

# **Disproportionality and bias in the results of the 2005 general election in Great Britain: evaluating the electoral system's impact**

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**ABSTRACT:** The 2005 UK general election resulted for the third successive time in the Labour party winning a much larger share of seats in the House of Commons than of the votes cast. Furthermore, with an equal share of the votes the Conservative party would have won 111 seats fewer than Labour. Commentators have used this outcome to criticise aspects of the country's electoral system. This paper reports a decomposition of the pro-Labour bias in the 2005 result (in the context of the outcome of previous contests), which allows an evaluation of the validity of such criticisms. It shows that most of the bias can be attributed not to the operation of the first-past-the-post electoral system per se but rather to party and voter behaviour within the template provided by that system.

**KEYWORDS:** electoral bias; Great Britain, 2005 general election, electoral systems

The nature of Labour's third successive victory in the 2005 United Kingdom general election generated much comment. With 36.2 per cent of the votes cast in Great Britain it won 56.5 per cent of the seats contested there.<sup>1</sup> By contrast, the main opposition parties – the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats – won 33.2 and 22.7 per cent of the votes but only 31.5 and 9.9 per cent of the seats respectively. The small gap between the two leading parties in vote share (3 percentage points) but the

significant difference in their share of the seats (355 for Labour and 197 for the Conservatives, a difference of some 25 percentage points in share of the total) was the focus of particular concern. In addition, some noted that the Conservatives won a small majority over Labour in England (35.7 and 35.5 per cent of the votes cast there respectively) but that Labour obtained 286 seats to the Conservatives' 194 out of the total of 529.

Such disproportionality in the translation of votes into seats is not unusual in first-past-the-post (FPTP) systems, and is generally recognised. What particularly concerned commentators was that Labour experienced a substantial decrease in its share of the votes between the 2001 and 2005 elections yet still won a large majority of seats in the House of Commons. Labour's majority of 64 seats over all parties in the House of Commons (including the 18 Northern Ireland MPs, five of whom – representing Sinn Féin – do not take up their seats) was achieved on the smallest share of the votes received by the winning party at a general election since 1832.

This situation generated suggestions that the 'electoral system' caused the disproportionality. Some used it as the basis for outright condemnation of FPTP, calling for its replacement by a more proportional system.<sup>2</sup> Others suggested that the FPTP system as currently operated in Britain either favoured Labour or had been manipulated by Labour to its own ends – one respected commentator, for example, referred to Labour's 'gerrymandering of seats'.<sup>3</sup> Among the former group, the main concern was that Labour tended to win much smaller seats – in terms of the number of people registered on the electoral roll – than the Conservatives: for them, the result was not only disproportional, it was also biased.<sup>4</sup>

Some of these criticisms of the current system are valid, and indicate problems with the current system: others are not – including that about gerrymandering. But the disproportionality is not new. What is relatively new is its size, and that it favours Labour. Analyses of recent elections have uncovered the reasons for this. This paper deploys their methods to analyse Labour's 2005 victory, which allows evaluation of criticisms of the current electoral system.

### **Disproportionality and bias**

One way of identifying to what extent the electoral system favoured Labour is to assess what would have happened with a different vote distribution. For example, with 36.2 and 33.2 per cent of the votes cast respectively, Labour and the Conservatives won 31.5 and 56.5 per cent of the seats. If the two parties' vote shares had been reversed, would their share of the seats have been also? If so, then the system doesn't favour Labour, it favours the winning party with that share of the votes. If not, and the Conservative share of the seats was smaller than Labour's, then the system is biased towards Labour: with the same vote share it gets a better return in terms of the number of seats allocated.

Evaluating the size and reasons for any such bias can be undertaken using an algebra applied to studies of all recent UK general elections (Brookes, 1959, 1960; Johnston et al, 2001, 2002a, 2002b). This defines bias as the difference between two parties in the number of seats they would obtain if they had the same share of the votes cast. It can be evaluated for any vote share, but is usually deployed for an equal share. Thus

in analysing the 2005 situation the bias assessment establishes the outcome if each had won 34.7 per cent. This involves reducing Labour's share of the poll in every constituency by 1.5 percentage points and re-allocating those votes to the Conservative party there.<sup>5</sup> If there is no bias, with equal shares of the votes the two parties should get the same number of seats.

There have been major changes in the size and direction of bias in British general election results since 1950 (Figure 1: in all analyses reported here, a positive figure indicates a bias favouring Labour whereas a negative figure indicates a pro-Conservative bias.) The first five elections had pro-Conservative biases, never greater than 60 seats (the maximum value was 59, in 1951). In the 1970s-1980s there was virtually no bias. From 1992 it increased again but in a different direction, favouring Labour by 38, 82 and 141 seats at the 1992, 1997 and 2001 elections respectively. Labour was again very substantially advantaged in 2005, with a bias of 111 seats.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

An advantage of Brookes' algebra, as adapted for studies of the UK electoral system, is that the bias can be decomposed to identify how it is produced. (The full algebra is set out in Johnston et al, 1999, 2001.) Such outcomes can be generated by two major processes, both involving aspects of the geography of the electoral system. The first is variations in *constituency size*. If constituencies vary in their electorates, differences in the number of votes needed for success follow. If one party is strongest in places with small constituencies it will need fewer votes overall (and thus a smaller share of the national vote total) to win them than an opponent whose main strengths are in areas with large constituencies. The second component is the *efficiency in the distribution of a party's support*. If a party wins 51 per cent of the votes nationally, the most efficient distribution would be for it to have 51 per cent in every constituency, when it would win them all.

The constituency size bias can be split into sub-components. Within Great Britain, Scotland and Wales were long over-represented relative to England with smaller constituencies (averaging c.55,000 voters in 2001, for example, compared to 70,000 in England). This malapportionment was partly removed in 2005 as a consequence of revised rules for redistributing seats introduced as part of the devolution settlement involving the creation of a Scottish Parliament: Scotland had 72 constituencies in 2001 but only 59 in 2005. Wales continued to be over-represented, however, with an average 2005 constituency electorate of 55,762 compared to 65,343 in Scotland and 70,203 in England. If one party is stronger in Wales than elsewhere, it should benefit because on average fewer votes are needed for victory in a constituency there.

Smaller seats are 'easier' to win. Size variations refer not only to the total electorate, however, but also differences in turnout. With large proportions of the electorate abstaining – 41 per cent of the British electorate in 2001 and 39 per cent in 2005 – if turnout varies considerably across constituencies fewer votes will be needed to win in some than others, advantaging the party which is relatively strong in areas with lower turnout. The number of votes needed for a constituency victory can also be influenced by the number of parties contesting the seat, and the share of the votes obtained by such 'third parties'. A relatively successful 'third party' reduces the 'price' of victory in a constituency so that if one of the main parties is relatively strong in areas where

‘third parties’ are too, it will be advantaged in the bias calculations. Where ‘third parties’ win seats, however, the advantage not only disappears but also reverts to the other main party, if ‘third parties’ tend to win seats that might otherwise go to one of the main parties.

### **Bias and its components in 2005**

The bias figure for each election shown in Figure 1 can thus be decomposed into the following components:

1. Constituency size
  - a. National differences between countries in average constituency electorate
  - b. Differences in constituency electorates within countries;
  - c. Differences in turnout;
  - d. Differences in third-party votes; and
  - e. Differences in third-party victories.
2. Efficiency of a party’s vote distribution.

There is also an interaction term, treated here as a residual – that part of the bias associated with a combination of the components rather than one of the separate elements.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Table 1 gives the size of the various components of the 2005 total bias of 111 seats, together with comparable figures for 2001. (These have been calculated using the same constituencies as 2005, which involved replacing the 72 Scottish constituencies used then with the new set of 59. The estimated result of the 2001 election in each of the new constituencies was calculated by Denver, Rallings and Thrasher, 2004.) The major change is in the importance of the vote efficiency component, which is the most likely to change over the short-term.

#### *Constituency size bias sub-components*

Of this element’s five sub-components, turnout variation was the most important at both contests, worth 38 seats of the net bias to Labour of 131 in 2001 and 38 of the 111 in 2005 (Table 1). Labour was not only substantially advantaged by its relative strength in the areas of low turnout, however, but also gained significant benefit from variations in constituency size: a small proportion of this reflected its relative strength in Wales, where it has long been the predominant party. Differences within countries also benefited Labour, which is relatively stronger than the Conservatives in the smaller constituencies, and this advantage increased between the two elections. Variations in constituency size increased as a consequence of net population movements between 2001 and 2005: the average electorate in Conservative-won constituencies was 72,138 in 2001 compared to 67,544 in those won by Labour; four years later the respective figures were 72,950 and 66,802.

The combined impact of turnout and constituency size variations in 2005 is clearly shown in Table 2. The 627 constituencies are divided into quintiles on both constituency size and turnout,<sup>6</sup> with the number of seats that Labour would have won with equal vote shares indicated. The row totals show that Labour would have won

117 of the 126 seats with the lowest turnouts as against only 18 of the 125 with the highest. A similar, if less extreme, pattern emerges with constituency size as the variable of interest: Labour would have won 94 of the 125 smallest seats but 33 of the 126 largest. Combining the two, the internal cells indicate Labour's predominance in the smallest seats with the lowest turnouts. (There is a correlation between the two variables: there are 49 constituencies in the top-left-hand cell, for example – the smallest and lowest turnout seats – instead of the 25 which would be the case if the two were independent.)

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Whereas the constituency size and turnout sub-components both benefit Labour, the two representing the impact of 'third parties' operate against each other, although they don't balance precisely. Until 1997 the net advantage was with the Conservatives but at the last two elections switched to favouring Labour (by 9 seats in 2001 and 7 in 2005). Figure 2 shows that the impact of third party votes always advantaged the Conservatives; the third parties – the Liberal Democrats and their predecessors plus, to a lesser extent, Plaid Cymru and the Scottish National Party – performed better on average in seats where the Conservatives were the stronger of the two main parties. This trend was reversed slightly after 1997, however, as the Liberal Democrats began to win more votes in Labour's heartlands (including such northern cities as Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle upon Tyne and Sheffield). The overall advantage remains with the Conservatives but in 2005 it was less than half of its maximum impact in 1997.

[FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Where third parties win substantial proportions of the votes but not enough to gain the seats, the Conservatives benefit. When they win constituencies, however, the Conservatives are disadvantaged. Labour benefited overall, increasingly so as more third party victories were recorded from 1974 on. But the trend changes direction at the end of the period, being worth 37 seats to Labour in the 2001 bias figure (when calculated for the then-extant constituencies, including Scotland's 72) but only 26 in 2005. (Table 1 shows that the reduction using the new Scottish constituencies for both years was from 31 to 26.) This is because the third parties – especially the Liberal Democrats – are now winning seats that Labour would otherwise have claimed.

#### *The efficiency component*

Much of the trend in net bias over the 16 elections since 1950 shown in Figure 1 can be accounted for by changes in the efficiency component. Labour was advantaged at almost every election by the various size sub-components other than third-party votes, but not by efficiency. Until 1997, the Conservatives' votes were more efficiently distributed than Labour's at every election except February 1974 (Figure 3). Labour has been the clear beneficiary at the last three elections in the sequence, however, with efficiency bias components of 48, 72 and 34 seats respectively (the maximum for the Conservatives was 39, in both 1951 and 1970).

[FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

The reason for this major switch is illustrated by splitting each party's vote total in every constituency into three segments: *wasted votes* play no part in winning a seat (i.e. the party's candidate loses); *effective votes* are those needed to win (i.e. one more than the second-placed candidate's total); and *surplus votes* are additional to those needed for victory (i.e. those in excess of the effective vote total in seats that a party wins). Comparing the number of votes each party would have obtained in each category at each election, after they have been redistributed to give equal vote shares, shows no substantial differences between the Conservatives and Labour in their average number of wasted votes per seat lost (Figure 4). There is a clear downward trend for both parties, however, suggesting that over time each has obtained fewer votes in the seats that it lost. There is a very clear shift in the pattern for surplus votes over recent elections, however (Figure 5). Until 1997, Labour tended to have many more surplus votes per seat won: where it won it did so, on average, by much larger majorities than did the Conservatives. In 2001 and 2005, however, Labour gleaned fewer surplus votes. This shift comes through very clearly in the percentage of each party's votes that were effective (Figure 6). Until 1997, with equal vote shares Labour had smaller percentages of its votes effective than the Conservatives, with the gap as wide as 11 points. In 1997 the situation reversed: Labour's more efficient performance was repeated in 2001 and, to a slightly lesser extent, 2005.

[FIGURES 4, 5 AND 6 ABOUT HERE]

The substantial increase in the efficiency of Labour's vote distribution, and the parallel decline in the Conservatives', was in considerable part caused by the fall in Labour's surplus vote accumulation, for two apparent reasons. First, with the decimation of the mining industry a considerable number of Labour's surplus votes 'disappeared' as turnout fell in a considerable number of very safe seats it had previously won with large majorities, thanks to high turnout stimulated by the miners' trades unions. Secondly, Labour decided that its campaigning resources should be increasingly focused on marginal constituencies where victory or defeat was in the balance. There was little value in stimulating turnout in either safe seats, where victory was assured, or, especially, 'hopeless' ones where there was no chance of success and low turnouts were acceptable. A much more centralised and spatially-focused campaigning organisation (Denver et al, 2003, 2004) ensured reductions in surplus and wasted vote totals, producing a better ratio of seats to votes. This policy began to pay dividends in 1992 and the rewards were very substantial in 1997 and 2001. Paralleling this was the growth in anti-Conservative tactical voting at those three elections, with many Labour voters switching to the Liberal Democrats where they were best placed either to defeat a Conservative incumbent or to block a possible Conservative gain. As a consequence the number of Labour wasted votes was reduced while in seats that Labour won with the help of Liberal Democrat tactical votes the margins were relatively small and the number of surplus votes few. The result – shown in detail in Johnston et al (2002b) – was that Labour very significantly changed the shape of its vote distribution across the constituencies from one that was relatively inefficient to one that was more efficient than its opponent's.

Labour benefited substantially from its targeted campaigning strategy because the Conservatives did not initially respond. They continued to get high turnouts in their safe seats, partly because they campaigned relatively intensively there and also, perhaps, because of a greater feeling of civic duty among Conservative than Labour

supporters of the importance of turning out to vote whatever the local context and irrespective of whether there is any canvassing/campaigning pressure to do so. This changed somewhat in 2005, when the Conservatives clearly undertook a more targeted campaign with resources focused on the constituencies they needed to win.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, they again built-up relatively large majorities in their safe seats. Figure 7 shows the 2005 turnout in seats won by Conservative and Labour candidates in 2001, and the margin of victory then. Labour had more very safe seats than the Conservatives, but also much lower turnouts there. And the larger the margin of Labour victory in 2001, the lower the turnout four years later. This was not the case in Conservative-held seats: the best-fit lowess line shows a slight fall in turnout until the margin of victory is 20 points (Conservatives got the highest turnouts in the seats they could have lost), but no change thereafter.

[FIGURE 7 ABOUT HERE]

Table 3 shows that the Conservatives' targeted campaigning in 2005 paid some dividends. Given that the party's overall share of the vote total was largely unchanged between 2001 and 2005, for it to be more efficient that share needed to be increased in the seats that they could win but allowed to fall elsewhere. The first block in Table 3 shows that the Conservative share of the votes cast increased on average in seats won by either Labour or the Liberal Democrats in 2001 with small margins over a second-placed Conservative, for example, but fell in the safe seats held by those two parties. The Conservative share also fell on average in some of the seats it won in 2001 by small margins. But, most importantly, and unnecessarily in terms of overall efficiency, it increased quite substantially also in its safe seats (those which it won in 2001 with margins of more than 15 percentage points). There was some 'redistribution' of Conservative support to places where extra votes would be more efficiently used – but also some increase in support where it was inefficient (i.e. where the additional votes were not needed).

[TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

Alongside that redistribution, and to the Conservatives' considerable advantage, the second block in Table 3 shows that the Labour vote declined much more on average in Labour-held seats, especially those won in 2001 with small majorities over either a Conservative or a Liberal Democrat candidate, than in Conservative- and, particularly, Liberal Democrat-held seats. The Liberal Democrat share of the vote increased much more in Labour- than Conservative-held marginals, indicating that of the party's two tactical strategies that of opposing Labour incumbents on issues linked to the Iraq war and student fees was much more successful than that seeking to 'decapitate' incumbent Conservative MPs, especially high-profile individuals such as David Davis (the shadow Home Secretary), Oliver Letwin (the shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer), Theresa May (shadow spokesperson on the family and a former party chair), Tim Collins (shadow Education Secretary) and even the Leader of the Opposition, Michael Howard. Four of those MPs increased their majorities in the face of such intense challenges to their incumbencies including, in at least one case (Dorset West, where Oliver Letwin was defending his seat), campaigns for pro-Liberal Democrat tactical voting: Tim Collins was defeated in Westmorland and Lonsdale, however.

In 2005, therefore, the Conservatives were able to reduce their surplus vote average to some extent by a more targeted campaign and achieved several victories over both Labour and the Liberal Democrats by relatively small margins. In addition, there was less anti-Conservative tactical voting involving Labour and Liberal Democrat supporters. But the average Conservative margin of victory was higher in 2005 (at 17.4 percentage points) than 2001 (15.4 points), because of the high turnouts in its safe seats. Labour thus retained a considerable proportion of the considerable advantage in vote efficiency it gained at the previous two contests.

### **What about second place?**

The discussion so far has focused entirely on the position of the two leading parties. But what of the Liberal Democrats, who have traditionally suffered very substantially from an inefficient vote distribution? In 2005 their leader indicated that an era of three-party politics had arrived, but whereas the Conservatives got a share of the seats more-or-less commensurate with their votes (33.2 per cent of the votes; 31.4 per cent of the seats), the Liberal Democrats did not – with 22.7 per cent of the votes they got only 9.9 per cent of the seats. Is the system treating them fairly in their attempts to replace Labour, when compared with the Conservatives?

To assess the extent of this apparent bias against the Liberal Democrats, we have applied the above analytical procedure to a comparison between them and the Conservatives. Their respective shares of the votes were 33.2 and 22.7, so 5.25 percentage points of the total were removed from the Conservatives in each constituency and allocated to the Liberal Democrats; each then had 27.95 per cent. With that equal share of the non-Labour vote, the Conservatives were ahead of the Liberal Democrats in 77 seats, largely because of the efficiency component. Of more interest, if the distribution of votes across the three parties had thus been Labour 36.2, Conservatives 27.95 and Liberal Democrats 27.95, the allocation of seats would have been 373, 161 and 84 respectively. The Liberal Democrats would have been placed second in 300 constituencies, however, behind a Labour winner in 206 cases and behind a Conservative in 93.

Decomposition of that pro-Conservative bias of 77 seats (i.e. with equal vote shares at 27.95 per cent each the Conservatives would have been ahead of the Liberal Democrats in 76 constituencies) showed that its major cause was the efficiency of vote distribution. An inefficient distribution has long been a problem for the Liberal Democrats and their predecessors; at most contests they have been strong in just a few places, where they were able to target campaigning resources and had substantial numbers of activists willing to participate in long-term campaigns (Cutts, 2006). That strategy allowed them to increase their share of the seats in 1997 although their vote share declined. In 2001 and 2005 they spread their effort across a wider range of constituencies, to provide a firmer foundation for later campaigns. Some additional seats were won but in 2005 that increase was incommensurate with their growth of the vote share. (On these problems, see Russell and Fieldhouse, 2005.) To become the main party of opposition, they not only have to overtake the Conservatives in total vote share but also do this in an efficient way, which will be very difficult given their small share of the votes in 2005 in many constituencies.

## **Conclusions: so was it the system's fault?**

In 2005, as in 1997 and 2001, the operation of Britain's electoral system substantially favoured Labour. At both the 1997 and the 2001 contests a Labour lead of 9-11 percentage points in the share of the votes was translated into a 32-38 point advantage in the allocation of seats. In 2005, both gaps closed, to 3 points for votes and 25 points for seats – which in relative terms meant an even greater advantage for Labour. Uncovering the nature of that advantage has indicated that it results from benefits to Labour from both major components of electoral bias – constituency size and vote efficiency. Can these – or some of the sub-components in the case of the first – be ascribed specifically to the system itself?

Regarding constituency size, a considerable proportion of Labour's advantage comes from the relative concentration of its support in small constituencies. Excluding the minor element of this which results from the smaller constituencies in Wales (a consequence of it being guaranteed at least 36 seats by the 1944 Act, and subsequent drift – on which see Rossiter et al, 1999, and Butler and McLean, 1998), this cannot be ascribed to the system per se. The politically-neutral Boundary Commissions are required to make constituencies of equal size 'as far as is practicable' and there is no evidence that in doing this they favour Labour by creating smaller seats where that party is strong. Labour's advantage results from it being strongest in the cities and other (largely ex-)industrial areas where population is declining, so that over time Labour seats tend to get smaller and Conservative seats correspondingly larger. The Boundary Commissions are required to report every 8-12 years, so that the longer the time since their last reviews, the greater the likely variation in constituency size. The 2005 election was the third to be held (in England and Wales though not Scotland) using constituencies enacted in 1995. These were defined using electoral data collected in autumn 1990, however, so that nearly seven years of population change had occurred before they were first used: in England, the mean variation around the average constituency electorate in 1995 (using 1990 data) was 4.8 percentage points; by the time the 1997 election was held, that mean had increased to 6.5 points; in 2001 it was 7.3 points; and in 2005, 8.3. As the constituencies aged they became more varied in their electorates, to Labour's benefit.

This 'creeping pro-Labour bias' could at least be reduced if the Boundary Commission reviews were both increased in frequency and speeded up: currently the Boundary Commission for England takes as long as five years to conduct a review, which may then report four years before the next election. The time taken could be substantially reduced by increasing the Commission's staff for a shorter period and/or removing the very time- and resource-consuming public consultation procedures (on which see Rossiter et al, 1999; Johnston et al, 2001). Some of the bias could then be removed, but one consequence would be frequent changes in constituencies, which many MPs have protested against in the past. Indeed they changed the *Act* in 1958 to extend the period between reviews and require the Commissions not to pursue greater equality at the expense of breaking the ties between constituents and their member: as the then Home Secretary put it, there was 'a presumption against making changes unless there is a very strong case for them' (cited in Rossiter et al, 1999, 98). So MPs and parties can't have it both ways: the alternatives are more frequent changes and less bias, or less frequent changes and continuity of representation, but more bias.

(The over-representation of Wales could be easily removed, of course, as it was for Scotland.)

The bias caused by constituency-size variations between and within countries is only one component of the total, although it may be crucial in close contests. It could be reduced by changing how the current electoral system operates, but this is not the case with the other elements of the constituency size bias component. Just as the Boundary Commissions do not define constituencies to benefit one party over another, so they don't do it to produce some seats with much lower turnout than others. This is a consequence of voter behaviour, increasingly (implicitly) encouraged by the parties. As voters became better attuned to the situation that in many (certainly a majority) of constituencies whether or not they turn out to vote will have no impact on the outcome, then unless either they have a high level of civic duty pressing them to vote or the party that they are likely to support encourages them to, turnout will fall more in some places (the safe seats) than others. And if these conditions vary between parties – the supporters of one tend to have a higher level of civic duty than others; one party makes more efforts to turn out its support irrespective of its chances of winning/losing the seat – then bias is a likely consequence, as recent elections have shown. This is not a function of the system, and could only be changed by policies designed either to increase turnout (compulsory voting, perhaps, or efforts to make voting easier such as postal ballots, though in 2005 the parties promoted these much more in marginal than in safe seats) or to make constituencies more competitive (which would remove the Boundary Commissions' impartiality).

Just as the bias components associated with turnout variations cannot be ascribed to the system, so also is the case with those linked to third-party votes and wins. These are entirely a function of voter and party behaviour, and change to the system could not remove them. The same applies to the efficiency component, also increasingly a function of parties mobilising support in the 'right' constituencies.<sup>8</sup> Deliberate gerrymandering is not possible. The public consultation element of the Boundary Commissions' reviews introduces a small possibility of, in effect, gerrymandering by parties which convince the Commissions to define constituencies that favour them rather than their opponents. This was done with considerable success by Labour in the reviews enacted in 1995 – though the party probably only gained 12-20 seats as a consequence; in the reviews that started in 2001 (and which were only enacted in Scotland prior to the 2005 election) the Conservatives responded much more to Labour's expertise, thereby largely nullifying the potential advantage.<sup>9</sup>

In sum, except for variations in constituency size, the workings of the FPTP system cannot be 'blamed' for delivering two landslide victories to Labour with less than 45 per cent of the votes in 1997 and 2001 and a third in 2005 when a 25 percentage points lead in seats over its main opponent emerged despite only a 3-point lead in vote share. Geography is key to those biases, but not the geography of constituency definition. Rather it is a combination of the geographies of party support, turnout and party campaigning within that geography which produces most of the bias, currently favouring Labour because of where its supporters live, where they turn out, and where it campaigns for their support. The geography of constituencies (i.e. the 'system') provides the template for this, but it is how voters and parties act within that template which generates the disproportionality and bias. Change **to** the existing system – i.e. retaining FPTP but modifying how constituencies are defined – would alter that

situation only slightly; change **of** the system – i.e. introduction of proportional representation – would alter it very significantly, but that is a much bigger issue.

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## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper we deal only with the situation in Great Britain because of the separate party system in Northern Ireland. The election in the Staffordshire South constituency was postponed (as required under electoral legislation) because of the death of one of the candidates after the closing date for nominations. It was held on 23 June, and the result is incorporated in the analyses here.

<sup>2</sup> See for example the article by Chris Huhne – a Liberal Democrat MP – in *The Guardian*, 23 May 2005, p.13.

<sup>3</sup> Simon Jenkins, *The Times*, 4 May 2005, p.18.

<sup>4</sup> A point stressed by Boris Johnson – a Conservative MP – on BBC1's *Question Time* programme on 12 May, 2005. By dividing each party's number of votes by its number of seats, for example, such critics claimed that it took some 44,000 votes on average for the Conservatives to win a seat and 97,000 for the Liberal Democrats, but only 27,000 for Labour.

<sup>5</sup> Blau (2001, 2004) has made a number of criticisms against this method, which uses a uniform vote swing between the two parties across all constituencies (which never happens) and allows for no change in either the vote share for other parties or the turnout. He suggested an alternative, which produces very similar results for most British general elections since 1950. His criticisms are particularly valid when there is a wide gap between the two leading parties in terms of their vote share and have less purchase in 2005 when the gap was small and the number of votes transferred by the procedure also small. As such, the analyses reported here provide a valuable first approximation of the amount of bias.

<sup>6</sup> The seat held by the Speaker is excluded.

<sup>7</sup> In addition individual donors made loans to party organizations in marginal seats to assist their campaigning. Note, however, the criticism of Lord Ashcroft – a former Conservative Party Treasurer – of the party targeting all 164 seats it needed for outright victory rather than concentrating on the 50

most winnable seats (M. A. Ashcroft, *Smell the coffee – a wake-up call for the Conservative Party*.

Privately published (see <http://www.lordashcroft.com/>).

<sup>8</sup> Work on previous elections (Johnston et al, 2002), shows that the impact of the efficiency component is much more sensitive to the actual shares of the vote total won by the two parties than is that of the size component. This was the same in 2005: there was a much more pronounced pro-Labour efficiency bias with vote shares of c. 35 per cent than there was at either c. 25 or c.45 per cent.

<sup>9</sup> On which see the article in *The Times*, 17 May 2005, p.1

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Table 1. The size of the bias components with equal vote shares, 2005 and 2001 general elections.\*

	2005	2001
Constituency size		
National differences	6	5
Within-country differences	20	15
Turnout differences	38	38
Third-party vote differences	-17	-24
Third-party victory differences	26	31
Efficiency	35	74
Interactions	2	-8
TOTAL	111	131

\* A positive figure indicates a pro-Labour bias and a negative figure a pro-Conservative bias. The 2001 bias calculations were made using the estimated results for that election in the 59 newly-constituted Scottish constituencies.

Table 2. The number of seats that would be won by Labour at the 2005 general election with equal vote shares, by constituency size and turnout (both in quintiles)

<i>Turnout</i>	<i>Electorate</i>					TOTAL
	Smallest	2	3	4	Largest	
Lowest	46/49	29/30	21/22	9/11	9/12	117/126
2	23/28	27/31	25/29	6/10	6/10	102/125
3	16/22	16/22	12/21	12/32	12/32	69/126
4	5/13	5/19	8/28	5/31	5/34	28/125
Highest	4/13	4/23	7/26	2/25	1/38	18/125
TOTAL	94/125	81/125	73/126	53/125	33/126	334/627

Table 3. Average changes in each party's share of the votes cast (in percentage points) between 2001 and 2005 by party which won a constituency in 2001, by which party occupied second place, and by the margin of the winner's victory (in percentage points).

<i>Winner 2001</i>	C		L		LD	
<i>Second 2001</i>	L	LD	C	LD	C	L
<u>Mean change in Conservative share of the vote (percentage points)</u>						
<i>Margin 2001</i>						
0 - 4.99	-	-1.53	1.37	-1.63	2.44	-
5 - 9.99	-0.93	1.02	0.78	-3.00	1.76	1.36
10 - 14.99	-1.05	2.75	-0.12	-1.82	0.63	4.92
15 - 19.99	0.88	2.68	-0.19	-1.55	-1.10	-
20 -	2.10	1.41	-1.20	-0.43	-1.42	-2.97
<u>Mean change in Labour share of the vote (percentage points)</u>						
<i>Margin 2001</i>						
0 - 4.99	-	-3.88	-7.33	-9.58	-1.15	-
5 - 9.99	-6.60	-1.98	-6.86	-7.64	-1.70	-1.02
10 - 14.99	-5.67	-4.07	-7.00	-8.62	-1.74	2.03
15 - 19.99	-6.38	-1.44	-7.91	-8.25	-0.44	-
20 -	-6.06	-2.42	-6.99	-5.66	0.25	-6.72
<u>Mean change in Liberal Democrat share of the vote (percentage points)</u>						
<i>Margin 2001</i>						
0 - 4.99	-	3.67	3.81	9.95	-2.36	-
5 - 9.99	4.98	0.98	4.54	11.20	-1.72	-2.74
10 - 14.99	4.26	0.89	4.42	9.91	0.58	-9.86
15 - 19.99	3.47	-1.69	5.83	9.97	0.93	-
20 -	2.21	-0.04	5.12	5.01	-0.23	10.81

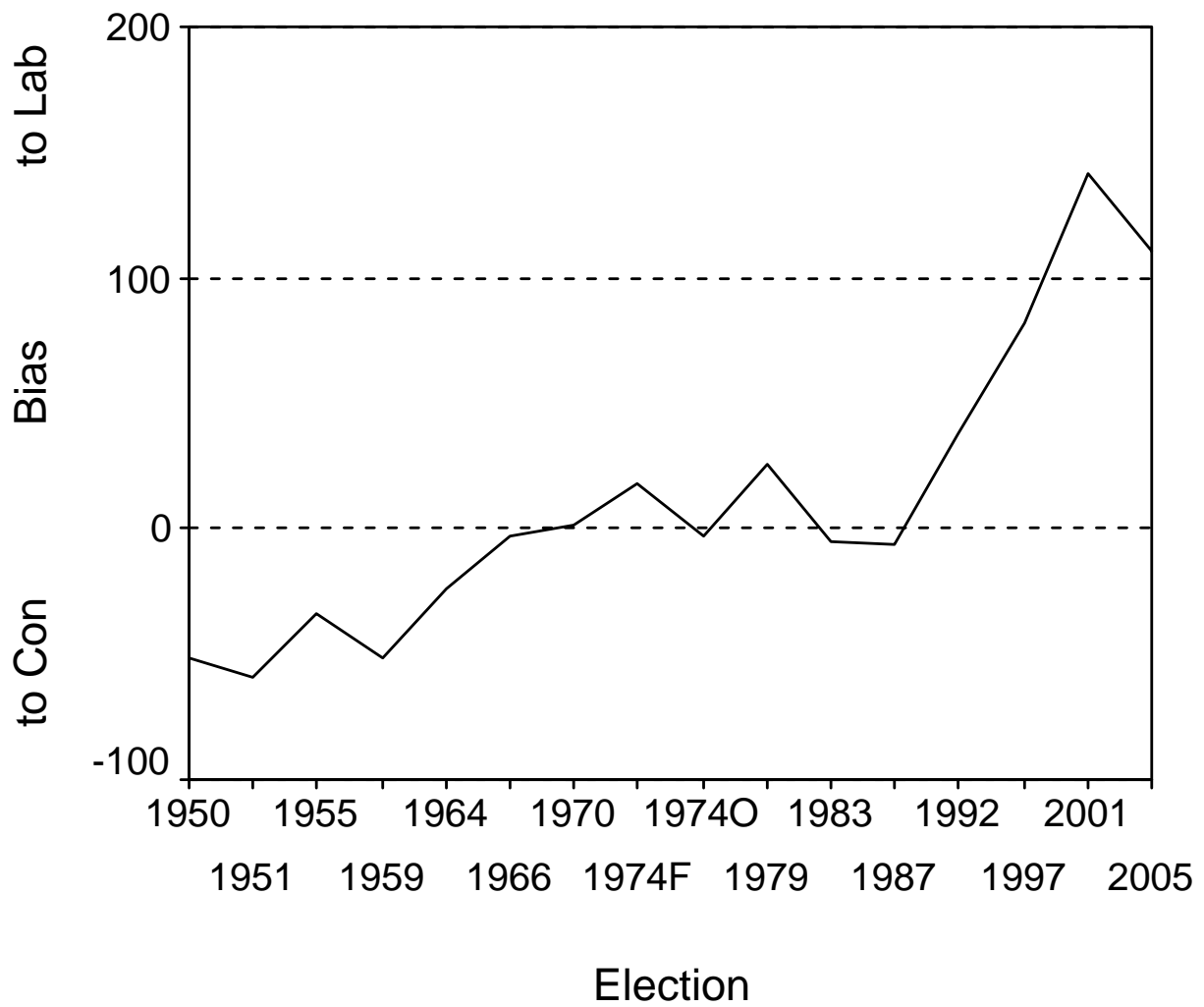


Figure 1. Net bias at each of the general elections in Great Britain since 1950. (A positive figure indicates a pro-Labour bias and a negative figure a pro-Conservative bias.)

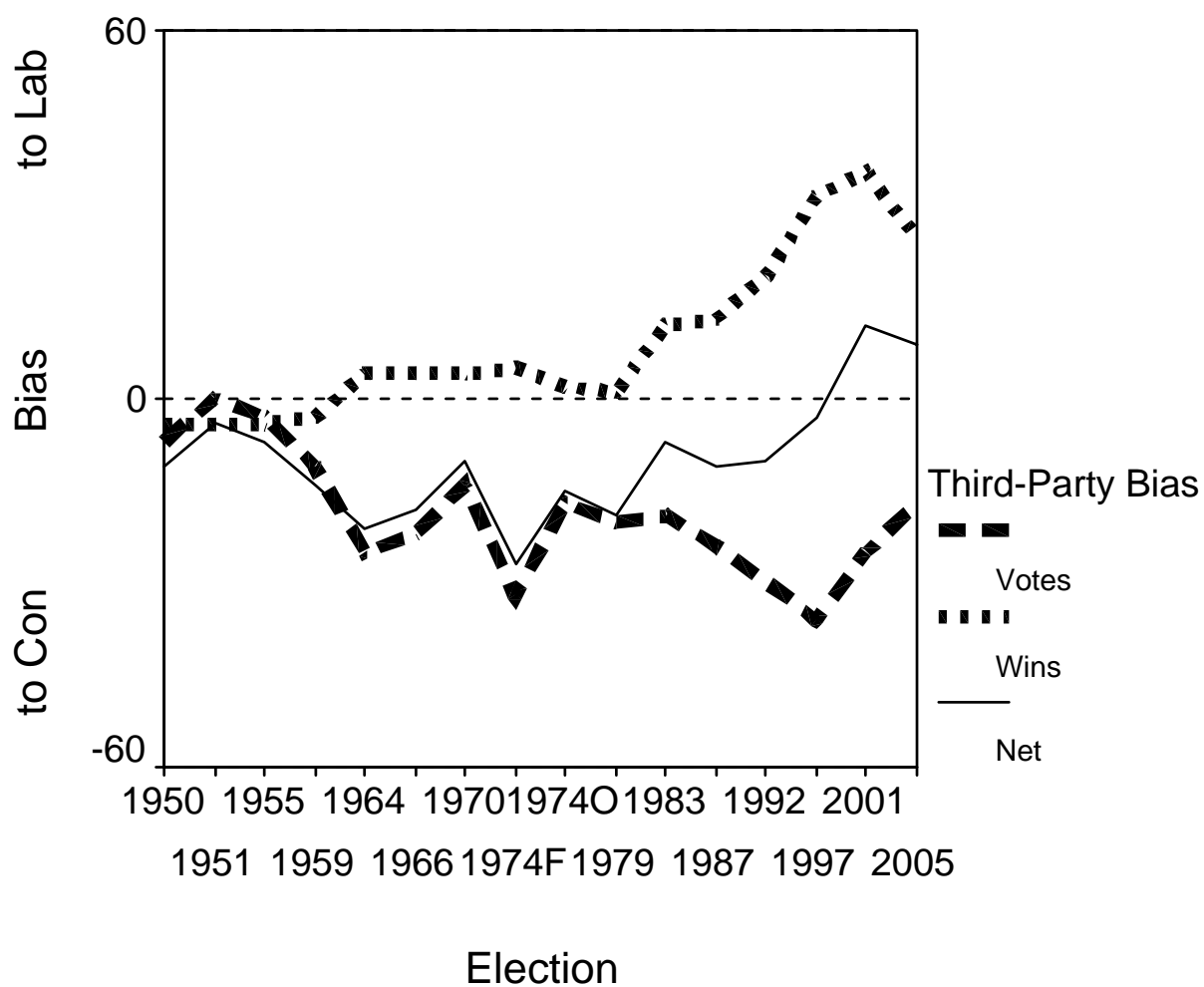


Figure 2. The third party bias components at each of the general elections in Great Britain since 1950. (A positive figure indicates a pro-Labour bias and a negative figure a pro-Conservative bias.)

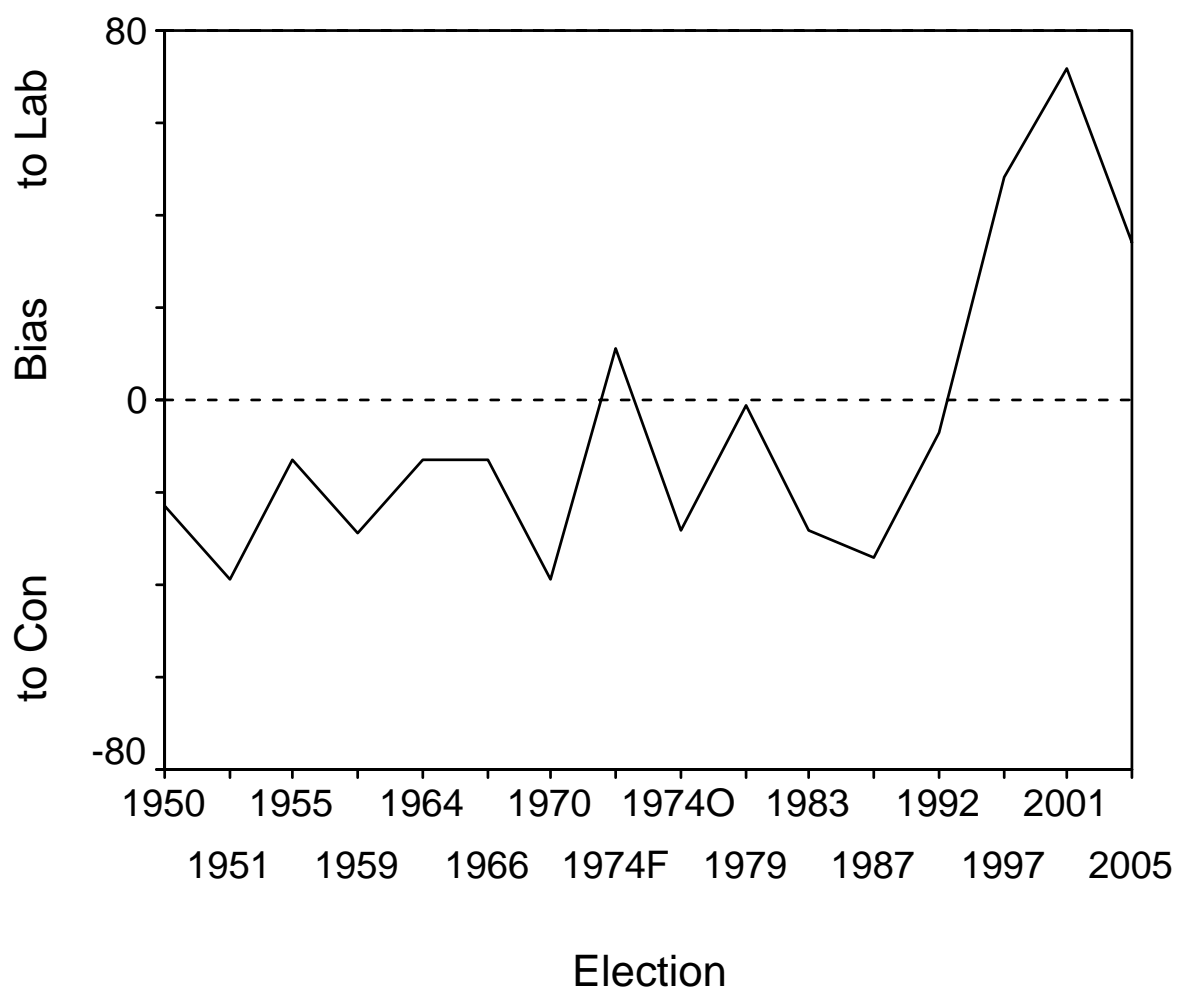


Figure 3. The efficiency bias component at each of the general elections in Great Britain since 1950. (A positive figure indicates a pro-Labour bias and a negative figure a pro-Conservative bias.)

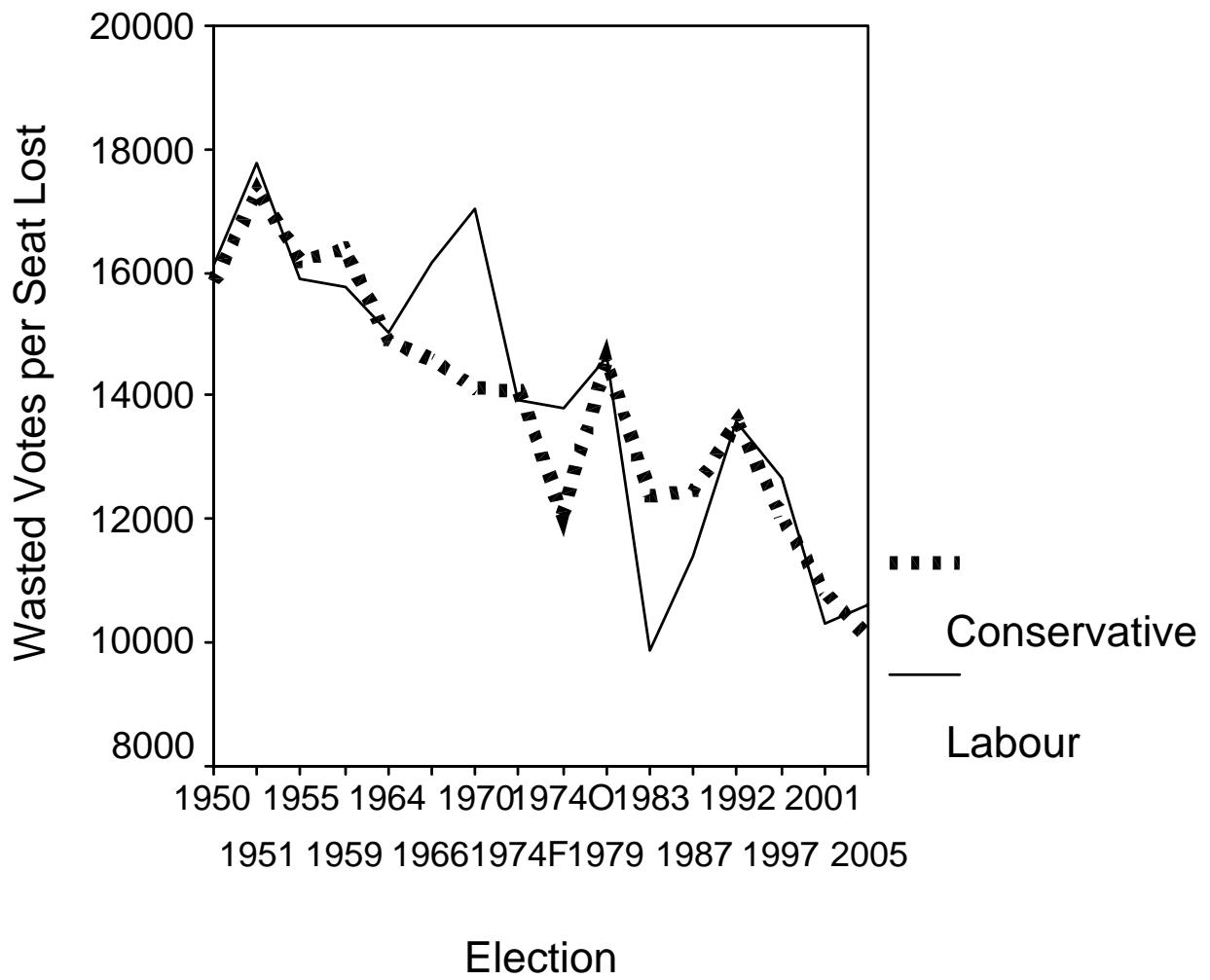


Figure 4. The average number of wasted votes per seat lost with equal vote shares at each of the general elections in Great Britain since 1950.

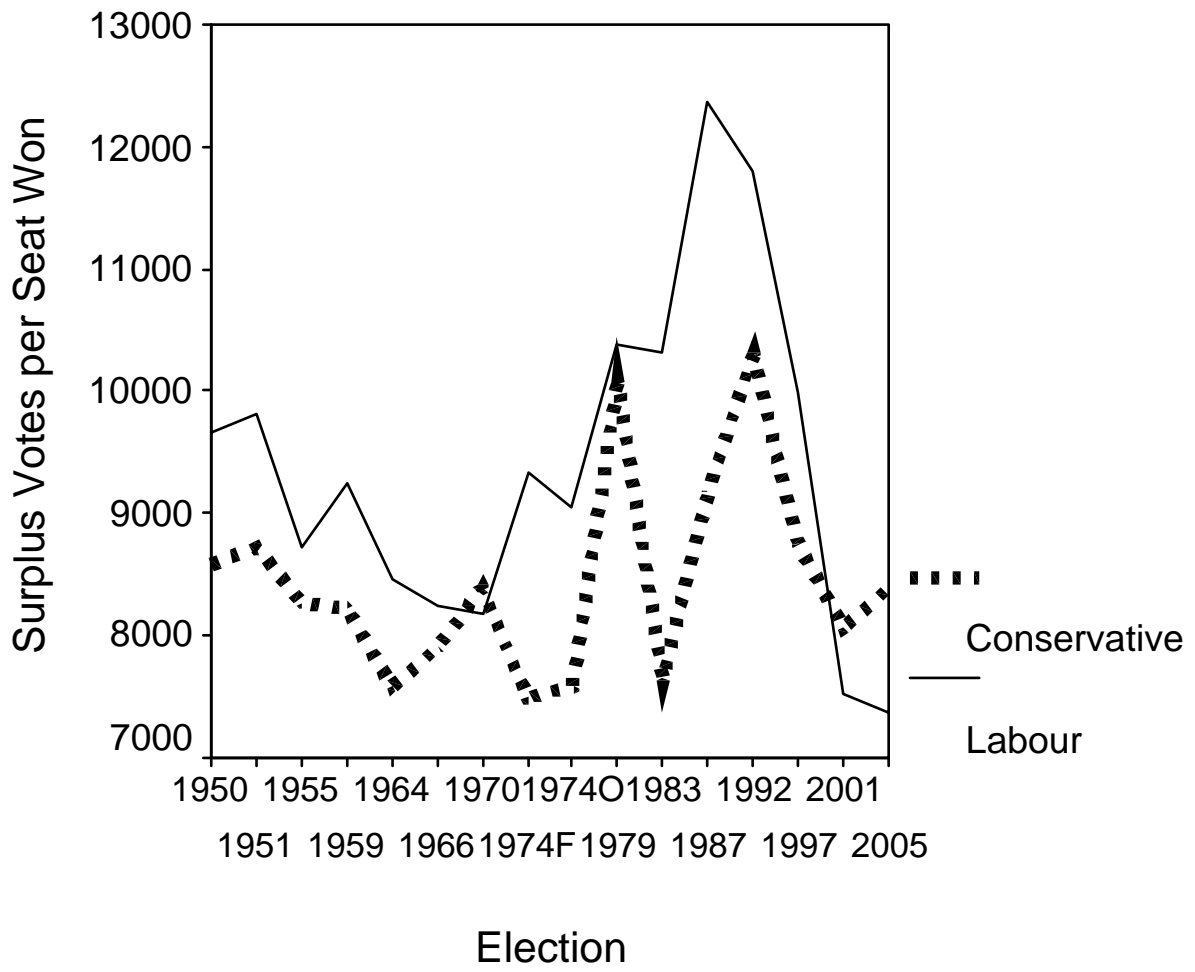


Figure 5. The average number of surplus votes per seat won with equal vote shares at each of the general elections in Great Britain since 1950.

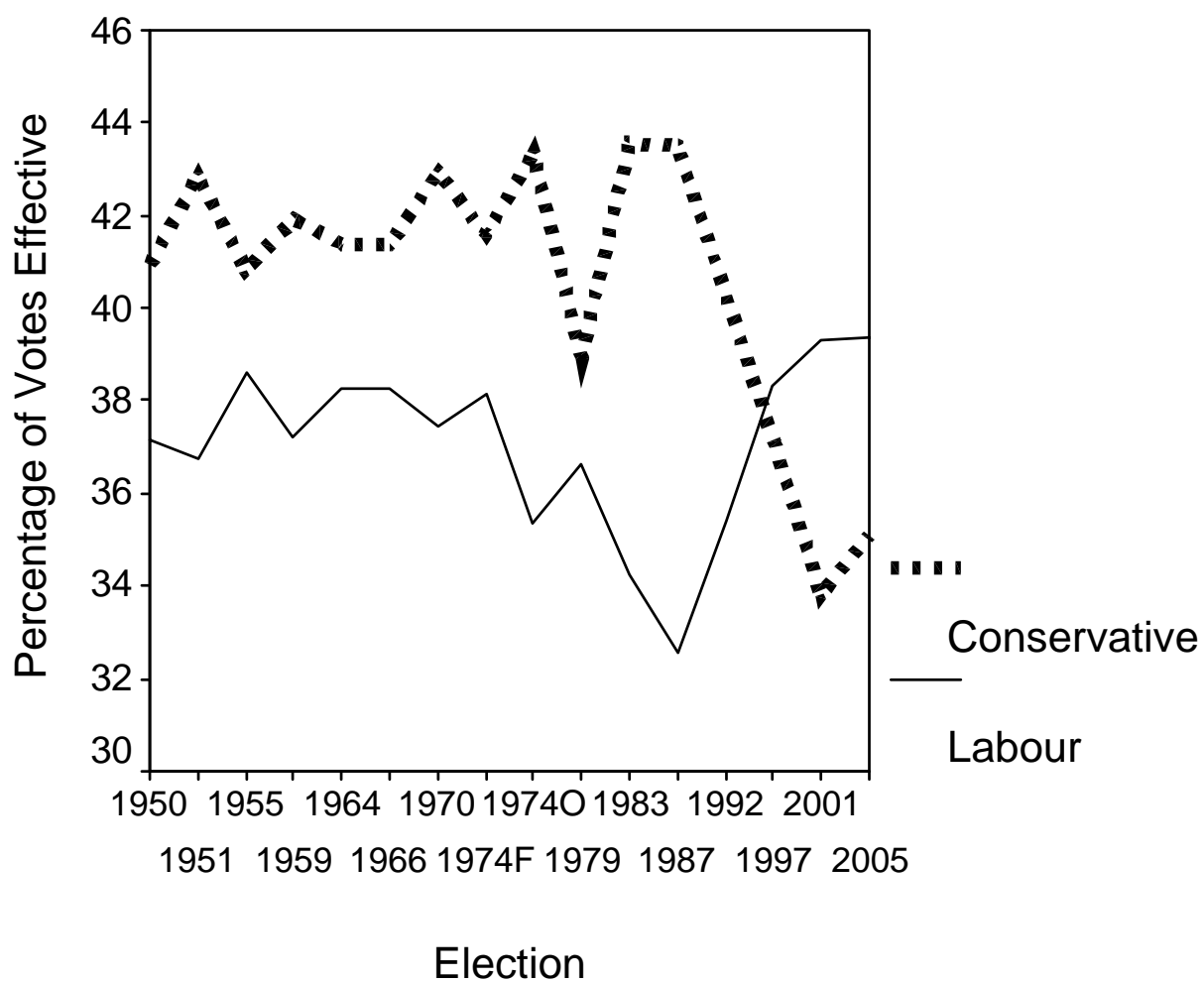


Figure 6. The percentage of each party's votes that were efficient with equal vote shares at each of the general elections in Great Britain since 1950.

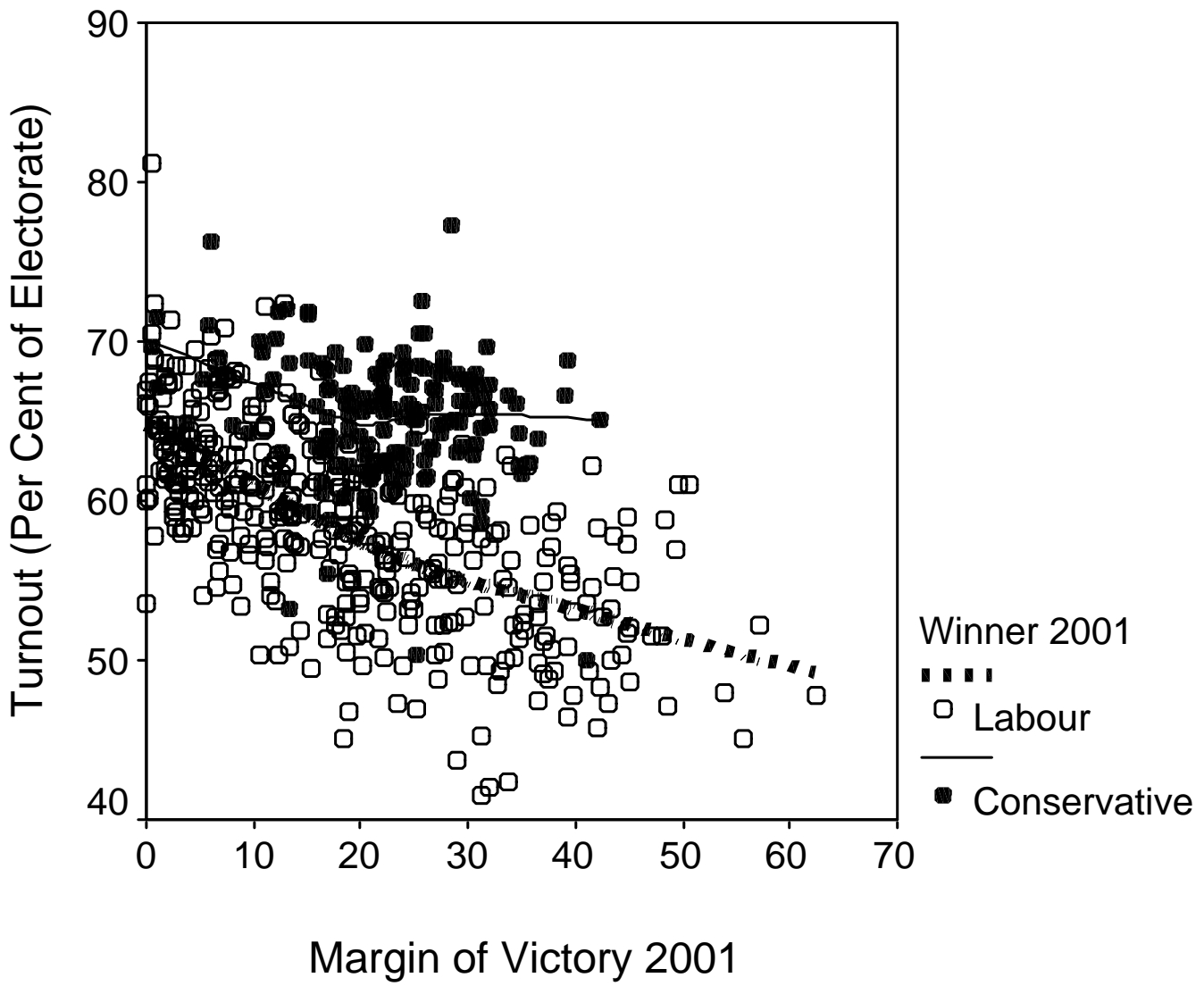


Figure 7. Turnout at the 2005 general election by the winner of each constituency and the margin of victory in 2001 (in percentage points).