

How Votes Become Seats: Electoral Outcomes and Support for Proportional Representation

Stuart Perrett*

*Research Fellow
University College London

EPOP
18 September 2026

Motivation | Electoral reform in Britain

- Electoral reform debated in Parliament since at least 1831 Bogdanor (1981)
- Recurrent but unresolved debate Mitchell (2005)
- 2024 general election most disproportionate on record Miori and Green (2025); Prosser (2025)



Andy Burnham wants to change the voting system – and it could well happen

Change voting system before next election, Davey urges Burnham

Existing explanations of public support for more proportional rules:

1. Ideology, values, perceptions of fairness Banducci & Karp (1999); Curtice & Seyd (2011); Curtice (2013)
2. “Winners” versus “losers” Anderson et al (2005); Bowler & Donovan (2007); Blais (2008)

→ Mostly cross-sectional studies with institutional preferences treated as fixed

Overall question

Do voters **update** their **institutional preferences** in response to changing **representational outcomes**?

Argument | Electoral institutions generate feedback effects

1. Electoral rules shape representational outcomes Duverger (1954), Taagepera & Shugart (1989), Cox (1997)
 - Constituency representation
 - Government formation
 - Conversion of votes to seats
2. Representational outcomes shape preferences about electoral rules

Hypothesis | Voters update their institutional preferences

Support for PR responds to changes in the proportionality of electoral outcomes associated with a voter's party, independently of national or constituency winner-loser status

- Nine waves of the British Election Study Internet Panel
- House of Commons Library election results
- Five general elections: 2010, 2015, 2017, 2019 & 2024
- Observations $\approx 136,000$; Respondents $\approx 67,000$; 36 party-election pairs

Outcome | PR support

Thinking about the outcomes of general elections, which of these statements is more important to you?

- 0 That one party gets more than half the seats in parliament so it can govern on its own, or
- 1 That every party's percentage of seats in parliament is the same as their percentage of the vote
- × Don't know

→ Trade-off between **governability** & **proportionality** Carey & Hix (2011)

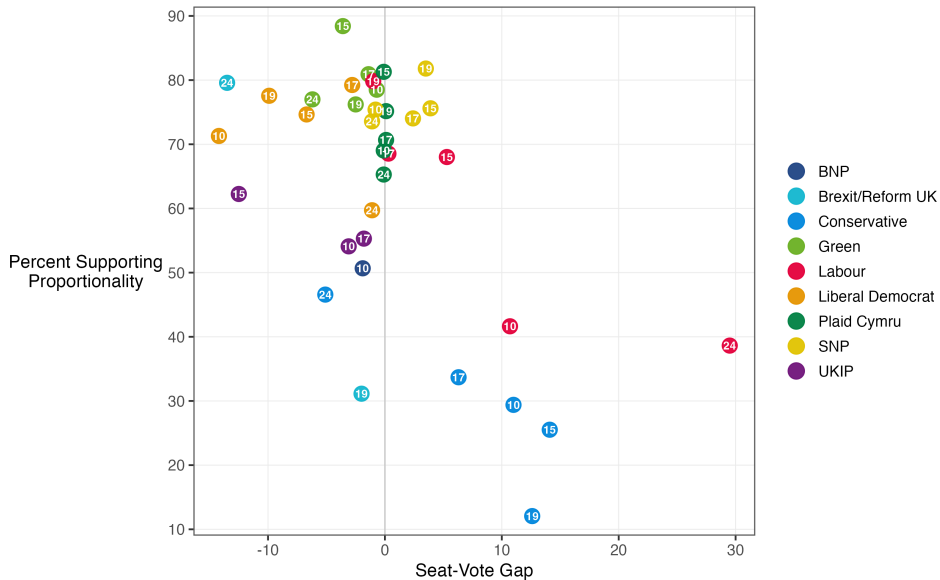
Predictor | Seat-vote gap

For party p at election e :

$$\text{Seat Vote Gap}_{pe} = \text{Seat Share}_{pe} - \text{Vote Share}_{pe}$$

- Measured in percentage points
- Positive values indicate **over**-representation; negative **under**-representation
- Linked to individuals by reported vote choice

Descriptive patterns | PR support varies with seat-vote gaps



Method | Identifying individual updating

Estimating **within-individual** i changes in support for PR across elections, conditional on election e and vote choice p :

$$Y_{ie} = \beta \text{SeatVoteGap}_{ie} + \alpha_i + \gamma_e + \delta_{p(i,e)} + \varepsilon_{ie}$$

- α_i absorb stable predispositions towards PR
- γ_e absorb common election-specific shocks
- $\delta_{p(i,e)}$ absorb party differences in PR support

Results | Seat-vote gaps predict changes in PR support

	1. Seat-Vote Gap	2. + Winner-Loser
Seat-Vote Gap	-.013***	
	(.001)	
Constituency Winner		
National Winner		

Individual, election, and vote-choice fixed effects

Standard errors clustered at individual and party-election levels

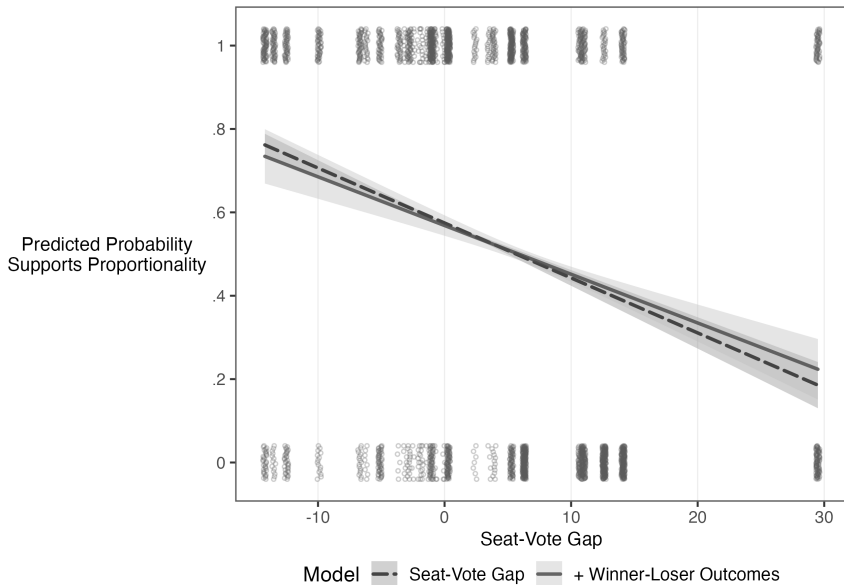
Results | Seat-vote gaps predict changes in PR support

	1. Seat-Vote Gap	2. + Winner-Loser
Seat-Vote Gap	-.013*** (.001)	-.012*** (.001)
Constituency Winner		-.025*** (.006)
National Winner		-.037 (.029)

Individual, election, and vote-choice fixed effects

Standard errors clustered at individual and party-election levels

Results | PR support falls as seat-vote advantage increases



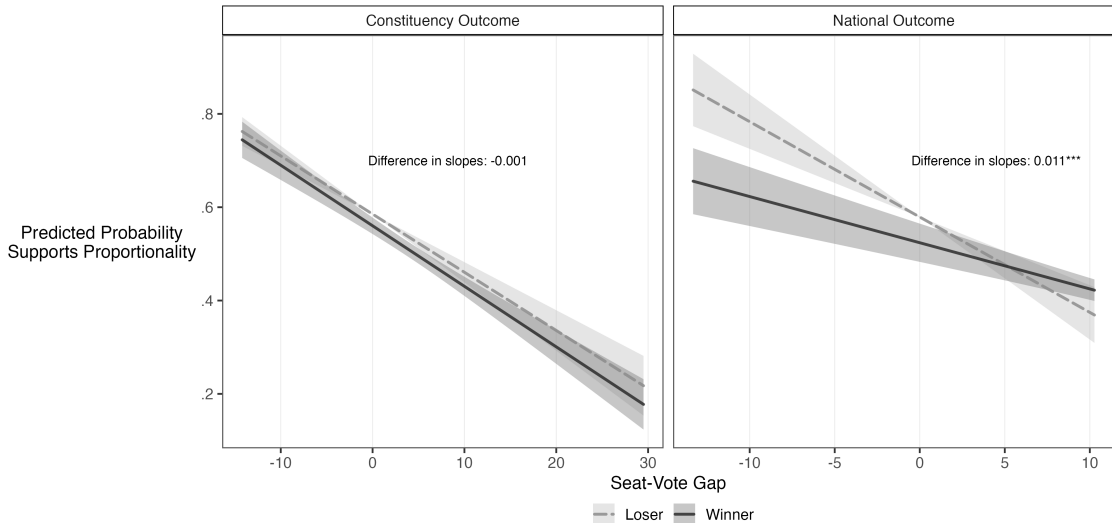
Results | Seat-vote effects by electoral success

	3. Local Outcome	4. National Outcome
Seat-Vote Gap	-.012*** (.001)	-.020*** (.003)
Constituency Winner	-.025** (.009)	
National Winner		-.055* (.021)
Seat-Vote Gap $\times$ Constituency Winner	-.001 (.001)	
Seat-Vote Gap $\times$ National Winner		.011*** (.003)

Individual, election, and vote-choice fixed effects

Standard errors clustered at individual and party-election levels

Results | Seat-vote effects vary with national success



Conclusion | Electoral outcomes shape institutional preferences

- Voters respond to representational outcomes beyond winning or losing
- **1-point increase** in seat-vote advantage associated with a **1.2-point decline** in PR support
- Seat-vote gaps fluctuate 5–15 points: **meaningful movement** in institutional preferences

Conclusion | Theoretical pay-off

- Institutions generate **feedback effects** Pierson (1993)
 - Institutional preferences **endogenous** to political outcomes Riker (1980); Shepsle (1989); Tsebelis (2002)
 - Electoral reform is **strategic** Boix (1999); Colomer (2005)
 - Party positions shift in response to previous electoral results Abou-Chadi & Stoetzer (2020)
- These accounts of elites apply to voters too!

Unstable support for electoral reform in Britain under conditions of:

1. Party **dealignment** and voter **volatility** Sobolewska & Ford (2020); Fieldhouse et al (2020)
2. Party system **fragmentation** and shifting seat-vote gaps Prosser (2025)

How votes become seats

Electoral outcomes and support for proportional representation

Thank you

`s.perrett@ucl.ac.uk`