A Reply to Jonathan Chaplin on Electoral Systems

Jonathan Chaplin's KLICE Comment (May 2015) on how our votes translate into parliamentary representation speaks into a very potent present argument over our electoral system. Long before the surprising Conservative victory, campaigners for electoral change,[1] in particular the Electoral Reform Society, were making the case that our present electoral system (popularly known as First-Past-the-Post or FPTP) is no longer fit for purpose. The subsequent result has only heightened petitions for change. The principal evidence cited from the 2015 results is that the Greens and UKIP gained 16.5% of the popular vote, but a mere 2 seats for their trouble – in contrast to the SNP gaining 56 seats on a relatively paltry 4.7%.

It is an entirely reasonable question to ask if the church, whether collectively or as individual believers, should care about the issue of electoral change. Chaplin does well to contend that Christians ought to care about the health of our representative institutions, and not least the role of representative assemblies such as the House of Commons as a forum for opinions, in which 'truth' might be sought. Where I was brought to disagreement, however, was the subsequent argument that any system that does not reward a party with parliamentary representation commensurate to their vote share is intrinsically unfair, and that such unfairness ought to be contested. One paragraph in particular summarises this argument:

'Those who benefit from FPTP but oppose the principle of proportional representation are in effect displaying profound disrespect for the views of millions of their fellow citizens. They are saying: "your political convictions are worth less than mine; it matters less that your views on justice and the common good are represented to government than that mine are."'

The argument that Christians should support a distinct position on electoral change is not itself new. In 2011 Britain voted against changing to the Alternative Vote (AV) system in a national referendum. Prior to the vote, the Christian think-tank *Ekklesia* argued not only that Christians ought to vote to adopt AV, but also that it was an essential part of the church seeking fairness in society. In a paper I wrote to help voters in our church decide how to vote, the main argument I wished to make was that each electoral system has its own strengths and weaknesses, and academic literature recognises that no system is objectively fairer than any other. The pioneer of Social Choice Theory, William Riker, showed that the only demonstrably fair choice system is simple majority voting between two choices – but we are all painfully aware that we are rarely confronted with two possible outcomes when faced with a choice.

General Elections are the ultimate expression of Social Choice – the means by which the preferences expressed by a collection of voters are turned into an outcome. In parliamentary systems like the UK's, the difficulty is that the election has two distinct but connected outcomes – the first the composition of the legislature, and the second the formation of a government supported by that legislature. There are two views as to how this process should be shaped. In the 'representative' school, broadly supported in Chaplin's paper, the most important thing is that the legislature should approximately reflect the votes cast for parties, and this confers legitimacy upon the government. In this view, any non-proportional system is by definition going to be 'unfair' for distorting the preferences of the electorate. The 'majoritarian' school, however, argues that the primary purpose of elections is to decisively choose a government, highlighting that systems such as FPTP encourage voters to choose between the two main governing possibilities – thus 'fairness' is related instead to one party winning more votes than any other single party, and being held responsible for their conduct while in office. Academics recognise the relative strengths and weaknesses of both arrangements, and conclude that which system is judged most suitable depends upon what is most prized in the final outcome.

The main value that proportional systems enshrine is that the number of seats a party receives will broadly reflect their vote share - which Chaplin ties to the value that each voter's preference is counted equally in the political process and is not 'wasted.' However, I would contest that a general election is also a means, albeit imperfect, to determine the 'will' of the electorate as to whom should govern them, as much as determining the composition of Parliament. In view of this, there are a number of ways in which proportional systems can also disenfranchise sections of the electorate, or potentially lead to less desired outcomes.

In the first instance, **PR doesn't necessarily lead to fairer outcomes in terms of vote share or government composition**. The 2013 German *Bundestag* elections is a pertinent recent example, where Angela Merkel's CDU/CSU alliance increased their vote share by a full 5%, winning 49.4%, a full 19.4% ahead of the nearest challengers, the SPD, making them clearly the outright winners of the election. Despite this, Merkel was forced to form a coalition with the losing SPD rather than continue her coalition with the FDP (the German Liberals) as her former coalition partners had failed to surpass the 5% threshold necessary to win seats under Germany's PR system. Given that the *Alternative für Deutschland* (the German equivalent of UKIP) also polled just under 5%, that meant that almost 10% of the German electorate went unrepresented, and the Germans ended up with a Grand Coalition that they certainly did not vote for. Given the refusal of the other two parties with seats (the Left and the Greens) to work with Merkel, it highlights the potential danger in PR systems for a 'coalition of the losers' to defeat the largest party.

Secondly, **PR deprives voters of the power to directly change the government**. To return to the example of Germany, only once has a federal election resulted in an outright change of government – the Red/Green landslide of 1998. Every other change of government has been due to one of the governing parties choosing to work with an opposition party instead – most usually the FDP. You therefore end up with one of two potential PR systems. The first is akin to Germany and the Republic of Ireland, where two large parties of the left and right compete, with several smaller parties in the middle. Party strength is determined by voters, but the resultant coalition is not. The second, as seen in Norway and in the recent Danish election, is where you have a rough bloc of left and right leaning parties – effectively a two party system, but much more entrenched and harder to change relative to FPTP.

The problem is compounded by the fact that **PR encourages parties to chase a core vote rather than beyond their base.** In systems like FPTP a party can only win if it expands beyond their base, encouraging a dual action of pulling in their own hardliners and reaching an accommodation with moderate voters. As the example of UKIP and the Green Party shows, any party that tries to split off for a sectional interest has enormous difficulty breaking through. PR systems in contrast do not encourage accommodations because a sectional interest is more or less guaranteed to turn their vote into seats. My homeland of Northern Ireland, while of course influenced by its highly sectarian history, reflects this reality through use of a PR system, Single Transferable Vote. The moderate Ulster Unionists and SDLP lost out to the DUP and Sinn Fein respectively as they attempted to move to the middle, as the other parties were able to seize their traditional tribal base. This means that across several elections to the NI Assembly, the designation of unionists and nationalists[2] has not changed at all as the two main blocs have been unable to appeal to voters who would not otherwise have voted for them.

It could (and has) been argued that reflecting sectional interests is not a bad thing, allowing voices that might not otherwise be heard to make their views known – and this is a key component of Chaplin's argument. While true, the problem is that **once required to make decisions, representatives have surprisingly little choice.** In parliamentary systems you can have one of two outcomes – a stable coalition as seen in the last Parliament, which effectively operates no differently from a single party government, or a minority government relying on support vote-by-vote, like the Callaghan government in the 1970s. The latter is obviously not very desirable, being very unstable

and often resulting in horse-trading and pork barrel politics to get measures through. The former highlights that the coalitions that result from PR contests do not necessarily produce different outcomes to single-party majority government, inasmuch as a government with a majority (whether formed of one or many parties) can do whatever it wants. The government functions as one bloc – albeit that the backbench revolts that occasionally occur can now be categorised by distinct party groups. In either case, as I have [argued](#) elsewhere, whether a representative is formally in the government or not, when they vote they have just one choice – to support or oppose a measure. FPTP therefore embraces this reality and focuses the electoral contest on whether a candidate will support or oppose the government.

One of the key principles Chaplin argues for is that representative assemblies should be 'truth seekers' – determining by the wisdom and reasoning of its members the correct way forward. PR seeks to approximate the views of the electorate, but in practice truth is not determined case-by-case. A governing coalition seeks the 'cheapest deal possible' - that is to say that the larger coalition partner will form a government with whichever smaller party demands the fewest concessions. A stable coalition (as with the Conservative/Liberal-Democrat coalition) usually has a formal coalition agreement, which negates the capacity for parties to break faith and form deals with other parties while in government – so in practice not every voice is heard or made to count. While it is also true that in FPTP the opposition parties are not easily heard, the system does have two distinct advantages over PR. The first is that government backbenchers, while not able to rebel at will, are significantly freer to join the opposition to vote against legislation they don't like. The second is that in FPTP a government operates as a different kind of coalition – built from a base wide enough to win a plurality of votes. A government therefore chooses its policies both to reflect the promises they made to win the previous election, and also to maximise the chances they will win the next one.

While I have used a few arguments to demonstrate that PR systems do not necessarily produce fairer outcomes, there are also positive arguments for why FPTP can produce fairer and better outcomes. Some have been alluded to above – that FPTP enables voters to directly choose who governs them and reduces the likelihood of an unwanted governing coalition. I think the most potent argument however is that **FPTP encourages political parties to reach beyond their natural base**. No party can win under the present system without persuading undecided voters to support them, so a system that encourages voters towards two main parties acts positively for those seeking truth by pulling parties away from narrow sectional interest and encouraging them to build a broad base of support. The focus on parties as single units is not necessarily the most helpful when one considers the extent to which parties are built of different coalitions who agree enough to campaign together, but still differ on certain issues. Truth seeking is not just something that happens in public debate, but also in the private debate of party structures - and it can be contended that it is better done where a party is not focused on a niche vote.

I would like to briefly acknowledge two peculiarities from the 2015 result that have made advocates for electoral change especially vociferous. The first is the SNP landslide – the party winning almost every Scottish seat on 50% of the Scottish vote. Yes their share of seats is a gross exaggeration of their vote share in Scotland, but the swings in Scotland are historic across any era of electoral history – the SNP was averaging swings of 30%, when the 17% swing that unseated Michael Portillo in 1997 was deemed highly unusual. Their influence in Scotland is indeed disproportionate, but it reflects a larger and more powerful movement in Scottish politics, to which the electoral system is only a distraction. Secondly, the collective 16.5% vote to UKIP and the Greens represented by only two seats, makes the result even less proportional than usual. I think however that the 2015 election can be discounted as an outlier due to the collapse of the Liberal Democrat vote from 23% to 8%. The uncertainty of where their 15% of the vote would go made it much less certain who was in the lead and challenging in certain seats. Coupled to a media narrative that multi-party politics had arrived, it reduced the usual propensity of FPTP to pull voters to the two main parties. The unusual disproportionality of the 2015 result does not say to me that the system is broken, simply that we

have come through a period of flux, and that there is a challenge for the main political parties to re-engage with the electorate.

I would finally like to recognise the direct plea that FPTP effectively discounts the votes of those who do not win, or who live in very safe seats, thus rendering their choice 'less valuable'. It is worth remembering that all choice systems involve some distortion of voters' preferences. Even in a PR system where one is free to choose one's most preferred option, a voter will have to choose between whether they most prioritise how a party would govern, the policies they put forward, or the party's leadership. They may also continuously vote for a party with little chance of being in a governing coalition – as is the case for Conservative voters in the Scottish Parliament, who effectively exercise no meaningful power.

In this regard FPTP is no different. The voter is required to make a choice, but the aggregation takes place at the local rather than national level. I have argued that tactical voting exists only as an academic measure, because if (for example) someone votes Liberal Democrat to defeat an incumbent Labour or Conservative MP, they have decided the most important factor is not which party they like best, but who is the best of the possible winners. This can be expressed in other ways – a voter preferring an MP who represents the area well, even if they do not like the party, or voting for a party because of (or despite!) the party leader. Such elections, however, make the key focus whether your MP will support the government or oppose it – and does so very well. PR does not offer this same capacity to hold a government to account, owing to the focus on voting for a party's policy platform – a platform which ultimately must be either ignored in opposition, or compromised in a coalition partnership. Measuring FPTP by the standards of proportionality ignores the valuable measure by which elections hold representatives and governments to account – a measure according to which it is arguably much better than PR.

To conclude, it is worth asking why the church should care about the electoral reform debate. In short, it is that electoral systems are not static and impartial – they shape the kind of politics that subsequently emerges, which in turn shapes the kind and quality of government we live under. This is part of the reason why parties such as the Liberal Democrats assert that 'new' politics can only emerge with electoral change. I will assume readers of this article will already be persuaded of the God-given mandate to govern wisely,[3] and hope you would agree that the choice to implement electoral reform, or to continuously delay it, would have an impact on the way our nation does politics – but that there isn't agreement on whether reform is necessarily and objectively a positive step. My own view is that there is a debate to be had, not necessarily a wrong to be made right.

There are strong arguments for why proportional systems may produce outcomes that are better or fairer from the viewpoint of one particular set of criteria, but equally strong arguments for why FPTP can produce outcomes that are better and fairer judging by a different set of criteria. Assuming that electoral change remains on the agenda, it is important to recognise the strength of the arguments on both sides, and that in the absence of a clearly demonstrable case of electoral fairness, there is not a distinctly 'Christian' position on electoral change.

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[1] I purposefully use the term 'change' rather than 'reform' as the latter implies a necessarily positive connotation.
[2] To protect the interests of each community, members of the Northern Ireland Assembly designate themselves as 'Unionist', 'Nationalist' or 'Other' to ensure each community provides majority support to contentious votes.
[3] If not, then I would recommend *God and Government*, edited by Nick Spencer & Jonathan Chaplin (SPCK 2009), as an excellent introduction and argument for the case.