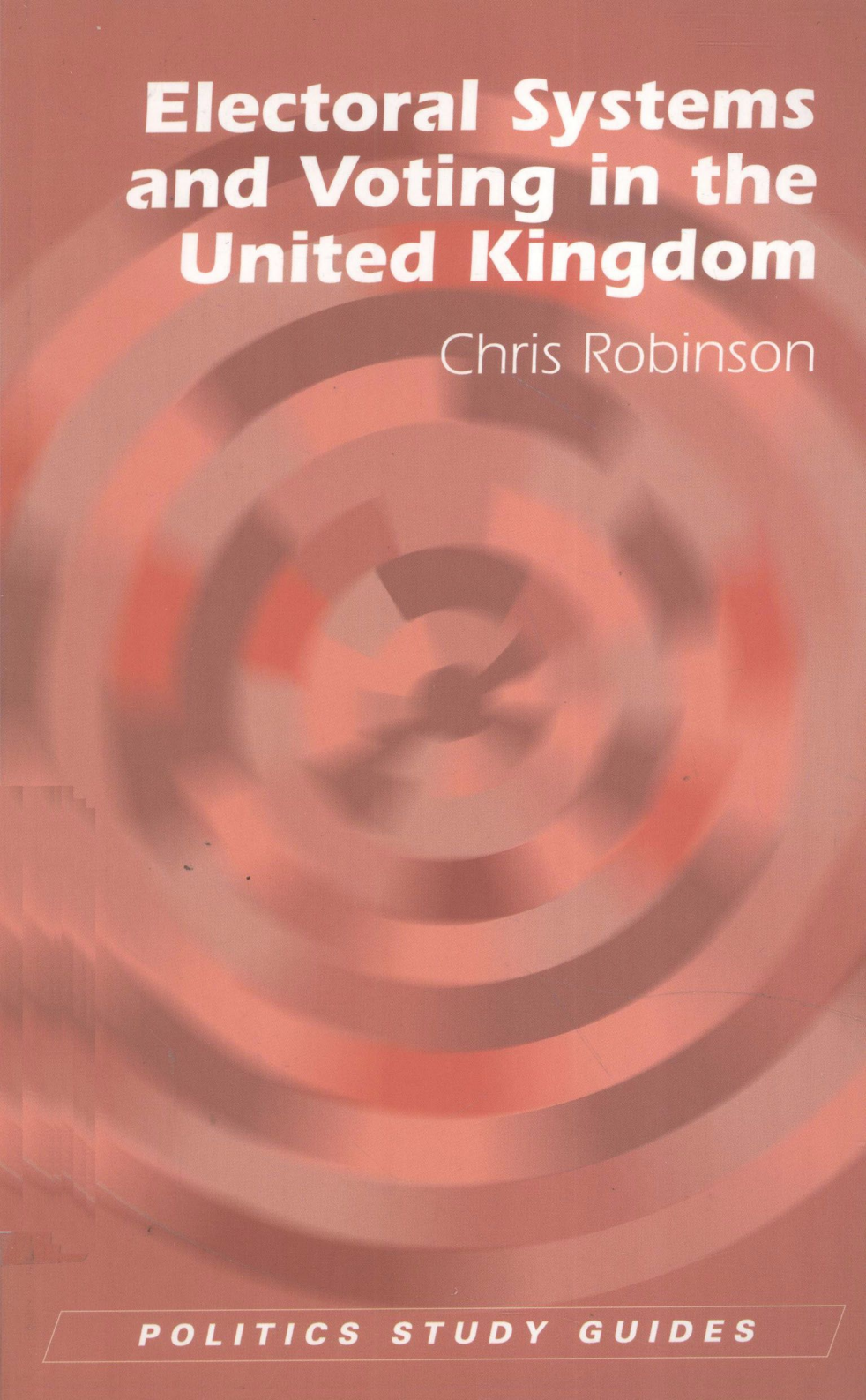
Electoral Systems and Voting in the United Kingdom

Chris Robinson



POLITICS STUDY GUIDES

Electoral Systems and Voting in the United Kingdom

Chris Robinson

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

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Overview

Students of politics have been afforded the opportunity to research the impact of the various recent constitutional reforms that have been made in the United Kingdom. This chapter introduces the reforms to the various methods of electing representatives in the UK.

In the first instance, the principles and functions of elections are explored. These will provide the reader with a useful point of reference when assessing the various electoral systems that are discussed in the following chapters of the book.

Key issues to be covered in this chapter

- Previous calls to reform the simple plurality electoral system
- Anomalies in the UK voting system
- The Blair government's constitutional reforms
- The main functions of elections
- The main principles of elections

Background

As recently as 1998, any book examining alternative voting systems to the one used to elect the British House of Commons would have had to look abroad for case studies of how they operate in practice. Apart from in Northern Ireland, all elections in the UK used the first-past-the-post electoral system. Books on electoral systems would often attempt some form of comparative analysis in order to interpret the likely impact of such systems if they were introduced for elections to Westminster. Students reading such books would have to become familiar with the workings of electoral systems around the world in order to obtain a contextual understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the voting system in their own country.

The first-past-the-post voting system has been criticised for decades. Attempts to reform it go back to the period between the two world wars. In recent times calls for its reform have become louder. But despite these calls there was no real movement on this issue at all until the late 1990s. The reasons for this inaction for the half-century following the end of World War Two are easily explained. In the 1950s and 1960s, Labour and the Conservatives alternated in power in a political system where regularly over 90 per cent of voters supported them. The issue of electoral reform was not on their agendas; indeed, the issue was not debated beyond the political parties. Apart from the occasional by-election upset, Britain's two-party system seemed as secure and stable as ever. Appearances can be deceptive, however, because despite this apparent strength, neither Labour nor the Conservatives could ever muster 50 per cent of the vote when elected to office. This lack of a popular mandate has been one of the main criticisms levelled at UK governments over the years. However, given the fact that no other political party could muster a percentage of votes even in double figures during this era, this issue was not as controversial as it would become by the 1970s and 1980s.

Changes in voting behaviour

Over the past thirty years, there has been much to comment upon about changing voting behaviour in Britain. The stability and the certainties that were apparent in the 1950s and 1960s seem to have been

replaced by greater uncertainties. Governments can be elected with hundred-seat majorities and yet having polled fewer votes than in the previous election when they had a majority of only twenty. Political parties may be within two percentage points of one another, but one might have ten times more seats than the other. Political parties may pick up 19 per cent of the national vote and win no seats in an election. These are just some of the anomalies that have been thrown up by the first-past-the-post voting system in recent elections.

These anomalies, which became characteristic of the UK electoral system, have ignited calls for reform. They started in the 1970s when the first cracks in the Conservative–Labour domination of votes started to show. In the February 1974 general election, the Liberals polled over six million votes (19.1 per cent of the vote) and yet won only fourteen seats in the House of Commons. The inadequacies of the system have to some extent been exposed by the way that voting behaviour has changed over the past forty years. It can be argued that these inadequacies have always existed; it is simply that their practical manifestations did not catch the public mood until the injustices, such as the one alluded to above, became so apparent. After the failure of any party to gain a parliamentary majority in the 2010 general election, resulting in a Conservative–Liberal coalition government, voting systems are now being looked at with renewed interest.

Government responses

These calls were given a sympathetic hearing by the incoming Blair government. Since the general election of 1997, a number of political and constitutional reforms, including changes to the way that the UK elects its MEPs and the introduction of devolved government in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, have taken place in the United Kingdom, and these have been accompanied by a variety of electoral systems in use much closer to home than those described in textbooks in the past. It is now possible to study the workings of these systems and examine the effects that they have on voting behaviour as well as the impact that they have on political parties and the party system. It is possible to look at these systems in a UK context and analyse their strengths and weaknesses without having to make extrapolations and assumptions from one political system to another.

Aims of the book

One of the main aims of this book is to examine the various electoral systems mainly within, but sometimes beyond, the United Kingdom. The first part of this book examines the main categories of electoral system. Chapter 2 examines the workings of the simple plurality system, otherwise known as first-past-the-post, currently used for UK general elections and local government elections in England. Chapter 3 examines a number of majoritarian voting systems, and Chapter 4 examines several proportional electoral systems.

Each of these early chapters will look at the principles of each system and how it works in practice, and where possible will provide a sample of the voting paper used in the election concerned. The impact of the system will be assessed as well as an evaluation provided of its possible use in elections to the House of Commons. There are also several case studies; these are largely drawn from the United Kingdom, but occasionally there is a study from abroad to further illustrate the workings of a particular system or an electoral system which does not operate in the United Kingdom.

The second aim of this book is to analyse voting behaviour in the United Kingdom. Chapter 5 examines the main developments in voting behaviour in Great Britain since the 1950s. This covers the so-called era of alignment when Conservatives and Labour dominated the British political landscape in terms of votes and seats in the House of Commons. The chapter also covers the later period of dealignment where increasing numbers of voters broke free of these earlier ties to the two main parties. The chapter sets the context for the remainder of the book because, as mentioned earlier, it has been the long-term shifts in voting behaviour that have exposed the inadequacies of the UK voting system. The calls for electoral reform have coincided with calls for greater autonomy for parts of the United Kingdom, and in answering these calls, the Labour government elected in 1997 offered not only devolution, but devolution with proportionally elected assemblies.

The remaining four chapters are devoted to studying voting for those institutions with proportional electoral systems. Chapter 6 will examine voting in the three elections to the Scottish Parliament. Chapter 7 will analyse voting in elections to the National Assembly

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