Throwing the rascals out?

Problems of accountability in two-party systems

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the concept of accountability as it is understood in two-party

systems and majoritarian democracy, namely, the ability of voters to remove governments

that violate their mandates or otherwise perform poorly. Voters' capacity to 'throw the rascals

out' is one of the main normative appeals of two-partism and the single-member plurality

(SMP) electoral system. However, this paper uses a spatial model to show that in at least two

types of situation voters are left in a bind when confronted with a mandate-breaking governing party: (1) when both major parties undertake unexpected non-centrist shifts in opposing directions after an election, leaving centrist voters with an unappealing choice; (2) when a governing party that had won an election on a non-centrist platform undertakes a post-election shift to the centre, leaving its more radical supporters dissatisfied. In each case, voters have four imperfect options: (i) punish the governing party by throwing the rascals out, but in doing so, vote for a party that is ideologically more distant; (ii) abstain, and withdraw from the democratic process; (iii) vote for a minor party that has no hope of influencing government formation, but which might detach enough votes to allow the ideologically more distant major opposition party to win; (iv) forgive the governing party its mandate-breaking. All of these options represent accountability failures. The problems are illustrated with two case studies from two-party systems: the UK in the mid-1980s and New Zealand from 1984-93. In both instances, many voters found it difficult to 'throw the rascals out' without harming their own interests in the process. The paper concludes that accountability may sometimes be better achieved if voters can force a party to share power in coalition with another party in order to 'keep it honest' instead of removing it from government completely, as can happen in multi-party systems based on proportional representation. Thus, although two-partism based on plurality voting is normally regarded as superior to multi-partism and proportional representation on the criterion of accountability, in some instances, the reverse can be true. The paper therefore undermines a core normative argument advanced by supporters of majoritarian democracy and SMP.

KEY WORDS: Accountability; two-party system; single-member plurality system; proportional representation; Duverger's law.

Despite their rarity, two-party systems have long fascinated political scientists. They constitute one of the principal ideal-types in classifications of party systems (Sartori 1976; Ware 1996, 2009). They are linked with the single-member plurality (SMP) electoral system in Duverger's law (Duverger 1964; Riker 1982; Cox 1997). Two-party competition offers the clearest demonstration of the spatial model of voting (Downs 1957; Enelow & Hinich 1984). It is also a key feature of the Westminster Model of majoritarian democracy (Lijphart 2012).

Part of the fascination with two-partism lies in its normative appeal. One of the most convincing arguments advanced in favour of two-party majoritarianism, particularly in parliamentary democracies, is that it is the regime that most strongly embodies the key democratic value of *accountability* (Bovens 2010). In two-party systems, a majority (more often, plurality) of voters directly chooses which one of the rival parties will monopolise executive power, without any intervention by party elites in post-election coalition negotiations. Voters can also remove governments that have violated their mandates or otherwise performed incompetently in office. In other words, they can 'throw the rascals out' simply by voting for the other party. The SMP electoral system, which underpins classic two-partism, gives voters the power to implement such changes of government directly by reducing electoral choice to two viable options (Duverger 1964; Cox 1997).

The claim that majoritarianism facilitates accountability is accepted even in critical accounts that otherwise find in favour of proportional democracy (Lijphart 2012; Powell 2000). A partial exception concerns 'wrong-winner' elections in two-party systems, where the party winning the most votes does not win the most seats (Renwick 2009). That is a consequence of 'bias' in the SMP electoral system, usually because one party's votes are more efficiently distributed across districts (Blau 2004). On this basis, two-partism has been criticised for not

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always permitting voters to throw the rascals out (Vowles 1999: 141-142). However, such occurrences are largely the exception.[1]

This paper adopts a different stance. It critically examines the concept of accountability as it is understood in discussions of majoritarianism and two-partism. It argues that a fundamental feature of the notion of accountability as 'throwing the rascals out' is that, no matter how badly a government behaves in a two-party system, it will be ejected from office only if there exists something better to replace it. If voters deem the opposition party to be even worse, then the governing party is safe. The paper considers two scenarios in which that might be the case. The first concerns a government that shifts away from the median-voter position but is re-elected because the main opposition is further away from the median voter. The second entails disenchanted radical voters seeing their preferred party move closer to the median-voter position but are then unwilling to support the main opposition because it is even further away. The paper shows that minor parties and voter abstention are imperfect responses to accountability failures. The paper draws on examples from two key Westminster democracies, the United Kingdom and New Zealand, to illustrate its points. It shows how more open structures of party competition based on proportional representation (PR) could have eased these countries' accountability problems.

Despite the limited number of existing majoritarian systems, the analysis of two-partism continues to be relevant. First, there remains a tendency, particularly in the Anglosphere, to assume that two-partism represents the epitome of democracy. This study undermines one of majoritarianism's core virtues, namely, its understanding of accountability. Secondly, the paper contributes to the debate about electoral systems. There is a tendency to assume that SMP is best at delivering accountability while PR is better at achieving representation

(Norton 1997; Pinto-Duschinsky 1999; see also Ezrow 2010). This paper argues that accountability is not always delivered under SMP, and may even be better achieved under PR, through partial rather than wholesale alternation in government.

The paper is organised as follows. The first section recounts how accountability functions in two-party systems. The second section presents theoretical examples of how accountability might not work as intended. The third section examines some imperfect accountability options available to voters, such as abstention and supporting minor parties. The next two sections consider examples of these problems in Britain and New Zealand, before the final section reflects on the limits of regarding the ability of voters to 'throw the rascals out' as the benchmark of democratic accountability.

ACCOUNTABILITY IN TWO-PARTY SYSTEMS

The starting point of the present analysis of two-partism is the majoritarian model of democracy. Often referred to as the Westminster Model, majoritarianism is a form of democracy in which the normative basis for government is the representation of majority opinion among the citizenry (Powell 2000: 47-88; Lijphart 2012: 9-29). In this system, voters have a choice of governing alternatives and the one that secures a majority forms the government. Checks and balances on executive power should not restrain the government giving expression to majority opinion. Majoritarianism is contrasted with 'proportional' or 'consensus' democracy, which is based on the representation of the broadest range of citizen opinion rather than just majorities (Powell 2000: 89-114; Lijphart 2012: 30-45).

Majoritarian democracy works best under two-partism, which provides voters with one governing party and one opposition party to offer voters an alternative government (Sartori 1976: 185-192). Two-partism is normally associated with the SMP electoral system – some defences of majoritarianism use the terms almost interchangeably (e.g. Norton 1997; Pinto-Duschinsky 1999). SMP plays both a limiting and an enabling role for voters. It effectively limits voter choice to two major parties. First, it sets a high electoral threshold for victory in each district and thereby hinders smaller parties' ability to win seats. Secondly, it provides a disincentive for voters to 'waste' their votes on parties with no chance of winning (Cox 1997: 69-98; Duverger 1964; Lijphart 1994; Riker 1982). But in limiting voter choice to two options, SMP simultaneously enables voters to elect the government directly, as the party that wins the most seats will, by definition, achieve a legislative majority. To remove the governing party, voters can switch to the other major party, with SMP making their task easy: a plurality of votes for the challengers will (usually) deliver it a legislative majority.

Two of the strongest normative arguments made for majoritarianism (and by extension, two-partism and SMP) are that governments are based on electoral *mandates* and are *accountable* to voters. Mandates entail a *prospective* view of what governments have been given the authority to do by voters at an election, usually based on policy promises in manifestos (Powell 2000: 69-88).[2] Accountability is *retrospective* and involves voters judging governments on their past behaviour and whether they honoured their mandates.

Accountability is at the heart of normative defences of majoritarianism (Chandler 1982; Norton 1997; Pinto-Duschinsky 1999). The governing party uses its parliamentary majority to implement its manifesto pledges. Pledges will not get traded away because there are no post-election coalition negotiations. With only one governing party, there is clarity of

political responsibility as voters know who to blame when things go wrong (Powell and Whitten 1993). At the following election, voters can decide whether or not the government deserves another term. If it has reneged on its promises and performed poorly, it could be voted out. Elections are the mechanism of delivering accountability, which is the ability of voters to '*throw the rascals out*' (Powell 2000: 47; Pinto-Duschinsky 1999).

At first glance, the argument of the majoritarians looks compelling. What could be better than for voters to have the opportunity to punish an underperforming governing party by removing it from office? This attribute of majoritarianism is conceded by its critics. The foremost empirical critique of majoritarianism is that of Powell (2000), who showed that governments in proportional democracies implement policies much closer to the preferences of the median voter than majoritarian governments do. However, Powell acknowledged that majoritarian democracies perform well on governmental ejection (2000: 47-50).

The present paper argues that, even on this criterion, majoritarianism falls short. It reinforces existing critiques offered by Powell, Lijphart and others by reappraising what has traditionally been seen as one of majoritarianism's strongest features – its notion of democratic accountability. In particular, a tension may arise in two-party systems between retrospective accountability and prospective mandates because democracy involves an endless sequence of elections. If a party wins an election in time t_0, it gains a mandate to implement its manifesto policies. If it violates its mandate by implementing different policies, voters may punish it at the next election in time t_1 by voting it out of power. However, before they do that, they must consider the policies of the opposition party. If its policies are even less palatable than those of the governing party, then at least some voters will be in a bind. Either they throw the rascals out and punish the governing party, but in doing so award a

mandate to a party that would make them even worse off; or they stick with the governing

party, and give it a free pass for violating its previous mandate, while in the process awarding

it a new one. Either way, the accountability mechanism fails.

ACCOUNTABILITY FAILURES IN TWO-PARTY SYSTEMS

Accountability in two-party systems can be explored using a simple spatial model. In a

single-shot election where the parties compete on a left-right ideological dimension, the party

that positions its policies closest to the median voter will win (Downs 1957; Enelow &

Hinich 1984). The winning party would possess a mandate to implement its policies in

government. However, accountability entails a retrospective judgment about what parties

have previously done in office (Powell 2000: 8-9). Therefore, it is necessary to incorporate a

retrospective element into the model. That can be done by introducing an unannounced post-

election shift in the government's policy position. Such shifts are entirely feasible under SMP

and two-partism because these systems facilitate 'strong government' (Chandler 1982;

Norton 1997; Pinto-Duschinsky 1999); that is, a government that can use its single-party

majority status to take full control of the legislative agenda, with little need to worry about

possible repercussions until the following election, which may be years away.

Assume that in a two-party system with plurality-rule voting, voters face a choice between

the incumbent governing party, L (left-leaning), and the opposition party, R (right-leaning).

Further assume that L won the previous election in time t_0 by promising to implement policy

at L_1 but in office it implements an unannounced change of policy to the more leftist position

L_2 (Figure 1 (a)). If L had remained at L_1, it would have been equidistant from the median

voter (MV) with party R, which is positioned at R_1. However, by moving away from MV to L_2, party L makes itself electorally less competitive, assuming that it remains at that position for the following election in t_1. In this instance, MV can hold L to account by voting for R, thereby handing the election to R and in the process throwing out the 'rascals', L. From the perspective of MV, the accountability mechanism has worked and she is no worse off than she was before.

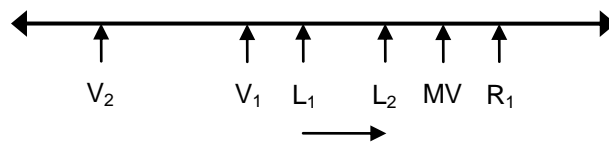*Figure 1*. Governmental (un)accountability to voters in a two-party system

(a) If Govt L changes policy in a leftist direction, median voter holds it to account by voting for Party R

L_2 L_1 MV R_1
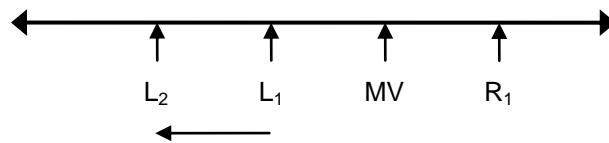
(b) Median voter can no longer hold Govt L to account if Party R shifts to right

L_2 L_1 MV R_1 R_2
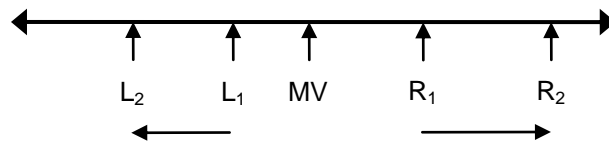
(c) Voter V_1 cannot hold Govt L to account (will not leap-frog L to support R)

Extremist voter V_2 alienated from L and R – no accountability

V_2 V_1 L_1 L_2 MV R_1

Under the assumptions of spatial voting, however, MV will vote for the opposing party only if she finds herself ideologically closer to it. Figure 1 (b) presents a new scenario in which that does not happen. Once again, L is the governing party and R the opposition party. It is assumed here that at the previous election in time t_0, MV was slightly closer to L, which was

positioned at L_1, than she was to R, which was at R_1. Now assume that between that election, when MV voted for L, and the next election in t_1, L shifted to the more leftist position of L_2. That reduced MV's utility because policy shifted to a position further away from her ideal point. Further assume, however, that during this same period, the opposition party, R, has abandoned its former policy position and shifted to the right to position R_2. Party R is now once again further away than L from MV. It is rational for MV to continue supporting L despite its utility-reducing (for MV) leftist shift. In this scenario, MV has no means of holding the governing party, L, to account. Its only way of doing so – throwing the rascals out – would entail supporting a party whose policies would make it worse off.

The discussion thus far has assumed that only the median voter matters in terms of accountability. The median voter is normally the focus of attention in two-party systems because its support is necessary for a party to achieve victory. It is not, however, sufficient. A party must also win the support of voters on one side of the median voter in order to obtain a majority. All voters who support a party contribute towards awarding it a mandate, and if that mandate is broken, they may seek to hold the government to account.

Figure 1 (c) considers two further voters, V_1 and V_2, neither of whom are the median voter. Both V_1 and V_2 find themselves on the left of the ideological spectrum and further to the left than the governing party, L, which was elected to government in time t_0 at position L_1. V_1 is a moderate left-leaning voter while V_2 is a radical leftist. Both voters have a preference for L over R in the sense that each is ideologically closer to L. Now assume that, once in government, L shifts from L_1 to the more centrist position of L_2. Both V_1 and V_2 are made worse off by this shift but neither has a viable means of holding L to account at the next

election. 'Throwing the rascals out' would entail voting for R at R_1, which would make both voters still worse off than at even L_2.

To summarise, in a two-party system based on SMP, an unexpected post-election policy shift by the governing party will lead some voters to seek to hold it to account at the following election, but in certain instances, no appropriate accountability options may exist. Specifically, a non-centrist shift by the governing party only should lead the median voter to throw the rascals out and support the other party. However, if the other party has also undertaken a non-centrist shift, the median voter may be stuck with the governing party. Likewise, a centrist shift by the governing party should leave radical voters on its own ideological flank dissatisfied, but throwing the rascals out would entail supporting an ideologically even more distant party, while supporting the incumbent would reward the latter for its mandate-breaking.

RESPONSES TO ACCOUNTABILITY FAILURES

The conclusion of the previous section was that some voters, far from being able to exercise accountability in a two-party system, may be faced with an unappealing choice between endorsing a mandate-breaking incumbent or supporting its even-worse opponent. However, the experience of actual two-party systems under SMP is that at least two other options exist for dissatisfied voters, although again neither is entirely satisfactory.

The first option is to abstain, whereby voters withhold their votes altogether. Extremists, such as V_2 in Figure 1(c), might abstain out of alienation if the two main parties were ideologically

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distant from them (Downs 1957). Centrists could abstain out of indifference if there appeared to be little distinction between the parties and little riding on the election (Kang 2004: 82). When the major parties are polarised, extremists would be more motivated to vote while centrists might be more likely to abstain, not so much because of indifference, but due to alienation from the entire system.

Abstention is an unsatisfactory accountability mechanism because it entails discontented voters withdrawing from the democratic process. Moreover, if abstaining extremists came disproportionately from one ideological flank, it might make it more likely that the party on the opposing ideological flank would win the election. The median-voter position would also shift in the direction of the opposite ideological flank and likely make government policy of either major party less palatable to the abstainers. However, although abstention is a response to voter disenchantment with two-party politics, it is not the principal focus of the present paper, which considers alternative party choices (see Enelow & Hinich 1984: 90-95).

The second option for dissatisfied voters under two-partism is to vote for a minor party (Gerring 2005). The presence of minor parties offers voters the chance to cast 'protest votes': they are partly votes against the governing party, but indicate an unwillingness to vote for the main opposition party (Kang 2004). Voters that support minor parties effectively abstain from the choice of government in a two-party system because those parties struggle to win seats under SMP (Duverger 1964). From one perspective, voting for a minor party under SMP seems irrational: one major party's policies will offer a voter higher expected utility than the other major party's and so it would be rational to vote for the party that makes the voter better off rather than 'wasting' one's vote on a no-hoper. However, elections are repeated events and voters may look not only to the future but also to the past, as

accountability demands. A voter may expect higher utility after the next election from the re-election of the incumbent governing party, but if that same party had broken its pledges after the previous election, it makes sense to punish the government. Voting for it again rewards it for its mandate violations. Voting for the major opposition party, however, leaves the voter with a lower expected utility.

One solution is to vote for a minor party, if one is available, that is ideologically close to the voter. This protest vote sanctions the government for its past behaviour while withholding support from the major opposition party that would make the voter worse off. Figure 2 shows the governing party, L, and the major opposition party, R, together with two disenchanted voters, V_1 and V_2. V_1 is fairly centrist but ideologically closer to L than to R and therefore unlikely to support the latter. V_2 is ideologically radical and closer to L than to R, but not satisfied with either and not at all willing to vote for R. (These scenarios are similar to those in Figure 1 (b) and (c) above.)

Figure 2. Presence of third and non-centrist parties
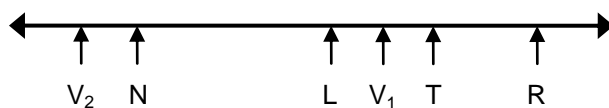
Now assume that two small parties are added to the system. One is a centrist party, T, which becomes the recognised 'third' party. As a centrist force, it attracts disgruntled voters from both major parties and adopts middle-of-the-road policies to that end (Adams & Merrill 2006; Nagel & Wlezien 2010). The other is a non-centrist ideologically radical party, N, which is

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well to the left of the other parties. V_2 is ideologically close to N and now has the option of voting for it, perhaps as a protest against the big two parties. If V_1 were disenchanted with L for some reason, e.g. it had shifted leftwards away from its previous promises, it could support T given its ideological proximity and R's remoteness. Again, this decision may amount to a protest vote, primarily against L for its failures but also against R for not being appealing enough to provide a viable alternative.

SMP tends to ensure that parties reliant on protest votes fail to move beyond the status of minor parties unless they enjoy geographically-concentrated support because of the difficulty of winning enough votes to capture a district. Even significant levels of minor-party electoral support can be compatible with the maintenance of a largely two-party parliamentary system (Duverger 1964: 216-228). Minor parties are sometimes seen as 'safety valves' for two-partism, enabling protest voting while not undermining parliamentary two-partism (McCraw 1979: 54). That may be the case if support for the minor parties ebbs and flows. It might not be such a good description if support is consistently high but not rewarded in terms of seats.

Voting for minor parties is an imperfect response by voters to accountability failures in two-party systems based on SMP. It may have a limited impact in terms of minor-party legislative representation but it could split the vote of the parties on one side of the ideological spectrum. Under SMP, that may hand victory to the other (less-preferred) major party, as is demonstrated later (Cox 1997).

Rising electoral support for minor parties was evident in New Zealand and the UK, the two classic cases of Westminster-style two-partism based on SMP (until the mid-1990s in New Zealand). Both countries usually had single-party majority governments and legislatures

dominated by the two main parties (Mair 2009; Quinn 2013; Miller 2005: 25-43). However, in each, there was a third party – the centrist Liberals in the UK and the economically-unorthodox Social Credit (later the Democrats) in New Zealand (Russell & Fieldhouse 2005; McCraw 1979; Miller 1989). Usually, the two major parties won 80-90 percent of the vote in New Zealand elections and somewhat less in UK elections. However, SMP ensured that legislative two-partism prevailed, at least until the UK's first post-war coalition government in 2010 (Quinn et al. 2011).

These two countries offer the clearest examples of parliamentary two-partism. They also provide fitting illustrations of accountability failures. The following two sections present cases studies that highlight how these problems arose in practice.

IDEOLOGICAL POLARISATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY TO CENTRIST VOTERS: THE UK IN THE 1980S

Two-party systems are normally associated with the ideological convergence of the major parties. In Britain, that was the case between the 1950s and 1970s, but from 1974 until the mid-1990s, the major parties, Labour and the Conservatives, were polarised (Quinn 2013). Into the 'vacated centre' stepped the Liberals (later, the Alliance and the Liberal Democrats) (Nagel & Wlezien 2010). The third party enjoyed its greatest support in the 1980s as the Alliance but the electoral system prevented a parliamentary breakthrough.

Figure 3 presents a simple spatial account of the UK's party system in the early-1980s. The Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher had implemented free-market economic

reforms in a sharp break with the post-war 'consensus' years. The Tories ran for office in 1979 on a fairly right-wing manifesto although there was little anticipation of how far they intended to implement their anti-inflationary strategy in government (Gamble 1994: 104). In the event, unemployment soared from 1.3 million in May 1979 to 3.2 million in January 1983 (Butler & Butler 2011: 410). It might be contentious to characterise this development as a broken mandate but there was undoubtedly a 'perception gap' between what voters expected and what was delivered. This gap is shown as a (post-election) rightward shift from Con_1 to Con_2 in Figure 3.

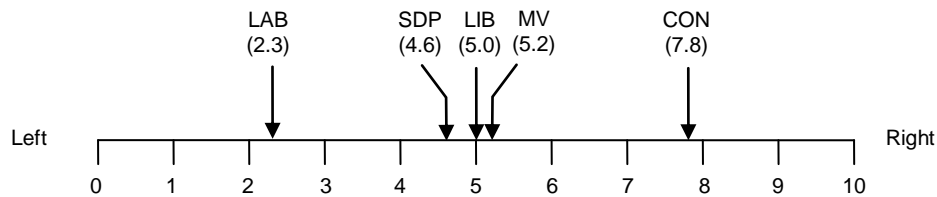*Figure 3*. Accountability problems for centrists: The UK (early-1980s)
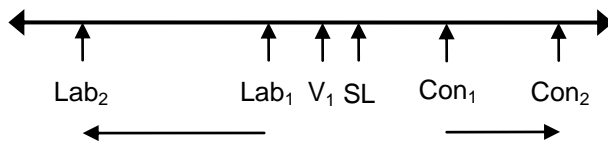
Labour fought and lost the 1979 election on a mildly left-of-centre platform but on its return to opposition, it became embroiled in an internal debate over its future. It shifted sharply to the left in time for the 1983 election (Seyd 1987), indicated by the shift from Lab_1 to Lab_2 in Figure 3. In the context of purely two-party competition, a centrist voter positioned at V_1 now found herself a long way from both major parties. Voters in this ideological range who wanted to hold the Conservative government to account for its policies in office would have had few palatable options available.

Events intervened, however. A group of moderate MPs left the Labour Party to form the Social Democratic Party (SDP), which quickly entered into an electoral pact with the Liberals

(Crewe & King 1995). The SDP-Liberal Alliance adopted a centrist position between the two major parties. For centrist voters such as V_1 above, it offered an attractive centrist alternative by positioning itself at point SL. Expert surveys of party positions in 1983 supported the notions of Labour-Conservative polarisation and SDP/Liberal centrism (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Estimates of UK parties on left-right scale in 1983

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              LAB              SDP   LIB   MV              CON
              (2.3)            (4.6) (5.0) (5.2)           (7.8)
               ↓                ↓     ↓↓                    ↓
Left  |————————————————————————————————————————————————————|  Right
      0    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10
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Notes: Figures for parties are mean expert ratings on 0-10 scale (0 = left-wing, 10 = right-wing). Figure for voters (MV) is median respondent's self-placement on Eurobarometer survey recalculated from original 1-10 scale as reported in Powell (2000).
Sources: Powell 2000: 168; Castles & Mair 1984: 83.

In the 1983 election, the Alliance almost doubled the Liberals' vote share in 1979 but SMP severely limited its seat gains (Table 1). Labour finished just ahead of the Alliance on votes but won nine times as many seats. However, the Alliance detached enough Labour votes to cause it to lose seats to the Conservatives, who won a landslide victory.

Table 1. UK general elections, 1979-1983

	1979		1983			
	Vote %	Seats N	Vote %	Change %	Seats N	Change N
Conservative	43.9	339	42.4	-1.5	397	+58
Labour	36.9	268	27.6	-9.3	209	-59
Liberal/Alliance	13.8	11	25.4	+11.6	23	+12
Others	5.4	17	4.6	-0.8	21	+4

Note: Fifteen more seats in 1983 compared with 1979 after district boundary changes.

Source: Quinn 2013: 383.

For some centrist voters such as V_1, there was a failure of accountability. To hold the Conservatives to account for their record in office, V_1 would have had either to vote for Labour, which was now too extreme, or vote for the Alliance. The even territorial distribution of the Alliance's vote ensured that it could not easily convert votes into seats and so by depriving Labour of votes, V_1 helped the Conservatives to increase their parliamentary majority (Curtice & Steed 1983). Other centrists stuck with the Conservatives, but may have done so unenthusiastically, given the Tories' considerable distance from the median-voter position. The UK election of 1983 was the first in a series in which the third party performed strongly in terms of votes but weakly in terms of seats, and the winning party achieved landslide parliamentary majorities on moderate shares of the vote (Mair 2009; Quinn 2013).

CENTRIST SHIFTS AND ACCOUNTABILITY TO NON-CENTRIST VOTERS: NEW
ZEALAND, 1984-93

Centrist voters are not the only ones who struggle to hold the major parties to account in two-party systems. Indeed, given that policy is normally fairly centrist, non-centrist voters are more likely to be consistently frustrated by two-party competition but also deprived of the means to do much about it.

The New Zealand party system was traditionally dominated by the centre-left Labour Party and the centre-right National Party (Miller 2005). However, the system started to undergo changes in the 1980s and 1990s. On entering government in 1984, Labour surprised everyone by shifting sharply to the right on economic policy, implementing free-market reforms that alienated traditional supporters and which were not signalled in its manifesto (Nagel 1998). Expert estimates of New Zealand parties' ideological positions changed markedly between the early-1980s and early-1990s (Table 2). Both Labour and National were perceived to have shifted to the right, while the mean voter largely remained where it had been. A newly-formed coalition, the Alliance, exploited Labour's shift by positioning itself to attract dissatisfied left-wingers in 1993.

In Figure 5, Labour's post-election shift to the right is indicated by the shift from Lab_1 to Lab_2. For left-leaning Labour voters, such as V_2, this shift is extremely unwelcome, as this voter's utility is much reduced at Lab_2 compared with Lab_1. The conventional way of sanctioning a governing party that violates its mandate in a two-party system is to vote for the other main party. However, in the eyes of V_2, National is even worse than Labour, as it is positioned further to the right at Nat. V_2 could continue to vote for Labour but then there is

little hope of seeing a shift to the left if the party is allowed to break its promises. Unless V_2 chooses to abstain, the only alternative is to vote for a protest party.

Table 2. Estimates of New Zealand parties and voters on left-right scale

	Early-1980s	Early-1990s	Change
National	6.0	7.0	+1.0
Labour	3.8	5.3	+1.5
Social Credit	5.6	-	n/a
Alliance	-	3.0	n/a
Voters	5.0	5.1	+0.1

Notes: Figures are mean ratings on 0-10 scale (0 = left-wing, 10 = right-wing). Figures for parties are mean expert ratings. Figures for voters are survey respondent median self-placements as reported in Powell (2000). Party ratings for early-1990s and voter ratings recalculated from original 1-10 scales.

Sources: Powell 2000: 180, 184; Castles & Mair 1984: 81; Huber & Inglehart 1995: 102.

Figure 5. Accountability problems for non-centrists: New Zealand (early-1990s)
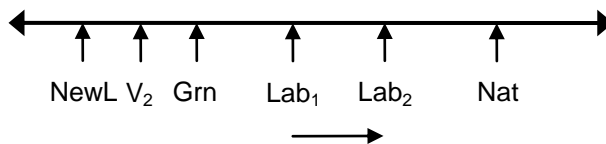
Left-wing discontent over the actions of the Labour government led to the emergence of new leftist parties (Miller 2005: 39-40; Vowles & Aimer 1993). These challenged the status of the

Democrats (the renamed Social Credit) as the principal repository for protest votes. The Greens fought their first election in 1990, as did NewLabour, formed by a renegade left-wing ex-Labour MP. That year, Labour was swept from office in a landslide National victory, losing half of its seats. However, while Labour's vote slumped by almost 13 percentage points, National's vote share increased by only 3.8 percent. The Greens and NewLabour won a combined 12 percent although SMP translated that into just one seat (Table 3). Voters such as V_2 in Figure 5 could support the ideologically-closer Greens (Grn) or NewLabour (NewL) to signal discontent with Labour.

Table 3. New Zealand general elections, 1990-1993

	1990				1993			
	Vote	Change	Seats	Change	Vote	Change	Seats	Change
	%	%	N	N	%	%	N	N
National	47.8	+3.8	67	+27	35.1	-12.7	50	-17
Labour	35.1	-12.9	29	-28	34.7	-0.4	45	+16
Greens	6.9	+6.8	0	-				
NewLabour	5.2	+5.2	1	+1				
Democrats	1.7	-4.0	0	-				
Alliance					18.2	+3.9	2	+1
NZ First					8.4	+8.4	2	+2
Christian H.	0.5	+0.5	0	-	2.0	+1.5	0	-

Notes: Two more seats in 1993 compared with 1990 after district boundary changes. Alliance figures compared with combined performance of individual constituent parties (incl. Greens, NewLabour and Democrats) in 1990.

Sources: Miller 2005: 254; Vowles 2002: 410.

Dissatisfied left-wing voters had no viable way of sanctioning Labour other than in ways that ultimately reduced their own utility. Voting for National was out of the question but voting for the Greens and NewLabour, while teaching Labour a lesson, caused the left-wing vote to fragment under SMP and widened the two-party vote- and seat gap.

The end came for New Zealand's two-party system in 1993 when a referendum on abandoning SMP in favour of PR was passed by 54 percent to 46 percent (Renwick 2011: 194-209). The referendum was held on the same day as the general election, which produced another accountability failure. National had been elected in 1990 on a promise to slow down the pace of reform. In fact, the new government speeded it up, making significant changes to the welfare state. Once again, there was a widespread perception among New Zealand voters that a governing party had violated its mandate (Vowles et al. 1995). The New Zealand Election Study (NZES) found that respondents discerned a shift to the right by National: on a 0 (right) to 100 (left) scale, National's mean placing by respondents shifted from 34 in 1990 to 24 in 1993. Labour shifted leftwards slightly, from 55 to 59, while the Alliance (a multi-party pact between the Greens, NewLabour, the Democrats and others) was at 68 in 1993. The mean respondent self-placed at 49 in 1993 (Vowles & Aimer 1993: 89).[3]

The result was a 12.7 percent decrease in National's vote share and the loss of 17 seats (Table 3). The right-wing vote fragmented, with the nationalist-populist New Zealand First Party and the socially-conservative Christian Heritage winning a combined 10 percent of the votes, but which resulted in only two seats under SMP. On the left, the Alliance increased the collective vote share of its constituent parties by 3.9 percent but added only one seat to the one it already held. Instead, Labour's seat tally shot up from 29 to 45 despite a lower vote share

than in 1990. However, its failure to unite the left-wing vote cost it seats. Both major parties were discredited in the eyes of many voters but the electoral system prevented it from being expressed in significantly greater legislative representation for the smaller parties.

Given the long-running debate over electoral reform in New Zealand, stretching back to the early-1980s, it is clear in retrospect that two-partism was already crumbling. Following the 'wrong-winner' elections of 1978 and 1981, some (though not all) in the Labour Party warmed to the possibility of electoral reform. In 1986, a Royal Commission, set up by Labour, recommended adopting PR (Vowles 1995: 103). The anticipation of change may have affected voter behaviour and minor-party strategy in the early-1990s.[4] The referendum ultimately sealed the fate of a widely discredited party system based on an unresponsive electoral system (Bale & Roberts 2002; Renwick 2011: 194-209; Vowles et al. 1995).

THE LIMITS OF ACCOUNTABILITY AS 'THROWING THE RASCALS OUT'

There are problems in viewing accountability in terms of 'throwing the rascals out' of government. At first glance, this form of accountability seems analogous to a football club sacking its manager. If performance is deemed unacceptable, responsibility is assigned and a change at the top is made. Supposedly in the same vein, if a government in a two-party system violates its mandate or is incompetent in office, the electorate can 'fire' it – i.e. vote it out – at the next election. However, there is a crucial difference. When a football manager is sacked, the club can recruit a replacement from a wide range of potential candidates. That is not true of governmental ejection in a two-party system, where there is only one alternative to

the incumbent governing party. If that alternative is seen by voters as even worse, the governing party might not be fired, irrespective of mandate-breaking or underperformance.

Two-party systems embody 'closed' structures of competition for government. They entail the same two parties alternating in office as single-party majority administrations. They stand in contrast to 'open' structures, where small and new parties enjoy realistic prospects of joining bigger parties in government, and where the governing formulae can include single-party majorities, single-party minorities and coalitions. Alternation in office may be wholesale or just partial, with one coalition partner leaving office but another remaining. Open systems invariably tend to be multi-party in nature and based on PR (Mair 2006: 65-66).

The distinction between the closed competitive structure of two-partism and more open structures has significance for governmental accountability. Governmental choice in open systems is less restrictive than the forced-choice of two-party systems. Under SMP and two-partism, if voters do not like a government of one main party, they can opt for a government of the other party. If they do not like either, they can either choose the least-worst option, 'waste' their votes on minor parties (Duverger 1964; Cox 1997), or abstain. None of these options enable voters to hold the government fully to account.

The situation is different when the structure of competition is open. Suppose that a major centre-left party governed alone with a parliamentary majority and that a subset of its supporters became dissatisfied with its performance. If those voters were not inclined to support the major centre-right party, they would have other options. They could vote for centrist or radical minor parties in the hope of depriving the incumbent of its majority, either

forcing it to form an executive coalition or turning it into a minority administration dependent on ad hoc legislative coalitions. Either outcome would likely force a change in government policy (Laver & Schofield 1990: 66-70; Strøm 1990; see also Kedar 2005).

There are, for sure, other questions that arise in relation to accountability and coalition governments. First, coalition governments are not directly elected by voters but formed after elections during elite negotiations. That may raise questions about their mandates; indeed the entire notion of a mandate becomes problematical when manifesto pledges are traded off to produce a coalition agreement (Quinn 2014). Second, a party might lose a substantial proportion of votes but remain in office as a coalition partner because it continues to hold the balance of power in parliament (Norton 1997; Pinto-Duschinsky 1999). Third, it might be difficult for voters to hold parties to account under coalition government because they might not know which of the parties is to blame for policy decisions they dislike.

These points have validity and indicate that multi-partism is not axiomatically superior to two-partism on the broad criterion of democratic accountability. Nevertheless, on the specific form of accountability known as 'throwing the rascals out', the comparison with proportional multi-partism is instructive. The weakness of accountability under two-partism is that there is only one alternative governing option to the incumbent. Greater openness in a party system creates more options.

These points can be illustrated by reconsidering the two earlier cases. Assume that the UK had used PR in 1983 and the votes were the same as actually cast. No party would have enjoyed a parliamentary majority and different coalitions would have been possible. Figure 6 shows the same scenario as Figure 3, with Labour and the Conservatives each having moved

away from the centre, so that they end up at Lab_2 and Con_2 respectively. However, each could form a coalition with the SDP-Liberal Alliance, e.g. 'Con$_2$-SL coalition' and 'Lab$_2$-SL coalition'. Given the Alliance's pivotal position, it could likely have secured a more centrist coalition deal with one or other major party (Crewe & King 1995). However, any policy package between these two potential coalition points would have made voter V_1 better off compared with Con_2 or Lab_2. In this example, centrist voters do not need to throw the rascals out because they can dilute the rascals' influence by making them share power with the Alliance. This way, they do not need to vote for the even worse rascals of the other major party.

Figure 6. Hypothetical coalitions in the UK (1983)
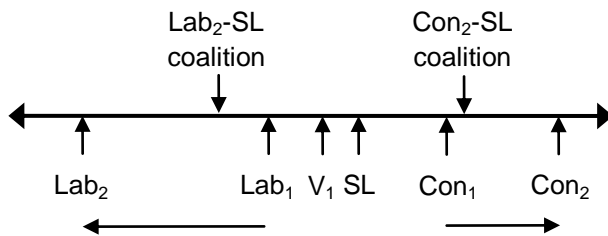
A similar point could be made of New Zealand in 1990. Figure 7 shows Labour's previous shift to the right (from Lab_1 to Lab_2) but now includes the policy position of a hypothetical coalition between Labour (Lab_2), the Greens (Grn) and NewLabour (NewL) at 'Left coalition'. Again, it is assumed that PR is used, ensuring that no party had a majority. 'Left coalition' would have been more preferable to Lab_2 for voter V_2 and would have sanctioned Labour by forcing it to join a left-wing coalition to 'keep it honest'. Naturally, the median voter, assumed to be positioned between Lab_2 and Nat, would have disliked this shift. But it was not the median voter that wanted to punish Labour for its broken promises in 1990; it

was left-wing voters such as V_2. There is nothing in the traditional account of 'throwing the rascals out' that says it should apply only to centrists.

Figure 7. Hypothetical coalition in New Zealand (1990)
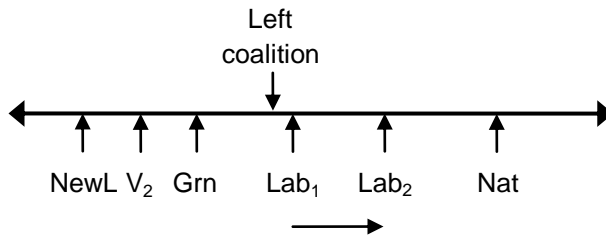
In both instances, an open party system, based on PR and with smaller parties able to access office, would have enabled voters to hold the government accountable for its policy change. 'Throwing the rascals out' is not always the best way of achieving that goal. If voters' preoccupation is with policy outcomes, there will be situations when other methods of accountability, including partial alternation in office, will better secure the desired policy change than wholesale alternation.

CONCLUSION

The ability of voters to throw the rascals out is claimed as one of the great advantages of SMP and two-partism. This paper has shown that accountability does not always function in the simple way that proponents of SMP and two-partism suggest. Dissatisfied voters may face a choice between four options: (1) throwing the rascals out by supporting a less desirable major party; (2) 'wasting' their votes on minor parties; (3) abstaining from the selection of

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the government; (4) endorsing a mandate-breaking government. None of these options is satisfactory from the perspective of democratic accountability.

It might be objected that this problem is atypical of two-partism. However, the cases examined earlier were not isolated. In the UK, Labour lost left-leaning votes to the Liberal Democrats in 2005, partly over the Iraq War, but retained power because the third party was hindered by SMP (Bartle & King 2006). In 2015, the Conservatives lost votes to the right-wing UK Independence Party, which secured a 12.5 percent vote share but only one seat under SMP, as the Conservatives remained in office. In New Zealand, voters on the free-market right flocked to the newly-created New Zealand Party in 1984 rather than vote for the centrist policies of National. It enabled Labour to win – although, ironically, Labour subsequently implemented free-market reforms (Miller 2005: 38-39).

The case of Labour in the UK under Tony Blair, like that of Labour in New Zealand in the 1980s, draws attention to an important way in which this study is relevant. Under the influence of globalisation, many centre-left parties have shifted to the right, including these two parties but also Clinton's Democrats in the US and others (Cable 1999; Giddens 1998).[5] SMP made it difficult for leftist voters to hold these parties to account. However, in PR countries, leftist voters had other options. For instance, in Germany, the Left Party and the Greens increased their representation after the Social Democrats' centrist shift in the early-2000s (Nachtwey 2013). The left-wing vote has similarly fragmented – to the benefit of green and radical-leftist parties – in Scandinavia, Austria and New Zealand (the latter under PR since 1996).

The critique of the majoritarian version of accountability applies with equal force to normative defences of SMP. SMP is the link between voters and the two-party system, and the transmission belt for accountability between citizens and elites. The ability of voters to 'throw the rascals out' is routinely offered as a justification of SMP during debates about electoral reform, whether in the academic literature (Chandler 1982; Norton 1997; Pinto-Duschinsky 1999) or in referendum campaigns. Changes of electoral systems are rare – parties that benefit from the status quo are usually able to block proposals for reform – but occasionally they become possible, such as in New Zealand in 1993 (Renwick 2011). Comprehending the advantages and disadvantages of electoral systems is vitally important on these occasions. Accountability loomed large during the UK's (defeated) referendum on abandoning SMP in favour of the alternative vote in 2011 (see Renwick and Lamb 2013). A deeper understanding of accountability would enhance future public debates.

Accountability is assumed to be difficult to achieve under PR. However, PR does permit partial alternation in government (Farrell 2011: 214-220), which is a way for voters to instigate change when 'throwing the rascals (completely) out' is undesirable. Furthermore, as party competition has become increasingly bipolar in multi-party systems, with rival *blocs* of parties competing for executive power, voters can switch support between parties *within* each bloc, as a means of exercising accountability. Centrists may switch between blocs, enabling traditional accountability even under PR (Mair 2006: 70).

The question of accountability is central to debates about democracy. This paper has argued that the most celebrated form of electoral accountability – throwing the rascals out – is not always the benchmark measure its proponents claim. Other forms of electoral accountability associated with PR, such as depriving parties of majorities or forcing them to share power,

can work better. Further research could profitably explore these issues in more empirical detail.

1. Post-war 'wrong-winner' elections occurred in Britain in 1951 and February 1974, and in New Zealand in 1954, 1978 and 1981. On none of these occasions did the gap in vote shares between the two main parties exceed 1 percent.

2. The concept of a mandate is contested, with questions over the extent to which voters genuinely endorse manifesto pledges (see Budge et al. 2012; Quinn 2014; Weir & Beetham 1999).

3. The data for the NZES 1993 is available at http://www.nzes.org/exec/show/freq_1993c. Left-right positions provided in the text for 1993 were recalculated from the NZES's original 1-7 scale.

4. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer (#1) for drawing this point to my attention.

5. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer (#2) for drawing this point to my attention.

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