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## The Evolution of Debates about Electoral Reform in the UK since 1945

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### Abstract

This paper asks how debates about electoral reform have evolved in the UK since 1945. Through analysis of newspaper coverage and other materials, it examines changes in the total amount of discussion of electoral reform, in what reform proposals are on the table, in the nature of the arguments that are offered for or against these proposals, and in who participates in the debates and what positions they adopt.

By investigating these points, the paper seeks to shed light on several specific questions that are fundamental to our understanding of electoral reform processes in general. First, to what extent and how are debates about electoral reform at any given moment constrained by longer-term patterns of discourse on this subject? Are short-term calculations of self-interest all that matters, or are these calculations framed or limited by persisting habits of thought? Second, how do debates about electoral reform change in response to specific events? How do they respond, for example, to elections in which one party wins most votes but another wins most seats or to perceived governance failures or scandals? Third, how have the opportunities open to and the hurdles faced by electoral reformers changed over time? Has the credibility of certain arguments risen or fallen, and why have such changes taken place?

The research finds an enormous rise in discussion of electoral reform in the UK since 1945. This rise began in the 1970s and is associated with the increasing fragmentation of the party system and disengagement of voters from the traditional political parties. The content of these discussions has changed in some respects, but remained remarkably constant in many others. The interests of politicians have tended to dominate, but their influence has been shaped and constrained by longer-term patterns. Overall, the research suggests that the politics of electoral reform at any given moment cannot be understood without engaging with longer-term patterns of evolution.

### Biography

Dr Alan Renwick is Reader in Comparative Politics at the University of Reading and a leading expert on the politics of electoral reform. His first book, *The Politics of Electoral Reform: Changing the Rules of Democracy*, was published by Cambridge University Press in 2010 and analyses major cases of electoral system change in France, Italy, Japan, and New Zealand. His second book, *A Citizen's Guide to Electoral Reform*, was published by Biteback in the run-up to the Alternative Vote referendum of May 2011. It explores arguments for and against a variety of possible electoral reforms in the UK. In addition to his current research on the evolution of debates about electoral reform in the UK, he is, with Jean-Benoit Pilet of the Université Libre to Bruxelles, currently writing a book on the personalization of electoral systems in Europe, due to be published by Oxford University Press in late 2014.