

# The Politics of Electoral Reform in the United Kingdom

- A Window of Opportunity?

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# Abstract

The first-past-the-post electoral system employed in British general elections has remained virtually unchanged for over a century. It is therefore of historical relevance that a referendum on the Alternative Vote is planned for May 2011.

This report sets out to explain why the Liberal Democrats were more successful in pushing for electoral reform after the UK general election 2010 than the Liberal Party was after the general election of February 1974, despite similar circumstances. To answer this question, a theory consuming method is employed. One of the theoretical approaches consulted is the power maximizing approach. According to this perspective, changes to electoral systems occur as a consequence of rational choices by political parties. The second is the multiple streams approach which describes agenda setting as an anarchical process in which streams of problems, policies and politics move an item onto the agenda.

The conclusion of this report is that a combination of these two approaches offers a satisfactory explanation. Due to increased power incentives, the parties managed to arrive at a compromise in 2010 but not in 1974. Also, because of increased problem recognition, better evaluated policy alternatives and more beneficial political circumstances there were more favourable conditions for policy change in 2010.

*Key words:* electoral reform, agenda setting, United Kingdom, multiple streams, power maximizing approach

Words: 9968

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# 1 Introduction

In the United Kingdom general election in May 2010, no political party gained enough seats to be able to form a single party majority government in the House of Commons. Both the Labour Party and the Conservative Party negotiated with the Liberal Democrats in order to secure a majority (Kavanagh et al. 2010, p. 208-210). After days of negotiations, a coalition government was finally formed consisting of the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats. One of the prerequisites for this deal was a promise from the Conservative Party that a referendum on electoral reform for the House of Commons would be held in May 2011 (Grice 2010).

The electoral system employed in general elections to the House of Commons, the first-past-the-post system, has remained virtually unchanged throughout the twentieth century (Johnston et al. 2000, p. 506). However, the electoral system has been debated regularly in the United Kingdom. One occasion was after the February 1974 general election, when numerous circumstances were similar to the 2010 election. After the votes were counted, no party had gained enough votes to form a majority government and the election resulted in a so called “hung parliament”. Consequently, Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath had no choice but to negotiate with the Liberal Party <sup>1</sup>(Conley 1990, p. 34). The Liberal Party demanded an undertaking of electoral reform, but the Conservatives were not willing to deliver anything of substance on this issue. Hence, the negotiations collapsed (Marks et al. 2010).

This report sets out to explain why there was a difference in outcome with regard to electoral reform in the aftermaths of the elections in February 1974 and May 2010. Despite several similar circumstances, the matter of electoral reform was just discussed briefly in 1974, and no measures were taken in order to change the electoral system. In 2010, on the other hand, the discussions resulted in a decision to hold a referendum over electoral reform.

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<sup>1</sup> The Liberal Democrats were created after a merger of the Liberal Party and the Social Democrats in 1989 (Liberal Democrat History Group).

## 1.1 Aim

Electoral systems matter, for in the words of Alan Renwick: “Elections lie at the very heart of modern democracy” (Renwick 2010, p. 1). The electoral system can have a substantial impact on who governs a country. Therefore it is of importance to discuss advantages and disadvantages of different systems and to investigate what causes them to change.

Many academic researchers claim that rational choices and tactical behaviour on behalf of political parties are of crucial importance when it comes to explaining why changes to electoral systems occur at certain times. In this report, I will partly employ such an approach, and I will refer to it as the “power-maximizing approach”.

However, I wish to expand the scope of my analysis. I will do this by also using the multiple streams approach created by John W. Kingdon. This is a theory which sets out to explain national agenda setting as an anarchical process in which a combination of problems, policies and politics move an item onto the agenda (Kingdon 2003, p. 76).

United Kingdom is an influential country whose electoral system is characterized by traditions and has remained unchanged for very long. It is therefore an important and unique case which requires in depth case study analysis such as this one.

In addition to answering my question and to explain the particular case of United Kingdom, this report has a wider aim of. It wishes to add a new dimension and understanding to the academic discussion about what causes electoral systems to change. I hope to achieve this by complementing the traditional view of political parties as agents of change with the unconventional multiple streams approach. This approach is primarily concerned with agenda setting in general, and not research about electoral systems. However, this report hopes to demonstrate that this approach can offer a valuable input and a new angle of approach for other studies about changes to electoral systems.

## 1.2 Question

Can the power maximizing approach together with the multiple streams approach explain why the Liberal Democrats were more successful in pushing for electoral reform after the UK general election in 2010 than the Liberal Party was after the UK general election in February 1974, despite many similar circumstances?

## 1.3 Theory

To answer my question, I will employ two different theoretical approaches: the power maximizing approach and the multiple streams approach. For the power maximizing approach, I use the work of different authors for a general introduction to this approach. However, I focus on Josep M. Colomer and an article in which he presents a hypothesis based on a vast data collection (Colomer 2005, p. 1).

As a contrasting view, I use the multiple streams approach by John W Kingdon. It is a complex approach with a wide scope, which means I have not been able to take all aspects of the approach into consideration in my analysis.

### 1.3.1 The Power Maximizing Approach

The power maximizing approach assumes that politicians control the choice of electoral systems and that their motivations are to maximize their power (Renwick 2010, p. 7).

According to this approach, the reason why political parties show a concern in electoral systems is because they are the groups essentially affected by the distributive nature of electoral institutions. Moreover, as parties have the actual power to alter electoral systems it is natural that they are the actor most commonly associated with changing the electoral system (Benoit 2007, p. 372).

According to Josep M. Colomer, a few basic assumptions can be made. The first is that voters and leaders participate in elections to win. Secondly, political actors are well-informed about the incentives and likely effects of different electoral rules. Third, they are not risk-prone, thus preferring a secure partial victory to a relatively low probability of total victory with the risk of a total defeat (Colomer 2005, p. 2).

In other words, changing electoral rules can be rational strategy for political parties. The higher decision-, negotiation- and pressure power a party has under the existing institutional framework, the greater is its chance to successfully alter the existing electoral system (Colomer 2005, p. 3).

The hypothesis that I derive from using this approach is that the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives had stronger incentives to reach an agreement on electoral reform in 2010 than in 1974. Hence, I will seek to explain if it was more rational for the parties to come to some kind of agreement on electoral reform in 2010 than in 1974, or if the outcome only appears to have been the result of coincidental merging of streams, as Kingdon would argue.

### 1.3.2 The Multiple Streams Framework

In his book *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*, John W. Kingdon describes how agendas are set and why political ideas have their time (Parsons 1995, p. 192-193). He defines the agenda as the list of subjects that government officials are paying some serious attention to at any given time (Kingdon 2003, p. 3). Originally developed in a US context and not primarily concerned with constitutional matters, I still find Kingdon's approach a viable and relevant tool for my study. I hope to demonstrate why through a detailed comparative analysis.

Kingdon's approach is inspired by the notion of organizational 'garbage cans' which stresses the anarchical nature of organizations as opposed to rational coherent structures (Parsons 1995, p. 192-193). According to Kingdon, the ability of human beings to process information is more limited than what a comprehensive approach (such as the power maximizing approach) would prescribe. The extensive research carried out by Kingdon suggests that the policy process has a loose, messy quality to them and not the tight and orderly process that a rational approach specifies (Kingdon 2003, p. 78).

What I focus on in this work is how the agenda is set through the joint effect of several factors, or streams, coming together at once (Kingdon 2003, p. 77). The availability of all three streams in society will dramatically enhance the chance for a specific policy to be adopted by policy makers (Zahariadis 2007, p. 65). Firstly, there needs to be problems which catch the attention of people in or around the government. Secondly, there must be a community of specialists who generate proposals, or 'solutions' to the problems. Finally, there must be events in the political stream such as election result or changes of administration (Kingdon 2003, p. 87).

These independent streams of problems, policies and politics "flow" through the system all at once, and can be coupled when a policy window opens. These policy windows open either by the appearance of problem or by events in the political stream, for example through a change of government (Kingdon 2003, p. 194). When a window opens, advocates of proposals sense their opportunity and rush to take advantage of it (Kingdon 2003, p. 175).

My hypothesis is that the Liberal party was less successful in pushing for electoral reform in 1974 because some or all streams of problems, policies and politics were not present in society to the same extent. Perhaps there were not any available policy alternatives or any problem recognition in 1974. If this is the case, this would imply that the circumstances were less beneficial for those who pushed for electoral reform in 1974.

### 1.3.3 Comparison of the Two Approaches

Translated to my case, these two theoretical approaches differ in their fundamental assumptions about how issues (in this case electoral reform) become a serious item on the governmental agenda.

The power maximizing perspective argues that electoral reform and changes to electoral systems are the outcome of rational and strategic choices conducted by well-informed political parties seeking to maximize their self interest. The multiple streams approach, on the other hand, claims that actors are not capable of processing enough information to always make the most accurate and most rational decisions. There is, according to Kingdon, always an element of randomness and anarchy in the process, and complex factors that no actor can control on its own will promote an item onto the agenda (Kingdon 2003, p. 78).

There are some similarities between these two approaches though. In the political stream, Kingdon emphasise that political actors are acting in accordance with their own interests. Hence, the process is not completely arbitrary. In the political sense then, these two theories intertwine.

It might seem contradictory to use two such different approaches, especially as I will rely on both to explain my case. However, I do not regard this as a problem as it allows me to view the problem from different angles and use the, for my analysis, most suitable parts from both views.

## 1.4 Method and Material

This is an explanatory, comparative case study. As such, an important initial step was to consider the choice of cases. As many circumstances, including the hung parliament, the actors involved in negotiations and the country setting were similar in 1974 and 2010, it should be possible to learn from the comparison. If two cases are similar but different in one or a few ways, this should make it easier to identify the explanatory factors (Bjereld et al. 2002, p. 82).

As my theoretical approaches determine what the focus of this study needs to be (Teorell et al. 2007:238), the empirical part of my study focus on such facts that is important for my study and analysis. This has been an important way to limit my work.

In order to find the answer to my question in the analysis, I use a theory consuming approach. This means that I will try to explain the difference in outcome with regard to electoral reform with the help of my two theoretical approaches (Esaiasson et al. 2007, p. 42).

The materials I have used are mostly secondary sources. To ensure the quality of these sources, most of them are either academic articles or books written by academic researchers. For facts about the elections and the post-election



negotiations I have found great help from the books “The General Election of 1974” by David Butler and Dennis Kavanagh and “The General Election of 2010” by Dennis Kavanagh and Philip Cowley. After each UK general election, a book like this is written by well respected academics. The purpose of them was originally to make a record of the elections before ‘partisan myths took popular root’ (Butler 2010, xiii).

Since this report is being written in 2010, there was not much printed literature available yet about the election held the same year. As it is important to use comparable sources for both cases, I have tried to prioritize employing written literature, which means that the account of the election 2010 tends to rely much on the book by Kavanagh and Cowley.

## 2 Empirical background

This section begins with a description of the electoral system employed in the United Kingdom and the debate that has surrounded it historically.

Thereafter, I will provide the reader with a short account of the general elections and the subsequent coalition negotiations.

### 2.1 The Electoral System of the United Kingdom

The electoral system used in the United Kingdom goes by many names: the simple plurality system, the simple majority system or, as most citizens in the UK know it, the first-past-the-post electoral system (Robinson 2010, p. 9). The present system has evolved through a continuous series of amendments (Norris 1996, p. 68).

The elections to the House of Commons are held in 650 constituencies, each electing a single member. The candidate with the highest number of votes will win that constituency and gain one seat in the House of Commons (Kavanagh et al. 2006, p. 396).

Electoral systems tend to be considered and evaluated on the criteria of representativeness (producing a proportional relationship of seats to votes) and majoritarianism (producing a government majority) (Kavanagh et al. 2006, p. 396). The British electoral system has been successful in producing majority governments, with only two hung parliaments since 1945 (Robinson 2010, p. 12). This ability of the system to create strong and stable governments is usually considered one of its major advantages (Robinson 2010, p. 18).

On the other hand, the electoral system has been less successful in satisfying the criteria of representativeness. The benefit of simplicity can be, and often has been, at the cost of fairness to smaller parties and to the supporters of these parties (Farrell 2001, p. 28).

#### 2.1.1 Demands for Electoral Reform

The debate surrounding electoral reform in Britain has experienced periodic revivals. The focus of the discussions has often been related to how the British system fulfills the criteria of representativeness. Frequent subjects of debate have

been how the system translates votes into seats and how representative elections should work. This has been contrasted to the criteria of majoritarianism. Hence, should priority be given to the creation of strong, stable government or to 'fairness' to smaller parties and social groups (Norris 1996, p. 65-66)?

The first main period of debate is referred to as the first wave movement. This took place between 1830 and 1931, when a vote for AV was rejected in the House of Lords (Johnston et al. 2000, p. 506-507). After this, not much was heard on the subject of electoral reform until the second wave movement started in 1974. At this time, the problems of fairness and effective majoritarian government were highlighted by changes in the party competition. The hung parliament in February 1974 became an example of these changes. The second movement is still ongoing (Farrell 2001, p. 34-35; Norris 1996, p. 69; 71).

## 2.2 The General Election of February 1974

On February 7 1974, the ruling Conservative Party and their leader Edward Heath announced that a general election would be held on February 28 the same year (Butler et al. 1974, p. 44).

The party manifestos were presented, but no one took too much notice of the Liberal Party document as there seemed to be no chance of them putting their proposals into practice. It was not until a few days before the elections that the party sailed up as a credible candidate (Butler et al. 1974, p. 53).

### 2.2.1 Election Result

	<b>Seats (out of 635)</b>	<b>Percentage of vote</b>
<b>The Conservative Party</b>	297	37,8 %
<b>The Labour Party</b>	301	37,1 %
<b>The Liberal Party</b>	14	19,3 %
<b>Scottish and Welsh Nationalists</b>	9	2,6 %
<b>Communists</b>	0	0,1 %
<b>Others</b>	14	3,1 %

Table 1. An overview of the election result in the UK general election of February 1974. Source: Kavanagh et al. 2010, p. 350.

No party managed to win enough seats to be able to form a single party majority government. Prime Minister Edward Heath initially tried to achieve a coalition agreement with the Ulster Unionists and the Liberal Party, but ended up unsuccessful with both (Conley 1990, p. 34).

After a weekend of fruitless negotiations, Heath had no option but to resign. This led to the creation of a minority Labour government which did not last very long. A re-election was held in October the same year (Conley 1990, p. 34-36).

## 2.2.2 Discussions on Electoral Reform

In the coalition negotiations between the Liberal Party leader Jeremy Thorpe and the Conservative Party leader Edward Heath, Thorpe demanded a firm undertaking on electoral reform (Marks et al. 2010). Heath could not deliver on this but did however make a somewhat less binding offer: he proposed the setting up of a Speaker's conference which would consider the desirability and possibility to a change in the electoral arrangements (Butler et al. 1974, p. 256). This offer was not sufficient for Thorpe who maintained that there was no possibility of the Liberal Party agreeing to participate in the Government unless the Prime Minister gave more indication that he and his party were in favour of changing the electoral system (Marks et al. 2010). As no such indication was given by the Conservatives, the negotiations collapsed (Marks et al. 2010).

## 2.3 The General Election of May 2010

Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown called the election for 6<sup>th</sup> May 2010.

The Liberal Democrats surged in the polls prior to the election, and this brought renewed attention to how the electoral system punished smaller parties such as the Liberal Democrats. The party took advantage of the situation and highlighted what they called the "idiosyncrasies of our electoral system" (Kavanagh et al. 2010, p. 164;171).

### 2.3.1 Election Result

	<b>Seats (out of 650)</b>	<b>Percentage of vote</b>
<b>The Conservative Party</b>	307	36,1 %
<b>The Labour Party</b>	258	29,0 %
<b>The Liberal Democrats</b>	57	23,0 %
<b>Scottish and Welsh Nationalists</b>	9	2,2 %
<b>Others</b>	28	9,6 %

Table 2. An overview of the election result in the UK general election of May 2010. Source: Kavanagh et al. 2010, p. 351.

As the votes were counted, no party had reached the 326 seats needed to win an outright majority (Dorling et al. 2010). The Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats had more seats combined (315) than the Conservatives had alone, but they did not have enough to form a majority. However, with an arrangement where minor parties promised not to vote against them in a vote of confidence, a coalition between these two parties was still a plausible reality (Kavanagh et al. 2010, p. 202).

### 2.3.2 Discussions on Electoral Reform

During four days in May, intense discussions between representatives from the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats and Labour took place. Similar to the situation after the election of 1974, the question of electoral reform played an important role.

The Conservatives initially proposed a committee of inquiry on the subject of electoral reform, but Liberal Democrat MPs emphasized that they needed a more concrete deal. Labour showed more enthusiasm and even suggested a referendum on STV<sup>2</sup> (Kavanagh et al. 2010, p. 226). On May 10th Gordon Brown promised to resign, following demands by the Liberal Democrats (Mason et al. 2010).

This development put pressure on the Conservative Party who now presented their final offer of a post-legislative referendum on AV. This meant that a referendum would be whipped through the Commons, but with a right for Conservatives to campaign against the adoption of AV (Kavanagh et al. 2010, p. 215). Nick Clegg and his party had serious doubts about whether Labour would be able to deliver what they had promised, and therefore they decided to accept the Conservative offer. The coalition altogether took five days to create (Kavanagh et al. 2010, p. 221).

The referendum on electoral reform is planned to be held in May 2011. Similar to the first-past-the-post system, it is based on single-seat constituencies.

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<sup>2</sup> STV, Single Transferable Vote, is a proportional system where more than one candidate per constituency is elected (Farrell 2001, p. 126).

However, it seeks to overcome one of the main drawbacks to the first-past-the-post system, namely that a candidate may be elected by a minority of votes cast (Gay 1998, p. 64). The AV-system allows voters to rank the candidates. Counting the votes takes several stages, and continues until one candidate has a majority of the votes (Gallagher et al. 2005, p. 581).

As mentioned, AV ensures that the chosen candidate obtains more than half the votes cast, which is a powerful justification for the system (Robinson 2010, p. 36, 41). However, it is not the proportional system that the advocates of electoral reform so long have wanted.

## 2.4 A Summarizing Table: Comparison of 1974 and 2010

	<b>1974</b>	<b>2010</b>
<b>Election Result</b>	No party won a majority of seats: Conservatives and Lib Party did not have enough seats to form a majority government.	No party won a majority of seats: Conservatives and Lib Dems had enough seats to form a majority government, but not Labour and Lib Dems.
<b>Demands for electoral reform (by the Liberal Party/Liberal Democrats)</b>	Lib Party wanted Proportional Representation. Demanded a Speaker's conference whose recommendation had to be implemented within six months.	Lib Dems wanted Proportional representation, but negotiated with both Labour and Conservatives in order to find 'the best deal'.
<b>Attitude towards coalition with the Conservatives within the Liberal Party/Lib Dems</b>	Lots of scepticism within the Liberal Party towards the Conservatives.	Some tension within the Liberal Democrats, albeit not to as high degree as in 1974.
<b>Result of Con-Lib negotiations in regard to electoral reform</b>	- No agreement on electoral reform - Labour formed minority government	- Con-Lib Dem coalition formed - Agreement on referendum on AV with the Conservatives free to campaign against

Table 3. Summarizing table of important factors for my analysis. References: Kavanagh et al. 2010, p. 212; 215; 220; 226; 350-351, Marks et al. 2010, Butler et al. 1974, p. 258, Conley 1990, p. 34-35.

## 3 Analysis

Seeing that the power maximizing approach has similarities to the political stream, I will analyse these under the common headline of ‘political circumstances’. Thereupon follows an analysis of the perceptions of problems at these two elections, and an account of what different policy proposals were available in 1974 and 2010. Finally, I will provide a conclusion of the analysis where I will answer my question.

### 3.1 Political Circumstances

This section starts by analyzing if it was more rational for the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives to come to an agreement on electoral reform in 2010 than in 1974, and if this can explain the difference in outcome. Thereafter, I will introduce the ‘political stream’ by John W. Kingdon. Here I will focus on the concept of bargaining.

#### 3.1.1 The Power Maximizing Approach

According to this approach, changes to electoral systems are the result of deliberate and strategic actions by political parties. Political actors strive to maximize their own benefits in elections (Renwick 2010, p. 7). The approach stresses that the political actors participating are well-informed about the incentives and likely effects of different electoral rules (Colomer 2005, p. 2).

I will now, with the help of this approach, discuss why the negotiations in 1974 and 2010 had a different outcome in regard to electoral reform. I will focus on events that happened in 2010 and contrast this to 1974.

It appears as if the Conservative Party was well aware of different options and potential outcomes in the 2010 negotiations. Their final offer was a referendum on AV with the right for Conservatives to campaign against the adoption of AV (Kavanagh et al. 2010, p. 215). Under AV, they would be worse off than under the present system (Travis 2010), but if they had not at all delivered on the matter of electoral reform, they would have lost the support of the Liberal Democrats just like they did in 1974. In those events, the Conservatives would have missed out

on their first chance of ruling the country since 1997. Moreover, they would have lost all control over the shaping of the electoral system. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the Conservatives considered a referendum on AV the 'least bad' outcome.

Also, neither the Conservatives nor the Labour Party wanted to take a risk by forming a minority government. The experience from 1974 was that this was not a sustainable solution. Hence, a minority government would risk their power in the long term: something parties will avoid, seeing as they are not risk-prone (Colomer 2005, p. 3).

During the 2010 negotiations, the Labour Party suggested a referendum on STV. However, as Labour's share of the seats would be squeezed under STV (Travis 2010), the Liberal Democrats were probably right in being skeptical about whether the Labour Party would actually deliver on their promises (Kavanagh et al. 2010, p. 226). This is because, according to this approach, when politicians control the choice of electoral systems they do this in order to maximize their power (Renwick 2010, p. 7). Therefore it would not make sense for the Labour Party to promote STV as it would decrease their share of seats considerable.

Furthermore, a party with high decision power under existing institutional framework has a greater chance of successfully altering the existing electoral system (Colomer 2005, p. 3). When forming a coalition with the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats became part of a secure majority government. A coalition between Labour and the Liberal Democrats would either have been short of majority or forced to rule with other small parties. These are two scenarios where the future power prospects seem uncertain. In this scenario then, it seems more rational for the Liberal Democrats to ensure they receive as much decision power as possible, as according to this approach, that grants them more influence over the electoral system (Colomer 2005, p. 3). In 1974, even if the Liberal Party decided to form a coalition with the Conservatives, they did not have enough seats to form a majority government (Conley 1990, p. 34). Therefore, the incentives to form a coalition were not as strong: this reduced their willingness to compromise.

A clear trend in the United Kingdom is that political parties tend to favor electoral systems which benefit them and maximize their power (Smyth 1992, p. 9). This trend conforms to Colomer's hypothesis that changing electoral rules can be a rational strategy for likely losers or threatened winners if the expected advantages of alternative rules exceed those of using the existing rules (Colomer 2005, p. 3). One typical example of this is when Labour started to rethink its support for the first-past-the-post system in the 1980's because it seemed like they might not ever win another general election (Johnston et al. 2001, preface xvii).

Recently though, the electoral system has favored the Labour Party over the Conservatives. This has not always been the case, however. Between 1950 and 1960, the bias in the system strongly favored the Conservative Party. Between 1966 and 1980 there was relative little bias either way. In the 1990's the system clearly favored the Labour Party (Johnston et al. 2001, p. 12). The same applies to the general elections of 2001 and 2005 (Kavanagh et al. 2010, p. 351). This could be one reason why the Conservatives found it more acceptable and rational to propose a referendum on AV in 2010 but not in 1974. However, as previously



mentioned, the Conservative Party would gain fewer seats under AV than under the present system, despite the fact that the system has favored Labour recently. Thus, the Conservatives still have reasons to prefer the first-past-the-post system over AV, which they do. Hence, the rational thinking on behalf of the Conservatives did not lie in the fact that the Conservatives suggested AV because they prefer this system, but rather that they reviewed all other options available and realized that this was as 'little' as could have been done in order to gain the support of the Liberal Democrats.

Conclusively, according to this approach, one reason why the negotiations in regard to electoral reform were more successful in 2010 than in 1974 was because both the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats knew from experience (1974) that they could lose the chance to govern if they did not compromise on electoral reform. Also, neither the Conservatives nor Labour wanted to form a minority government, as the experience of 1974 was that this was not a sustainable solution. The Liberal Democrats wanted to gain as much decision power as possible, and therefore they favored a deal with the Conservatives and not Labour in 2010. In 1974, a coalition between the Conservatives and Liberal Party would have been short of majority, which is why the incentives for collaboration were not as strong for either party. Finally, as the electoral system have favored the Labour party recently, it is possible that the previously uncompromising support for first-past-the-post on behalf of the Conservatives has faltered, making a referendum on AV seem slightly more acceptable.

### 3.1.2 The Political Stream

Events and changes in the political stream can successfully promote an item onto the agenda. The political stream is composed of public mood, pressure groups campaigns, election results and partisan or ideological distributions among politicians and changes of government (Kingdon 2003, p. 145).

In this text, I will not consider how the public mood and changes in this had an impact over policy making as the politicians perception of this mood to a large extent is based sources that are either unavailable for me or time consuming and difficult to analyze (Kingdon 2003, p. 162-163). Neither will I discuss organized political forces as it is difficult for me to assess how much the politicians have allowed themselves to be influenced by these groups. Consequently, I will exclusively focus on the government and events within the government.

The general elections of 1974 and 2010 were the vital events which promoted the matter of electoral reform onto the agenda in the first place. As the government is at the very top of the list of actors in the policy-making arena, a shift here will be of large importance (Kingdon 2003, p. 154).

In the political stream, the ambition is to reach consensus in policy issues, and the focus is on bargaining. Coalitions are being built through the granting of concessions in return for support of the coalition (Kingdon 2003, p. 159-160).

One essential reason behind the breakdown of negotiations in 1974 was the failure to reach consensus due to an insufficient bargaining process in regard to electoral reform. Both parties presented proposals which failed due to unsophisticated assessments of how the proposal would be received by the other party. The proposal which Liberal leader Thorpe presented comprised of a suggestion that a Speaker's conference should be installed, which would recommend a suitable action to take in regard to electoral reform. Thereafter, the Conservative and Liberal parties had to commit to what their spokesmen would recommend, and implement the result within six months. Conservative leader Edward Heath explained that his party could not deliver on this (Marks et al. 2010). Heath did however make offers on a much less binding and advisory Speaker's conference for electoral reform (Butler et al. 1974, p. 256). This offer was not sufficient for Thorpe who required that the Conservative Party and Edward Heath publicly indicated that they recognized the injustice of the system and were in favor of changing it. As no strong enough indication was given by the Conservatives, the negotiations collapsed (Marks et al. 2010).

In 2010 on the other hand, both parties started negotiations with a more open approach: The Liberal Democrats negotiated with both Labour and the Conservatives in order to find the best deal. At the outset, the Conservatives showed no signs of being willing to make any far reaching offers on electoral reform, and in similarity to 1974 they merely proposed a committee of inquiry on the subject of electoral reform (Kavanagh et al. 2010, p. 212; 226). Labour showed more enthusiasm in this matter and even suggested a referendum on STV (Kavanagh et al. 2010, p. 226).

At one point, a coalition between the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats looked imminent, a situation which urged David Cameron to persuade his reluctant MPs to agree on a referendum on AV. He finally managed to win their support (Kavanagh et al. 2010, p. 213-214). This was an offer which the Liberal Democrats later accepted.

It is hereby clear that in 1974 both parties held strong positions, far apart, and neither seemed ready to be ready approach the other. In 2010 on the other hand, more open negotiations took place and the parties' positions were allowed to evolve from tough bargaining processes. This is however, according to Kingdon, a rather normal course of events. In an initial stage, participants stake out their positions rigidly, refusing to compromise on their principle. Then, the time comes when such "rigid adherence to one's original position would cost one dearly" (Kingdon 2003, p.161). These are the real opportunities for change and compromise is in the air (Kingdon 2003, p. 162).

As the Liberal Party staked out their positions very rigidly in 1974, it is likely to assume they did not regard 1974 as the most perfect opportunity to compromise. Some observers go as far as saying that the Liberal Party deliberately pitched their demands too high (Conley 1990, p. 34). At this point in time, there was a strong anti-Tory mood in the Liberal Party, and any arrangement with the Conservatives would have ensured a far-reaching split in the Liberal Party (Butler et al. 1974, p. 258). This was on the other hand a problem in 2010 as well, and many influential members of the Liberal Democrats favored a deal with

Labour (Kavanagh 2010, p. 220). However, every member of the Liberal Democrats negotiating team (including Nick Clegg), had entered the House of Commons after 1997. Consequently, they had not fought those bitter fights with Margaret Thatcher and John Major which previous generations of Liberals had. Rather, they had voted against Labour policy for more than a decade (Kavanagh et al. 2010, p. 210). This made it easier for the Liberal Democrats to seriously consider working alongside the Conservative Party.

Neither the Conservatives showed much willingness to compromise in 1974. At a really fruitful time, even those who are against any change might introduce their own proposal in order to try to have some influence over the output, like the Conservative Party did in 2010. The reason for joining a coalition is not always because the benefits of joining are large, but rather that not joining means an exclusion from participation in decision making (Kingdon 2003, p. 159-160). If they had not been able to agree with the Liberal Democrats in 2010, they knew from experience (such as in 1974) that they could lose power to Labour.

Moreover, there were less-fortunate parts of the election result in 1974 compared to 2010. Thus, the policy window was not 'as open' in 1974 as in 2010. For example, even with the support of the Liberal Party, the Conservative Party would still have been eight seats short of a majority (Butler et al. 1974, p. 257). In 2010 on the other hand, The Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives had a comfortable majority, while the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats would have been unable to secure a majority together (Kavanagh et al. 2010, p. 202). Also, the Liberal Party won fourteen seats in 1974 compared to 57 in 2010 (Kavanagh et al. 2010. p. 350-351). This made them a more powerful player in 2010. All these factors contributed in making the coalition negotiations a little less 'hot' in 1974. Additionally, in 2010, the Labour Party put extra pressure on the Conservatives to deliver on the matter of electoral reform as they planned a program of constitutional reform in their election manifesto, including a referendum on the Alternative Vote and an elected House of Lords (Kavanagh et al. 2010, p. 162).

Conclusively, there were important differences in the political stream at these two times in history. The parties approached each other after having abandoned some of their most rigid positions in favour for collaboration. In accordance with Kingdon's predictions, they were prepared to do this because there were more favourable conditions and more at stake in 2010.

## 3.2 The Problem Stream

The problem stream consists of various conditions that policymakers or citizens want addressed (Zahariadis 2007, p. 70). For a problem to obtain the attention of policy makers, certain conditions must be fulfilled. In Kingdon's approach, the presence of one or more of the following mechanisms is important: indicators, focusing events/crises/symbols and feedback (Kingdon 2003, p. 90).

To find out whether any differences between the two cases in this stream can contribute to my analysis, I will as a first step identify what problems that are commonly discussed in relation to the first-past-the-post system, and if there are any ‘indicators’ which can be used to measure and assess how extensive these problems were at my two elections. However, for a problem to raise the awareness of policy makers, it is important that there are people who are ready to demonstrate the existence of problems to which one’s solution (in this case electoral reform) can be attached (Kingdon 2003, p. 93). Because of this, it is not enough for me to evaluate how “big” these problems objectively were at the two elections by using indicators. I must also survey whether these problems were discussed in connection to these elections. This is because, if the problem remained unnoticed it is not likely to have affected policy making.

I will leave out the ‘feedback’ aspect as I believe that this mechanism is more relevant for other issues such as for evaluating governmental programs. I will start by briefly discussing the ‘focusing event’ mechanism.

A focusing event is the push that some items need in order to gain the attention of people in and around government (Kingdon 2003, p. 94). The failure of the electoral system to deliver a majority government can be seen as the focusing events which gave the matter of electoral reform a push onto the agenda both in 1974 and 2010.

However, Kingdon claims that a focusing event rarely by itself can promote an item, unless accompanied by a further and deeper preconception that a problem is at hand (Kingdon 2003, p. 98). Therefore, I need to identify if there was a difference in how these focusing events were joined to problems relating to the electoral system.

As previously mentioned, the critique and the ‘problem’ that is most commonly associated with the first-past-the-post is that it is unfair towards smaller parties. The Liberal Democrats is the largest of the “small” parties, and it usually achieves a significant share of the vote but wins a few seats (Norris 1996, p. 67). Partly because of this, the Liberal Party/The Liberal Democrats and their voters have been among the most vocal actors when it comes to arguing against the current system (Kavanagh et al. 2006, p. 398). They were also the actor who pushed for electoral reform at these two elections. Because of this, I will look at statistics which reveal how extensive the ‘problem’ with unfair representation was in regard to these parties in the general election of 1974 and 2010. One way of measuring this is to look at indicators such as statistics of how many votes were required for the party to win a seat. Indicators like this can display whether there is or is not a problem, and they also assess the magnitude of the problem. Changes in indicators can be important when identifying if a problem has occurred (Kingdon 2003, p. 91-92). What is important to remember though, is that if you regard it as a problem or not depends on your values (Kingdon 2003, p. 110-111).

With regard to the Liberal Party (now Liberal Democrats), there was a wider discrepancy between votes and seats in 1974 than in 2010. In 1975, the Liberal Party secured a 19,3% share of the votes, but this only rewarded them fourteen seats (2,2 % of the seats) (Butler et al. 1974, p. 276). In 2010, the Liberal Democrats won 23% of the votes which yielded fifty-seven seats (8, 2% of the

total share of the seats) (Kavanagh et al. 2010, p. 351). Hence, in regard to the Liberal Party/The Liberal Democrats, the indicators reveal a larger unfairness when it comes to 'seats-votes' ratio in 1974 than in 2010. In fact, the electoral system has never treated the Liberal Democrats kinder than it did in the election of 2010 (Kavanagh et al. 2010, p. 345).

Since the aspect of unfairness often is mentioned in relation to the Liberal Party/The Liberal Democrats (Norris 1996, p. 67), it would be logical to assume that the discussion in favor for electoral reform was more extensive in 1974 than in 2010 as it turns out this problem was larger in 1974. Surprisingly, that is not the case. The discussion on electoral reform and the problems relating to the electoral system was not that intense prior to the election of February 1974. In fact, the movement for electoral reform started after the election rather than before (Norris 1996, p. 69).

One probable explanation for this was that the Liberal Party was not treated as a credible alternative to the two bigger parties prior to the election of 1974. Although some polls showed that they had near to 20% support, it was widely assumed that in a crisis election, they would be squeezed (Butler et al. 1974, p. 80). In fact, Kavanagh and Cowley claim that it was not until 2010 that the Liberal Democrats was figured as a serious force in government (Kavanagh et al. 2010, p. 345). Hence, this can explain why the problems relating to the Liberal Party did not catch on as much in 1974 as it did in 2010 (Kavanagh et al. 2010, p. 351).

However, the 'fairness' argument against the first past the post system is valid for other small parties as well. In the election of 1970, 90% of the population had voted for Labour and the Conservatives, and the system worked well. This meant that the 'fairness' problem was not considered to a large degree. In fact, in the 1950's and 1960's there was a large consensus among the political establishment to maintain status quo in the electoral system (Norris 1995, p. 70). Not until the early 1970's and particularly after the election of 1974, the problems of fairness were highlighted by changes in the party competition (Norris 1995, p. 72).

The tendency of a more diversified political landscape has grown stronger ever since. This becomes apparent when looking at statistics provided by a comparative political dataset developed by researchers at the University of Bern. These indicators reveal the disproportionality between parties on the vote level and parties on the seat level (a party with a seat in the parliament). The higher this number, the higher is the disproportionality between how many parties that people vote for and how many parties that gain a seat in the parliament. From 1974 and onwards, there is an increase (and some temporary decreases) (Klaus et al., 2010). Hence, the trend of a more diversified political landscape is proven through the indicators. A diagram distinctly illustrates this trend:

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**Relative Disproportionality: Parties on Votes Level/Parties on Seats level**

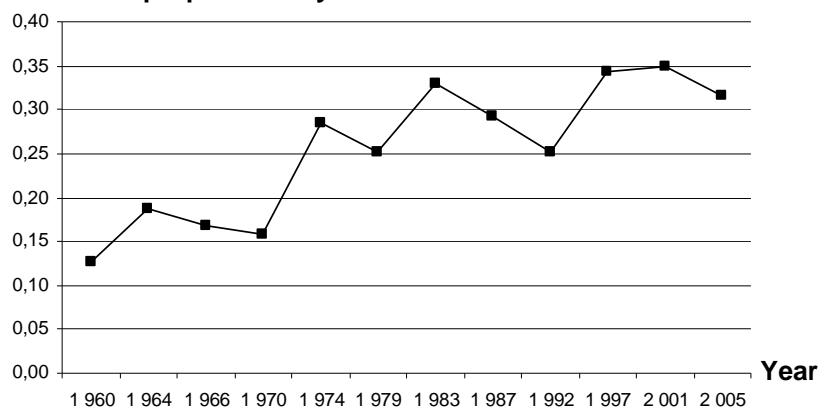


Table 4. Illustration of how the disproportionality between how many parties voters vote for and how many parties gain a seat in the parliament have changed between 1960 and 2005. Reference: Klaus et al. 2010

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In the general election of 2010, this tendency was reinforced even more as only two thirds of the votes cast were for either the Labour Party or the Conservative Party (Kavanagh et al. 2010, p. 385). It was called a landmark election in the sense that it confirmed the long-term decline in support for the two large parties and the increasing importance of ‘other’ parties (Kavanagh et al. 2010, p. 345). This new fertile ground for electoral reform opened a vast debate on the matter which newspapers in favor of electoral reform, such as *The Guardian* and *The Independent*, were not late to take advantage of. In connection to the general election of 2010, the editorials at *The Guardian* expressed excitement as “everyone was talking about electoral reform” and the newspaper was thrilled at the prospect of a hung parliament (Kavanagh et al. 2010, p. 292). *The Independent* claimed that the increasing support for the Liberal Democrats had offered “a unique opportunity to transform the electoral system” (Kavanagh et al. 2010, p. 294). Besides newspapers and the Liberal Party/Liberal Democrats, politically independent organizations such as the Electoral Reform Society have, ever since they were founded in 1884, been prone to demonstrate the disadvantages of the system (Electoral Reform Society: *Why reform*). Hence, there has never been a lack of people willing to demonstrate problems related to the electoral system.

Through this analysis, I have revealed that the problem with unfair representation was larger for the Liberal Party in 1974 than for the Liberal Democrats in 2010. However, overall the disproportionality between parties on a vote level and on a seat level has increased.

It is noticeable that the arguments in favour for electoral reform were more noticed in 2010. Through my analysis, I have explained that this is a consequence

of the fact that the Liberal Democrats are taken more seriously as a political force today, that there was a wide consensus to keep the electoral system prior to 1974 and that the system functioned better before 1974. These factors combined have created a more open debate climate on electoral reform lately. It has also made it more fruitful for all actors involved to point to problems associated with the system. Naturally, it is hard to gain sympathy and attention for problems when the general opinion is that something is working well.

Therefore, my conclusions from this discussion are that the election of 1974 was the 'breakthrough' needed to establish the debate on electoral reform again and for the problems to be considered on a broad level in society.

### 3.3 The Policy Stream

In the section about the problem stream, I discussed how the presence and demonstration of a problem can promote an item onto the agenda. According to Kingdon, the chances for a problem to rise on the agenda are dramatically increased if it is attached to a suitable solution (Kingdon 2003, p. 143). Therefore, a solution must be available in the policy stream, ready to be attached to a problem or to a development in the political stream (Kingdon 2003, p. 194-195). In this section, I will analyse whether there have been policy proposals that fulfil Kingdon's criteria available in the policy community at the two times that I compare. I will also analyse whether the presence or absence of a softening up process can have had an impact on the outcome in the two cases. I will start by introducing the concept of policy communities.

The policy stream consists of 'policy communities' in which specialists in a given policy area interact and where ideas about the best policy solutions and proposals float around (Kingdon 2003, p. 116-117). The 'policy community' in favour of electoral reform has traditionally been largely elite-driven and involved groups such as journalists and people from politics and academia (Norris 1995, p. 76). Politically independent interest groups/movements such as Electoral Reform Society and Charter 88 have also worked in favour of electoral reform and have argued that the electoral system should be made more proportional. The movement in favour of electoral reform within the political parties has tended to be largely pragmatic and focused on what the effects would be on party fortunes, while the rest of the policy community have focused on principles such as representativeness (Norris 1995, p. 69).

Within policy communities, many ideas are considered at some stage and in some way. Different people have various policy preferences that they would like to see seriously considered (Kingdon 2003, p. 122). Throughout history, several proposals have been of particular interest within the community in favour of electoral reform. Debates have primarily revolved around the following alternatives: the Single Transferable Vote, the Mixed Member System and the

Alternative Vote: a system that is not proportional but still considered to be better than the first-past-the-post (Gay 1998, Introduction; Norris 1995, p. 69).

After the rejection to adopt AV in the House of Commons in the 1930s, the debate on electoral reform temporarily flagged; in the 1950s and 1960s the matter was not publicly debated (Norris 1996, p. 70). The matter was resurfaced again after the general election of 1974 when there was a growing elite dissatisfaction with the first-past-the-post system (Weir 1992, p. 197).

The debate continued but it was not until 1997 electoral reform was placed at the centre of the political agenda. This year, the Independent Commission on the Voting System was appointed by the Labour government. The commission, more commonly referred to as the Jenkins commission, had as undertaking to recommend the best alternative to the 'first-past-the-post' system (Jenkins 1998: Introduction). The final recommendation from the commission was a novelty in the form of AV Plus<sup>3</sup> (Gay 1998, p. 21). Hence, a new policy proposal was now floating around in the policy community as a possible alternative.

The Jenkins commission did consider other systems frequently discussed within the policy community. For example, the report stated that AV would not be sufficient to achieve the Commission's aims, and therefore it was not a suitable option (Johnston et al 2000, p. 507). Neither was the Single Transferable Vote. STV is a proportional system favoured by for example the Electoral reform Society (Electoral Reform Society: Systems guide). In the Jenkins report, STV was adjudged a step too far from current practice (Johnston et al., 2000, p. 509). Thus, through this detailed report, it became evident that STV was not accepted within the political community. This meant that it failed to live up to one of Kingdon's three criteria for survival within the policy community.

According to Kingdon, it is essential that a proposition has technical feasibility, value acceptability and that the people proposing the idea have an anticipation of what could happen should the proposal be advanced in the larger political arena (Kingdon 2003, p. 131). The criterion of technical feasibility means that the proposition needs to be possible to implement in practice. When it comes to electoral reform, this criterion is not excessively restrictive as there is no written constitution in the United Kingdom which prevents changes (Jones et al. 1995, p 81). However, several practical difficulties were mentioned in relation to STV in the Jenkins report, for example the "excessively complicated" system of vote counting (Jenkins 1998, p. 30). The implementation of AV on the other hand would be relatively simple, requiring no special boundary changes (Gay 1998, p. 65).

Value acceptability can cause a problem since different people within the policy community and in the larger political arena are likely to possess different opinions about how democracy is best performed. As an example, virtually all supporters of the first-past-the-post system support the concept of the direct link

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<sup>3</sup> AV Plus would involve that the majority of MPs (80 to 85%) would continue to be elected on an individual constituency basis, with the remainder elected on a corrective Top-up basis which would significantly reduce the disproportionality and the geographical divisiveness which are inherent in first-past-the-post.



between the elected representative and his or her constituency. AV has won support because it retains this accountability link (Gay 1998, p. 51;64-65). Under STV, the country is divided up into multi-member constituencies (Gay 1998, p. 75) which makes this bond between MP and constituency less strong.

Finally, it is a challenge to adapt the proposal to fit the larger political arena. The people within the policy community have to ask themselves whether the proposal stands a chance of passage in the House of Commons, and whether it will meet the test of public acceptance (Kingdon 2003, p. 131). As the Jenkins commission so recently had adjudged STV too far from current practice, it is likely that other, less 'extreme' options such as AV sailed up as a possible if not ultimate option in the policy community.

Also, the Conservatives were openly hostile to the suggestion on AV+ from the Jenkins commission (Gay 1998, p. 42). This was a good indication of the Conservative attitude. The Liberal Democrats realized that if they were hostile to the AV+ system (which was not even a particularly proportional system) they would probably not accept anything more proportional but rather something less radical such as the AV.

I will now briefly discuss the role of the policy entrepreneur. A policy entrepreneur is someone who is willing to invest their resources in the hope for a future return (Kingdon 2003, p. 122). Many actors such as the Liberal Democrats, interest groups, academics and editorials in newspapers, have done this in order to encourage a reformation of the electoral system.

In order to promote their ideas, policy entrepreneurs are attempting to "soften up" both policy communities and larger publics by getting them used to new ideas and building acceptance for their proposals (Kingdon 2003, p. 128). In my analysis of the problem stream, it became apparent that a softening up process on electoral reform has taken place in the British society since 1974. Those who, as the policy entrepreneur, criticise the electoral system have as a consequence enjoyed more attention and recognition. Also, since more people vote for small parties, more people will be affected by the unfairness of the system. Prior to the election of 1974, the system had been working fine and there was a large consensus for keeping it. It is not an easy task to persuade policymakers and the public that changes are needed under such circumstances.

My conclusion is that similar policy proposals have been available within the policy community during both these elections. The community has pushed for different proposals earlier in history, including both AV and the more proportional STV. However, no sufficient softening up process had taken place prior to those occasions. The Jenkins report in the end of the 1990s played an important role in this process. Many different proposals were carefully evaluated in this report, making the public and people within the political community more aware of the different proposals available. It also made the groups within the policy community more aware of which propositions were viable in the world outside of their community. Since the debate on electoral reform had been absent prior to the general election of 1974, there had been no equally exhaustive debate prior to this election. As a consequence, there was not the same readiness in the policy community about which proposals would be conceivable in the outside world.

## 4 Conclusion

	1974	2010
<b>Political Circumstances</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Liberal Party did not have the same good position to negotiate, unable to form majority government with Conservatives</li> <li>- The bargaining process unsuccessful due to more or less conscious lack of willingness to compromise.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The Liberal Democrats could secure a majority government with the Conservative Party if they could agree (=more was at stake)</li> <li>- Actors did not stake out their positions rigidly but let their positions evolve.</li> <li>- Lessons had been learnt from 1974; both parties realized they had a lot to lose if they would fail to agree.</li> </ul>
<b>Problem Perception</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-The 'unfairness' problem was larger in relation to the Liberal Party than in 2010. The problem did not attract much attention because the Liberal Party was not considered a serious political force.</li> <li>- Overall perception that the electoral system was working well.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-The 'unfairness' problem was larger in relation to smaller parties (excluding Lib Dems) than it had been in 1974.</li> <li>-The Liberal Democrats were taken more seriously which is why the unfairness problem in relation to them received increased attention.</li> </ul>
<b>Available solutions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-To the most part, the same solutions were available in 1974 as in 2010, for example STV and AV.</li> <li>-No softening up process had taken place prior to this election.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Because of the recent Jenkins commission, there was a wider knowledge of what solutions would work in world outside the policy community.</li> </ul>

According to the power maximizing approach, the negotiations were more successful in 2010 because both the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats had increased reasons and power incentives to compromise at this point in time. Wise from the failure in 1974, they realized they had much to lose if they would fail to agree. Therefore they managed to secure a compromise from which both parties could benefit.

This report has also demonstrated that the streams of politics, problems and policies were available to a larger degree in the British society at the time of the election 2010 than in 1974. The problems of unfair representation (except in regard to the Liberal Party/Liberal Democrats) were larger and attracted more attention in 2010. There was also a better knowledge and readiness in the policy community about what policy alternatives were feasible in the outside world. Finally, there were more beneficial political circumstances which enhanced the willingness of the political parties to let their positions evolve through bargaining processes. These factors combined created more favourable

circumstances for a successful push for electoral reform onto the agenda in 2010 than in 1974.

In other words, this report has found that both theoretical approaches employed offer valuable input when it comes to answering the question about why the Liberal Democrats were more successful in pushing for electoral reform in 2010 than the Liberal Party was in 1974. I will now further discuss my conclusions in regard to the theoretical approaches employed.

In this particular case, it is evident that the power maximizing approach is correct in its assumption that political parties are important when it comes to changes to the electoral system. Without the power-maximizing aspirations on behalf of the Liberal Democrats, it is unlikely that the matter of electoral reform would have found its way onto the agenda at these particular times. It has therefore been essential to include this perspective in order to understand what the basic motivations for actors participating have been.

However, policy making and agenda setting is rarely that simple, and ambiguity is a fact of political life (Zahariadis 2007, p. 87). The multiple streams approach offers a way to take the complex reality of policymaking into consideration. It helps us to understand why there was a more 'fertile ground' and a wider political and public acceptance for the issue of electoral reform in 2010 than in 1974. This approach has undoubtedly increased the understanding of why the matter of electoral reform became the object of more 'success' in 2010 than in 1974.

Conclusively, it is clear that the power related motivations on behalf of the political parties were needed in order for electoral reform to end up on the agenda in the first place. However, the multiple streams approach increases our understanding of why there were more beneficial circumstances for success in 2010.

As mentioned in the introduction, United Kingdom is an important and influential case. However, I believe that the conclusions in this report can have implications beyond this particular case. For future research about what causes electoral systems to change, it could be useful to look at the perception of problems, available policy alternatives and political circumstances at the time when change occurred. This would provide for a more detailed analysis and an increased understanding of what causes electoral systems to change.

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