a nearly 6% national turnout gap (see Figure 2).

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[15]  Source: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/vote2005/ past__ elections/html/default.stm?gotoyear=16

**Fig 1: Proportion of marginal seats[1] after U.K. parliamentary elections**
%
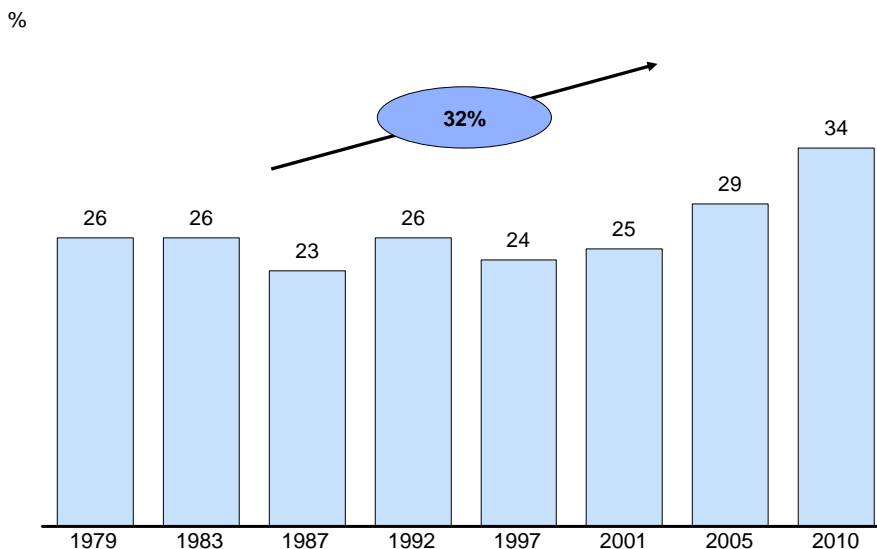


1 Marginal seats defined as having a majority of fewer than 5,000 votes.
SOURCE: Guardian (2010 general election spreadsheet), Electoral Commission (2005); Compilation of results by Iain Outlaw sourced from The Daily
      Telegraph General Election Supplement (1979-2001), The Time General Election Supplement (1979-2001), F.W.S. Craig: British Parliamentary
      Election Results 1983-1997 (Ashgate, 1999), The Electoral Commission (2001)

*Do most of us really live in a safe seat?*
Another claim in the IPPR pamphlet is that "the overwhelming majority of us live in safe seats […] where we have little chance of influencing the result of general elections."[16]

Let us again find a reasonable definition of what constitutes a 'safe seat'. Some of the biggest recorded swings in the 2010 general election were a 14% swing in Hemel Hempstead, a 12% swing in Basingstoke and a 14% swing in Cannock Chase (all from Labour to the Conservatives). Montgomeryshire saw a 13% swing from the Liberal Democrats to the Conservatives and Orpington saw a 12% swing in the same direction. Arguably the biggest swing of all, however, was a 22% swing which resulted in Labour-held Redcar falling to the Liberal Democrats.[17] Notwithstanding such outliers, even in an election dominated by the expenses scandal, it will be very hard to achieve

swings of more than 14% in one go. Applied again to an average constituency, seats with a majority greater than 15,000 can be considered safe.[18]

Looking again at the empirical evidence, we see the opposite trend. In 1979, more than a quarter (27%) of parliamentary seats could be considered 'safe' in that they were unlikely to fall to a different party in one go. By 2010, this had dropped to just over one in seven seats (15%). We can again observe roughly two phases, although the fluctuations here are larger than for the marginal seats. The first phase, from 1979 until 1997, generally exhibits a large number of safe seats whereas the last ten years have seen numbers shrink to only 5%, or 35 seats, in the 2005 general election. Over the entire 30-year period the number of 'safe seats' has fallen by nearly half (see Figure 3 overleaf).

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[16] Lodge and Godfried, op.cit., p.2.

[17] *The Guardian* (2010 General Election spreadsheet).

[18] This assumes again an average-sized constituency and turnout (75,000 voters, with a 65% turnout) in which a 14.3% swing would reduce a 15,000 vote majority to zero.

**Fig 2: Average majority for constituencies after U.K. parliamentary elections**
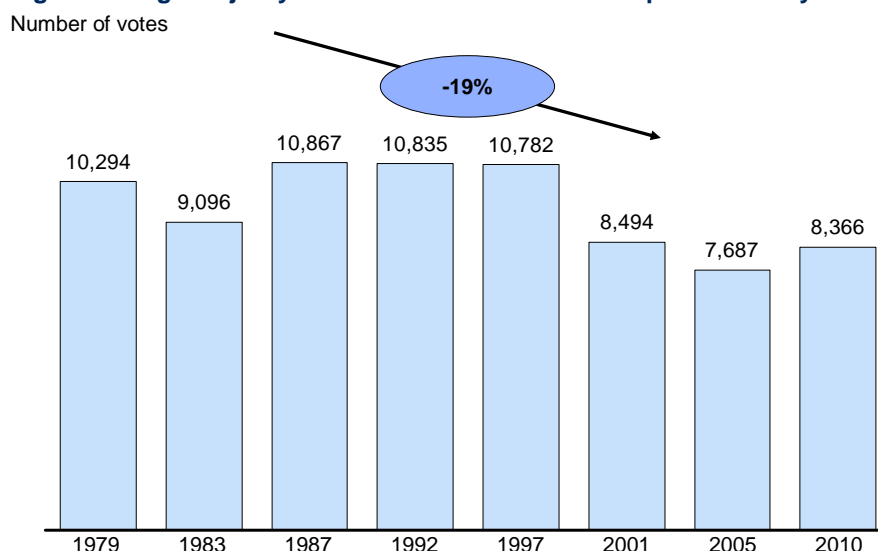
Number of votes

1 Safe seats defined as having a majority of greater than 15,000 votes.
SOURCE: Guardian (2010 general election spreadsheet), Electoral Commission (2005); Compilation of results by Iain Outlaw sourced from The Daily
Telegraph General Election Supplement (1979-2001), The Time General Election Supplement (1979-2001), F.W.S. Craig: British Parliamentary
Election Results 1983-1997 (Ashgate, 1999), The Electoral Commission (2001)

The magnitude of these findings only becomes apparent when the different categories of seats are being considered together. Today, 85% of constituencies are either genuinely marginal and competitive, or they give voters at least a sporting chance of changing the party of their MP. Although the variation in constituency size means one can only approximate a translation of these data into numbers of voters, it will not be far off the mark to say that roughly 39 million voters live in constituencies which cannot be classified as 'safe seats' – hardly the small number of people to which the IPPR pamphlet was alluding.[19]

Even among those seats considered 'safe' by our definition, there has been a trend away from large majorities. Whereas 12% of MPs had a majority exceeding 20,000 in 1979, this number has fallen to just 2% at the most recent general election. In fact, in 2005 there was no seat with a majority of more than 20,000 (see Figure 4).

An important factor which helps to explain this trend is the steady decline in voters' identification with a particular political party as measured by academics such as David Sanders et al. Their book *Political Choice in Britain* has found "the erosion in the intensity of partisan attachments is generalised – identifications with the Conservatives, Labour, and the Liberals and their predecessors all decreased in strength between 1964 and 2001", the period covered by their investigation.[20] On a scale from 0 to 3 (with 3 denoting the strongest identification), Sanders et al record a near halving in the average strength of party identification among voters from ˜2.4 down to ˜1.8 for Labour and the Conservatives and from ˜2.2 down to ˜1.6 for the Liberal Democrats.

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[19] Based on 45.6 million registered voters in the UK in 2010.

[20] D Sanders, H Clarke, M Stewart and P Whiteley: *Political Choice in Britain*, Oxford University Press, 2004.f

**Fig 3: Proportion of safe seats[1] after U.K. parliamentary elections**
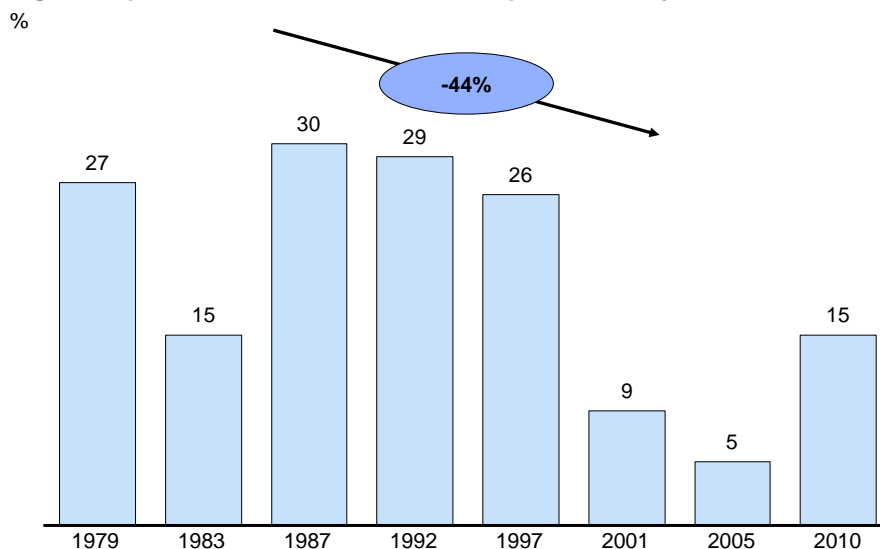
%



1 Safe seats defined as having a majority of greater than 15,000 votes.
SOURCE: Guardian (2010 general election spreadsheet), Electoral Commission (2005); Compilation of results by Iain Outlaw sourced from The Daily Telegraph General Election Supplement (1979-2001), The Time General Election Supplement (1979-2001), F.W.S. Craig: British Parliamentary Election Results 1983-1997 (Ashgate, 1999), The Electoral Commission (2001)

One consequence of this trend is the growing number of occasions where very safe seats were lost by an unpopular government in by-elections, first by the Conservatives in the 1990s and more lately by the Labour Party. Although in some cases, control reverted back at the next general election, many diligent MPs who had captured their seat in a by-election have been able to hang on to it the next time the country as a whole went to the polls.
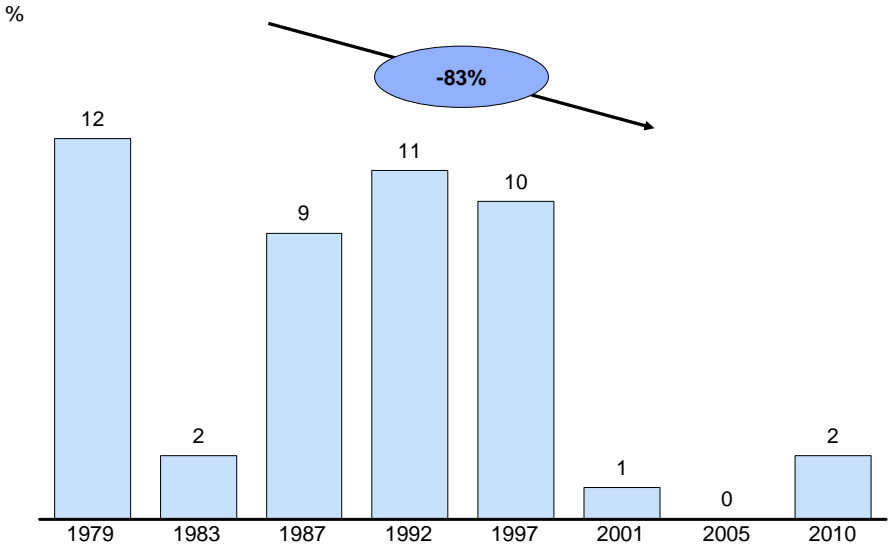
This trend has consequences beyond protest-voting because it reaches even the safest seats in the country as a quick investigation into the seats with the biggest majorities can demonstrate.

The electoral history of the 20 safest seats in 1979 reveals that a quarter of them have since changed hands (see Figure 5). This is all the more remarkable when considering two factors: firstly, the 1979 General Election contained some of the highest majorities recorded during the past three decades. There were five seats with majorities of more than

30,000 votes – this has never been repeated. 1992 and 1997 saw two seats with such large majorities, and in 1987 there was one such seat. In 1983, 2001, 2005 and 2010 there has not been a single seat with a majority of 30,000 or more. Secondly, three of the five 1979 seats that changed hands were not just in the top-20, but the top-10 safest in the country. In other words, nearly a third of the 10 safest seats in 1979 have since changed hands.

So, even if you live in a seeming electoral fortress all your life, there is a reasonable chance that it might fall within just half your voting-age lifetime.

**Fig 4: Proportion of 'extremely' safe seats[1] after U.K. parliamentary elections**

%

-83%

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 12 | 2 | 9 | 11 | 10 | 1 | 0 | 2 |
| 1979 | 1983 | 1987 | 1992 | 1997 | 2001 | 2005 | 2010 |

## CONCLUSION

Both sides of the debate about electoral reform employ powerful arguments to support their case. However, proponents of change hold strong cards when it comes to empirical evidence. The numerical facts that back up the first two arguments in favour of electoral reform, the 'minority' and the 'representation' arguments, are difficult to challenge with purely numerical counter-arguments – although there are very strong non-numerical arguments against the 'minority argument' and the 'representation argument', as laid out above.

However, the third, and most important claim – namely that a FPTP electoral system condemns the vast majority of the population to a spectator role on polling day because the outcome gets decided in a tiny minority of marginal seats – must be challenged.

For this argument is out of date and no longer valid. One third of Britain's electorate now lives in marginal seats, and in 85% of constituencies there is at least the possibility of a change in party. That leaves only 15% of seats with

majorities large enough that they cannot be overcome in a single election. But even here change is possible over time. A quarter of the 20 safest seats in 1979, each elected with majorities far greater than even the top-safest seat in 2010, have since changed party.

Demographic change, the weakening of party allegiance and the emergence of a true three-party system have rendered the electoral reformers' central argument largely redundant.

**Fig 5: A quarter of the safest\* seats in 1979 have changed hands since**

20 seats with largest parliamentary majorities, 1979

| Seat | 1979 majority | 1979 party | Party control since 1979 |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Antrim South** | **38,868** | • UUP | • **DUP gain (2000 by-election),UUP gain (2001), DUP gain (2005)** |
| Fylde South | 32,247 | • Cons | • Cons hold despite boundary changes |
| **Solihull** | **32,207** | • **Cons** | • **LD gain (2005)** |
| Rhondda | 31,481 | • Labour | • Labour hold despite boundary changes |
| Arundel | 30,760 | • Cons | • Cons hold despite boundary changes |
| Epsom & Ewell | 26,358 | • Cons | • Cons hold despite boundary changes |
| Sutton Coldfield | 26,107 | • Cons | • Cons hold despite boundary changes |
| **Eastbourne** | **26,084** | • **Cons** | • **LD gain (1990 by-election), Cons gain (1992), LD gain (2010)** |
| Hemsworth | 26,043 | • Labour | • Labour hold despite boundary changes |
| Rother Valley | 26,002 | • Labour | • Labour hold despite boundary changes |
| Surrey North West | 25,456 | • Cons | • Cons hold despite boundary changes |
| New Forest | 25,450 | • Cons | • Cons hold despite boundary changes |
| Honiton | 25,231 | • Cons | • Cons hold despite boundary changes |
| Windsor & Maidenhead | 25,130 | • Cons | • Cons hold despite boundary changes |
| Essex South East | 24,532 | • Cons | • Cons hold despite boundary changes |
| Melton | 24,360 | • Cons | • Cons hold despite boundary changes |
| **Weston-Super-Mare** | **24,313** | • **Cons** | • **LD gain (1997), Cons gain (2005)** |
| Chichester | 23,776 | • Cons | • Cons hold despite boundary changes |
| **Cardiff West** | **23,763** | • **Labour** | • **Cons gain (1983), Labour gain (1987)** |
| Hull East | 23,692 | • Labour | • Labour hold despite boundary changes |

\* Safe seats defined as having a majority of greater than 15,000 votes.
SOURCE: Guardian (2010 general election spreadsheet), Electoral Commission (2005); Compilation of results by Iain Outlaw sourced from The Daily Telegraph General Election Supplement (1979-2001), The Time General Election Supplement (1979-2001), F.W.S. Craig: British Parliamentary Election Results 1983-1997 (Ashgate, 1999), The Electoral Commission (2001)

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