1.5 First Past the Post: Operation and Impact on UK General Elections

EDEXCEL 9PL0 · about 50 minutes · Write-in edition

Total Marks

Name: _____ Date: ____ / ____ / _____

Answer ALL questions. Write full sentences for extended responses (questions worth 6 marks or more). Spend approximately 50 minutes on this pack.

1 This question asks for an example of a type of seat under First Past the Post in the context of UK general elections.

(Total for Question 1 is 1 mark)

2 This question asks about the term 'disproportionality' in the context of national UK general election results under First Past the Post.

(Total for Question 2 is 2 marks)

3 State what tactical voting means in UK general elections under First Past the Post, and give one brief consequence.

(Total for Question 3 is 2 marks)

4 This question asks for two real-world examples from recent UK general elections illustrating FPTP disproportionality, using the 2015, 2017 and 2019 election outcomes.

(Total for Question 4 is 3 marks)

5 Explain the distinction between safe and marginal seats and their impact on party strategy under First Past the Post in UK general elections.

(Total for Question 5 is 6 marks)

6 Evaluate the view that First Past the Post should be replaced for UK general elections.

(Total for Question 6 is 24 marks)

7 Using the source, analyse how FPTP disadvantages smaller and nationally dispersed parties when converting votes to seats.

(Total for Question 7 is 12 marks)

Mark scheme · 1.5 First Past the Post: Operation and Impact on UK General Elections

Question 1

names either a 'safe seat' or a 'marginal seat' cao **B1**

Answer: Safe seat or marginal seat.

Question 2

identifies that disproportionality means a mismatch between national vote share and number of seats won **B1**

gives an example effect, e.g. a party winning a larger share of seats than its vote share or vice versa **B1**

Answer: Disproportionality is the mismatch between national vote share and the percentage of seats a party wins in Parliament, for example a party gaining a large share of seats with a smaller share of votes or winning many votes but few seats.

Question 3

states that tactical voting involves casting a vote for a less preferred but more viable candidate to prevent another candidate winning **B1**

gives a brief consequence, e.g. it can affect marginal seats and national outcomes **B1**

Answer: Tactical voting is when voters support a less preferred but more viable candidate to stop an undesired candidate winning; it tends to be concentrated in marginal seats and can affect overall seat totals under FPTP.

Question 4

one correct example, e.g. Conservatives 2015: 36.9% vote share, 50.8% of seats **B1**

second correct example, e.g. UKIP 2015: 12.6% vote share but 1 seat (0.15% of seats) or Liberal Democrats 2015: 7.9% vote and 8 seats **B1**

examples correctly dated and linked to the stated election year **B1**

Answer: Examples include: Conservatives in 2015 won 36.9% of the UK vote but 50.8% of seats; UKIP in 2015 won 12.6% of the vote but only 1 seat, illustrating a major vote to seats distortion.

Question 5

defines a safe seat as a constituency where one party regularly achieves a large majority **B1**

defines a marginal seat as a constituency where the result is frequently close and small swings can change the winner **B1**

explains that parties concentrate resources and campaign effort on marginals rather than safe seats **B1**

explains the consequence that some areas receive more attention and policy promises because they are electorally competitive **B1**

explains that safe seats can lead to lower turnout or intra-party selection battles, reducing accountability **B1**

gives a brief contemporary example or consequence, e.g. targetting marginals in 2017 and 2019 campaigns **B1**

Answer: A safe seat is one where a party routinely wins by a large margin, while a marginal seat is decided by a small number of votes and can change hands with modest swings. Under FPTP parties focus money, time and high-profile visits on marginal seats to maximise seat gains, meaning policy offerings and campaign intensity concentrate on a limited set of constituencies. Safe seats may see lower turnout or less active campaigning and can produce less electoral accountability. Parties targeted marginals heavily in the 2017 and 2019 campaigns, reflecting this strategic focus.

Question 6

Level 0 No relevant content. **0**

Level 1 Basic, limited knowledge of FPTP and potential alternatives. Answer may be descriptive with little analysis or evaluation and few, if any, contemporary examples. **1-6**

Level 2 Clear, accurate knowledge of FPTP features and at least one reform alternative, with some developed analysis about likely effects. Evaluation is present but may be one-sided or lightly supported with examples. **7-12**

Level 3 Detailed knowledge and analysis of FPTP and multiple alternative systems, using well-selected contemporary examples (for example 2015, 2017, 2019 outcomes). Evaluation weighs benefits and disadvantages and begins to reach a sustained judgement. **13-18**

Level 4 Sophisticated and balanced evaluation integrating accurate, wide-ranging knowledge of FPTP mechanics and plausible alternative systems, using precise examples and considering political feasibility, effects on party system, government stability and voter accountability, to reach a clear, well-supported judgement. **19-24**

Indicative content:

- Arguments for replacing FPTP: it produces high disproportionality between national vote share and seats (e.g. UKIP 2015, Liberal Democrats 2015), marginalises nationally dispersed smaller parties, and encourages tactical voting and concentration on marginals rather than nationwide policy outreach.
- Replace-advantages: more proportional systems would better reflect voter preferences, increase representation for smaller parties and under-represented groups, reduce wasted votes and potentially increase turnout and legitimacy.
- Arguments against replacing FPTP: it tends to produce single-party majority governments which can provide clear accountability and stable government; alternatives can produce coalition or minority governments which some argue reduce decisive government; FPTP ensures local constituency representation through single-member MPs.
- Replace-disadvantages: more proportional systems can weaken the link between a single MP and a defined constituency, can empower small parties disproportionally through coalitions, may produce greater executive instability or fragmented party systems, and may be less understandable to some voters.
- Political feasibility and recent history: the 2011 AV referendum rejected a reform, and major parties with current advantages under FPTP may resist change; reforms require wide political consensus and public legitimacy to be durable.
- Evidence to weigh: 2015 and 2019 outcomes that show both benefits of FPTP for decisive majorities and costs in terms of representation; the SNP example shows how regional concentration is rewarded while dispersed parties pay a penalty.
- A strong conclusion should reach a balanced judgement, for example arguing that while FPTP has democratic costs in representation and fairness, it also provides clear lines of accountability and government formation; whether it should be replaced depends on the relative value placed on proportionality versus single-party government stability and the political feasibility of reform.

Question 7

Level 0 No relevant content. **0**

Level 1 Simple analysis using one extract, limited linking to FPTP mechanics and little use of the source to support points. **1-3**

Level 2 Clear analysis drawing on both extracts, explaining how single-member plurality converts concentrated regional support into seats and penalises dispersed support, with some use of contemporary examples. **4-6**

Level 3 Detailed analysis that uses the extracts to explain the causal mechanism and provides well-selected contemporary examples such as UKIP 2015, and shows an understanding of limits or countervailing factors. **7-9**

Level 4 Sophisticated analysis driven by the sources, integrating both extracts to show how FPTP's constituency-level plurality rule produces structural bias against dispersed parties, using precise election data and evaluating the strength of the source claims. **10-12**

Indicative content:

- Extract A highlights the mechanical point that only first place finishes in single-member constituencies yield seats, so national vote share that is thinly spread rarely translates into seats; this explains why a party with widespread but shallow support wins few seats.
- Extract B gives the concrete 2015 example of UKIP, whose 12.6% national vote produced just one Commons seat, illustrating the source claim about structural artefact rather than purely voter rejection by constituencies.
- Using both extracts, connect the general mechanism and the specific example: FPTP rewards geographically concentrated parties (for example, SNP in Scotland in 2015 won many seats with relatively modest national UK vote share concentrated in Scotland) and penalises parties whose support is broad but not locally dominant.
- Consider countervailing factors mentioned or implied in the extracts, such as tactical voting in marginals which can depress smaller-party second preference effects, or regional parties that convert concentration into representation, showing the system is not uniformly anti-small-party but discriminates by geographic distribution.
- Use precise data where relevant, for example UKIP 2015: 12.6% of vote, 1 seat; SNP 2015: 4.7% of UK vote but 56 seats, to show how distribution matters.
- Evaluation of the source claims might note that while FPTP structurally disadvantages dispersed parties, party organisation, local candidates, and differential turnout also affect outcomes, so the system is a key factor but not the sole determinant of under-representation.