



POL.UKP5 First Past the Post: Operation and Impact on UK General Elections

EDEXCEL 9PL0 · Calculators not allowed · about 80 minutes

Total Marks

Name: _____ Date: ____ / ____ / ____

**Answer ALL questions. Write full sentences for extended responses (questions worth 6 marks or more).
Spend approximately 80 minutes on this pack.**

- 1** This question tests the basic mechanics of First Past the Post in UK general elections, focusing on individual constituencies.

(Total for Question 1 is 1 mark)

- 2** 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 2 is 1 mark)

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

(Total for Question 3 is 2 marks)

- 4** This question is about tactical voting as observed in UK general elections under First Past the Post.

(Total for Question 4 is 2 marks)

- 5** 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 5 is 3 marks)

- 6** This question asks for an explanation of why First Past the Post tends to produce single-party majority governments, with reference to constituency-level mechanics.

(Total for Question 6 is 4 marks)

- 7** This question is about 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 7 is 6 marks)

- 8** Using the source extracts below, analyse the argument that First Past the Post disadvantages smaller and geographically spread parties in UK general elections.

Extract A (short analytical comment, 2020): "Because FPTP converts votes into single-member wins, a party with support spread evenly nationwide reaches few first places and thus wins few seats; concentrated regional support is rewarded while diffuse national support is not."

Extract B (comment from a political scientist, 2019): "The 2015 result showed how the UK Independence Party could gain over 12% of the popular vote but obtain almost no representation in the Commons, a structural artefact of single-member plurality rather than voter preference alone."

Context: both extracts discuss effects visible in the 2015 general election and subsequent commentary.

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

(Total for Question 8 is 12 marks)

- 9** This question asks for two distinct consequences of FPTP on party behaviour or the party system in the UK, illustrated with recent election evidence from 2015 to 2019.

(Total for Question 9 is 5 marks)

- 10** This question asks you to explain one institutional reform often proposed as a remedy for FPTP's disproportionality, and to state why this remedy is excluded from this pack's detailed coverage. The reform named should be one of: Additional Member System (AMS), Single Transferable Vote (STV) or Supplementary Vote (SV).

(Total for Question 10 is 4 marks)

- 11** Evaluate the view that First Past the Post should be replaced for UK general elections.

(Total for Question 11 is 24 marks)

Mark scheme · POL.UKP5 First Past the Post: Operation and Impact on UK General Elections

Question 1

- **B1** a concise definition identifying single member plurality, e.g. the candidate with the most votes in a constituency wins the seat
- **Answer: A voting system in which each constituency elects one MP and the candidate with the most votes, a simple plurality, wins the seat.**

Question 2

- **B1** names either a 'safe seat' or a 'marginal seat' correctly
- **Answer: Safe seat or marginal seat.**

Question 3

- **B1** 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
- **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 4

- **B1** 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
- **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 5

- **B1** 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
- **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 6

- **B1** identifies that single-member constituencies and winner takes all lead to many seats won by a single party even without an absolute majority of votes
- **B1** explains that geographically concentrated support translates into many seats, e.g. the party with most first places gains a plurality of seats
- **B1** explains that small leads in many constituencies can translate into large seat majorities nationally
- **B1** gives a brief example or consequence, e.g. 2015 Conservative majority with under 40% of the vote
- **Answer: Because each constituency is winner takes all, a party that wins the most votes in many constituencies gains all those seats even if its national vote share is below 50%. Geographically concentrated first-place support turns into many seat wins, and narrow first place finishes across many seats can produce large parliamentary majorities, as when the Conservatives secured a substantial Commons majority in 2015 with around 37% of the national vote.**

Question 7

- **B1** 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. targeting marginals in 2017 and 2019 campaigns
- **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 8

- **Level 0** (0): No relevant content.
- **Level 1** (1-3): Simple analysis using one extract, limited linking to FPTP mechanics and little use of the source to support points.
- **Level 2** (4-6): 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.
- **Level 3** (7-9): 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.
- **Level 4** (10-12): 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.
- **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.

Question 9

- **B1** one valid consequence identified, e.g. strategic/tactical voting, two-party concentration, regionalisation of representation, or marginalisation of smaller parties
- **B1** development of that consequence explaining the mechanism
- **B1** a second valid consequence identified distinct from the first
- **B1** development of the second consequence explaining the mechanism
- **B1** each consequence is linked to a contemporary example, e.g. UKIP 2015, SNP 2015, Conservative 2019 majority, tactical Remain/Leave voting in 2017/2019 marginals
- **Answer: Possible answers include: 1) Tactical voting: voters back the main challenger to stop an undesired candidate in marginals, as seen in some remain-leaning marginals in 2017 where anti-Brexit tactical voting boosted Conservative or Labour challengers. 2) Marginalisation of smaller, nationally dispersed parties: UKIP won 12.6% in 2015 but 1 seat, while the SNP's regional concentration turned into 56 seats in 2015, showing how FPTP alters party fortunes and encourages parties to focus on concentrated support.**

Question 10

- **B1** identifies the chosen reform and gives a concise explanation of how it changes vote-to-seat conversion (e.g. AMS mixes constituency seats with compensatory list seats)
- **B1** explains how that change reduces disproportionality or increases representation of smaller parties
- **B1** states that this pack does not cover those systems in detail because they belong to the companion POL.UKP6 pack on alternative systems or the 2011 AV referendum
- **B1** gives a brief comment on one practical or political obstacle to adopting the reform in UK general elections
- **Answer: Example: Additional Member System (AMS) combines single-member constituency seats with regional party list seats top-up to make overall representation more proportional; this reduces disproportionality by compensating parties that won fewer constituency seats than their vote share would suggest. This pack does not cover AMS in detail because alternative electoral systems and the 2011 AV referendum are treated in the companion POL.UKP6 pack. A political obstacle to adopting AMS would be the need for parliamentary consensus and public approval for a major constitutional change, as seen in past reform debates.**

Question 11

- **Level 0** (0): No relevant content.
- **Level 1** (1-6): Basic, limited knowledge of FPTP and potential alternatives. Answer may be descriptive with little analysis or evaluation and few, if any, contemporary examples.
- **Level 2** (7-12): 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.
- **Level 3** (13-18): 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.
- **Level 4** (19-24): 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.
- **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 disproportionately 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.