Party fragmentation and problems of accountability in the British general election of 2024

Thomas Quinn*, iD

Department of Government, University of Essex, Wivenhoe Park, Colchester CO4 3SQ, UK

*Correspondence: tquinn@essex.ac.uk

Under 'first past the post' (FPTP), voters can hold governments to account by 'throwing the rascals out'. The 2024 British general election appears to offer a clear-cut example, with voters removing the Conservatives after 14 years in government. However, FPTP ensures that the principal alternative to a Conservative government is a Labour government. This article argues that 'throwing the rascals out' works best for centrist voters with a genuine choice between the two major governing options. But it is problematic for non-centrist voters because it can deliver a government they prefer even less. The article focuses on Conservative promises and failings on immigration policy to show that right-wing voters who wanted to punish the government by abstaining or voting for Reform UK effectively magnified Labour's victory into a parliamentary 'super-majority' in 2024. The prospect of such outcomes occurring is greater in an era of dealignment and party fragmentation, where non-centrist electoral options are available but FPTP hinders their ability to convert votes into seats. This problem would be less likely to occur under a proportional electoral system because voters can switch support between proximate parties in the same ideological 'bloc' without indirectly helping the rival bloc.

Keywords: accountability; party fragmentation; first-past-the-post; 2024 UK general election; Conservative Party; immigration policy.

The British political system remains one of the best-known institutional expressions of majoritarian democracy (Powell 2000; Lijphart 2012). Central to this 'Westminster model' is a largely two-party contest for government. This structure

is enabled by the plurality rule, or 'first-past-the-post' (FPTP) electoral system, which disincentivises electoral support for parties that struggle to achieve local pluralities (Duverger 1964; Cox 1997). When smaller parties do win votes, they do not always convert them into legislative seats, with disproportional outcomes resulting (Gerring 2005). Supporters of majoritarianism counter that FPTP produces important democratic virtues. It enables voters to install governments directly and legitimize them with a mandate, as well as hold them to account by 'throwing the rascals out' (Norton 1997; Pinto-Duschinsky 1999).

The British general election of 2024 appears to provide a clear illustration of this accountability mechanism. The Conservative government's 14-year period in office ended with a crushing defeat after policy failures and broken promises (More in Common/UCL 2024: 19–20). Yet, the incoming Labour government won a mediocre plurality of 33.7% of the vote, which FPTP translated into a parliamentary 'super-majority' (Curtice 2024; Hennig, 2024). The scale of Labour's victory was magnified by divisions on the right, as right-wing voters defected from the Conservatives to Reform UK, the renamed Brexit Party (Ford 2024). Hampered by FPTP, Reform converted four million votes into only five parliamentary seats. This drew attention to a problem with 'throwing the rascals out' for non-centrist voters: it may produce a government they consider even worse (Quinn 2016).

This article uses the 2024 British general election to explore the concept of electoral accountability. It argues that a simple understanding of majoritarian democracy as a sequential process of *ex-ante* mandates and *ex-post* accountability ignores how every election is *simultaneously* a judgment of accountability on the previous government and the furnishing of a mandate for the next one. Voters each have one vote to achieve both tasks. Centrist voters, with a genuine choice between the two governing options, may find the tasks complementary; non-centrist voters who are much closer to one major party than the other may be forced to choose between prioritizing mandates or accountability.

The article shows that many right-wing British voters chose to punish the Conservatives for their broken pledges to reduce immigration by voting for Reform or abstaining, turning what might have been a middling Conservative defeat into a catastrophic one and a landslide Labour victory. Such distortions of the two-party contest for government under FPTP become more likely in the context of party fragmentation and the rise of 'challenger parties' (De Vries and Hobolt 2020). The article argues that 'accountability' for non-centrist voters may be better achieved through the type of intra-'bloc' vote-switching permitted by proportional electoral systems, whereby voters can switch support between two right-wing parties without indirectly boosting the left, and *vice versa*.

The article makes three contributions. First, it examines a core normative value of majoritarianism—accountability—and shows its operation in elections is not as clear-cut as usually presented (Powell 2000: 47–68). Second, it adds to the

literature on the 2024 British general election, a landmark in party fragmentation and voter volatility (Curtice 2024). Third, it connects to debates on FPTP and electoral reform (Farrell 2011; Renwick 2011), amid questions over whether outcomes as disproportional as those in 2024 are sustainable longer term (Ford, 2024: 8).

Normative bases of majoritarian democracy

In his comparative analysis of majoritarian and proportional democracy, Powell (2000) notes that these 'visions' prioritize different normative values and institutional preferences. Proportional democracy emphasizes the proportionate representation of different aggregated voter interests. This is seen in the use of electoral systems based on proportional representation (PR), which typically ensures that no single party wins a legislative majority, necessitating inter-party cooperation in executive formation. The proportional vision considers elections as ways of choosing legislatures that are microcosms of society.

In majoritarian democracy, by contrast, elections are means by which voters directly choose governments. This usually entails electoral systems such as FPTP, which facilitate the 'manufacture' of legislative majorities for single parties, even on less than a majority of votes cast. The rationale is that voters must be able to identify potential governments before an election and this is easier when two parties are each capable of winning a majority of seats and forming the executive (Powell 2000: 69–88). Such governments are endowed with *mandates* by voters, understood as the right, or even obligation, to implement the programmes they offered in their manifestos before the election (Hofferbert and Budge 1992).

When governments are formed by single parties with legislative majorities, there is 'clarity of responsibility', with voters knowing who to blame for policy failures (Powell 2000: 50–2; see also; Hobolt, Tilly and Banducci 2013). At the next election, governments face *accountability*, with the electoral system enabling voters to 'throw the rascals out'. The normative desiderata of majoritarianism are thus *ex-ante* mandates and *ex-post* accountability, while proportionality is less important. Majoritarians concede that FPTP produces disproportional election results but insist that more is gained by permitting voters directly to install and remove governments (Norton 1997; Pinto-Duschinsky 1999; cf. Vowles 1999).

Besides disproportionality, critiques of majoritarianism question the role of mandates (Weir and Beetham 1999). Mandates are the principal legitimizing device in majoritarianism: voters' endorsement of the winning party's election manifesto directly links voter preferences and government policy. However, it is rare for a party to win 50% of the votes in an election: it has happened in none of Britain's 22 post-war elections. This is a consequence of the rise of 'third' and 'minor' parties, which can win substantial vote shares but only occasionally enough to achieve the local pluralities needed to win seats (Duverger 1964: 216–28). When a majority

government is elected on a minority of the vote, its legitimacy under majoritarian principles appears weaker. Why should this minority be considered more important than any other (Powell 2000: 76–7)?

Criticisms have also been levelled at the majoritarian understanding of electoral accountability as 'throwing the rascals out' (Quinn 2016). Although voters can remove governments at elections, the two-party systems that characterize majoritarianism permit only one alternative to the incumbent. The process is not like a football club sacking its manager, with numerous replacements available. If voters wish to remove the government in a two-party system, they must replace it with the other major party or not at all (Quinn 2016: 131).

Problems particularly confront non-centrist voters who wish to punish a governing party they previously supported and to which they are ideologically closer than the opposing major party. Voting it out invariably leads to the more distant party winning the election. Such voters may have up to four options: (1) 'throw the rascals out' by voting for the more distant major party; (2) hold their noses and support the governing party despite their dissatisfaction; (3) abstain from voting but indirectly help the more distant major party by depriving its major rival of support; (4) vote for a proximate 'niche' party (if available) as a protest, but again indirectly help the more distant major party (Quinn 2016: 133). All four options are mediocre; whichever is selected, the accountability mechanism either does not work or produces a worse outcome for those voters.

This dilemma stems from the fact that the relationship between mandates and accountability is not solely a sequential process in which the former is furnished in one election and the latter judged at the next. Elections occur in an endless sequence, with each individual contest *simultaneously* a judgment of accountability in relation to the outgoing government *and* the awarding of a mandate to the next government. Problems arise when voters struggle to achieve the two tasks concurrently.

Two-party systems and voter discontent

Understanding the relationship between mandates and accountability requires an inter-temporal view of party competition. Fig. 1 presents the conventional conception of 'throwing the rascals out' when governments in two-party systems break their promises. It shows a two-election time period (t_1, t_2), with two parties, L (Left) and R (Right), offering manifestos at various positions on the left-right ideological scale. In the first election, the two parties adopt positions L_1 and R_1, respectively. In the absence of third parties and voter abstention, the median-voter theorem holds: since R_1 is closer than L_1 to the median voter (white disc at MV), party R wins the election (Downs 1957). It then forms the government and claims a mandate to implement policy at R_1.
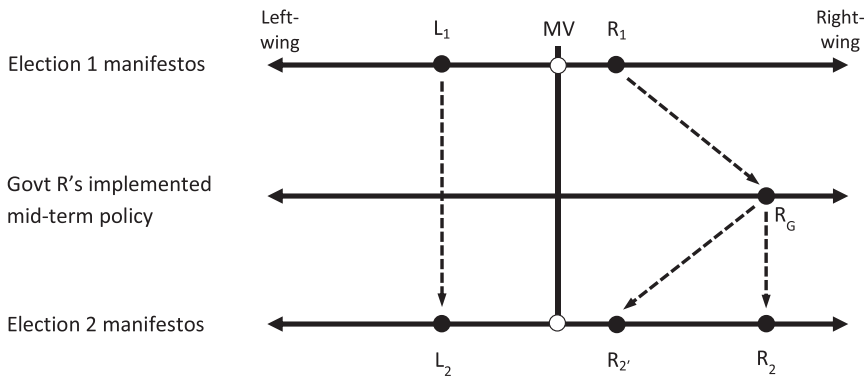
Figure 1 Accountability in a two-party system: non-centrist shift by government

Assume that, once in government, party R breaks its pre-election manifesto promises and implements a more right-wing policy at R_G. The government lacks a mandate for this policy position. Consequently, it may face punishment from voters at the next election. For simplicity, it is assumed that party L maintains its previous policy position in the second election (L_2). If the government adopted a manifesto that reflected its mid-term implemented policy (R_2), this is more distant than L_2 from MV, resulting in victory for party L.

If instead party R sought to revert back to the position it adopted in the first election, it would offer a manifesto at $R_{2'}$. This position is closer than L_2 to MV and would ordinarily be expected to win the election for party R. However, given that R has already broken previous promises to deliver this policy, its credibility may be damaged in the eyes of voters. If so, voters may place less trust in its promises, anticipating further reneging in the future. If MV votes for party L in the second election, then centrist voters have held party R to account by 'throwing the rascals out'.

The type of mandate-breaking and subsequent government removal in Fig. 1 showcases majoritarian mechanisms at their most effective and normatively persuasive. Crucial to its functioning was the fact that MV and other centrist voters possessed a genuine choice between two governing options. That was because these voters were positioned in between parties L and R. Once the government reneged on its past promises in a non-centrist direction, these voters could switch parties, even when party R shifted to $R_{2'}$ if this position lacked credibility.

Implicit within the notion of 'throwing the rascals out' is the addendum, '*and replacing them with something better*'. That is possible for centrist voters possessing reasonably equidistant choices between the major parties. But what about *non-centrist* voters for whom the major parties are either both to their left or both to their right? For these voters, one party is always significantly closer than the

other. When this closer party is in government and breaks its promises, how might these voters respond?

Fig. 2 presents a scenario in which non-centrist voters are betrayed by the party they supported. In the first election, the major parties, L and R, offer manifestos at positions L_1 and R_1, respectively. R is closest to MV and wins the election. It does so by attracting support not only from MV but all other voters closer to it than to L, including the right-wing voter highlighted at v_R. Party R claims a mandate to implement its manifesto in government.

After winning the election, assume that R implemented a more centrist policy, R_G, in government. This position is more preferable for MV, but less preferable for voter v_R. Now suppose that at the next election, party R offers a manifesto at R_2, reflecting the position it adopted in government. This could be because reverting back to its position at R_1 would lack credibility or it could be a response to a centrist shift by party L to L_2. Either way, party R's position in the second election is more distant from voter v_R than it was in the first election. What is the response of v_R and other right-wing voters?

Four options were identified earlier. The traditional answer of 'throwing the rascals out' is problematic. It would conventionally entail voting for the other major party, L, but L_2 is considerably further from v_R than R_2 is. A second option is to vote again for party R, despite its broken promises, because it is still the closest major party. However, this leaves party R unpunished for reneging on its pledges, perhaps emboldening it to do the same in future.

Apart from choosing between the major parties, two other options may be available (Kang 2004). The first entails voting for a proximate minor party, if available (Gerring 2005). In Fig. 2, a new right-wing niche party (Meguid 2005; Adams et al., 2006) emerges in the second election and situates at point N_2, which is close to voter v_R. The second option is for v_R to abstain altogether.
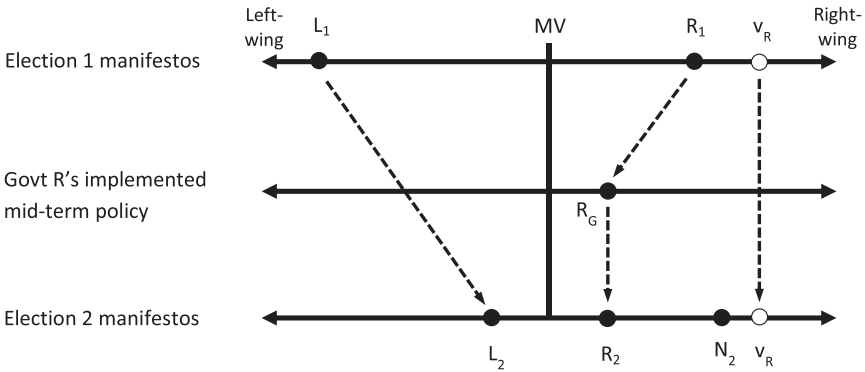

Figure 2 Accountability in a two-party system: centrist shift by government

The effect of these latter two options is to detach electoral support from party R, punishing the government, without transferring support to the more distant party L. However, under the plurality rule of FPTP, it is still party L that benefits. In Fig. 3, parties L and R are equidistant from the median voter at *x*. In ordinary circumstances, that would leave the election on a knife-edge, with each party winning 50% support. If a new niche party entered the contest and positioned itself to the right of R, at point N, all voters in the range *yz* would be closer to N than to R, while only those in the range *xy* remain closer to R. L would retain all voters in the *wx* range. Even if some right-wing voters stuck with R as the strongest rival to party L (Duverger 1964), the loss of any votes to N would damage R's competitiveness. Under FPTP, L would win. FPTP tends to under-represent small parties in legislatures (unless they have geographically concentrated support). N might not win many seats but by siphoning votes from R, it would cause R to lose to L. If this were replicated throughout marginal constituencies, L's parliamentary majority could be greatly magnified compared to a situation in which the right-wing vote was not divided.

The same problem would arise for party R if discontented right-wing voters abstained in the election. If voters in the range *yz* in Fig. 3 abstained (assuming no niche party at N), party R would again be left with only those in the range *xy*. Party L would win the election.

When faced with a centre-right government that broke its manifesto promises in a centrist direction, a right-wing voter therefore has four unappealing options (Quinn 2016). There is no way to determine a priori which option this voter would select. When electoral accountability means 'throwing the rascals out', it is most likely to be an attractive option to centrist voters with a genuine choice of major parties to support. It is more problematical for non-centrist voters for whom it could produce a government even less to their liking, possibly with an exaggerated
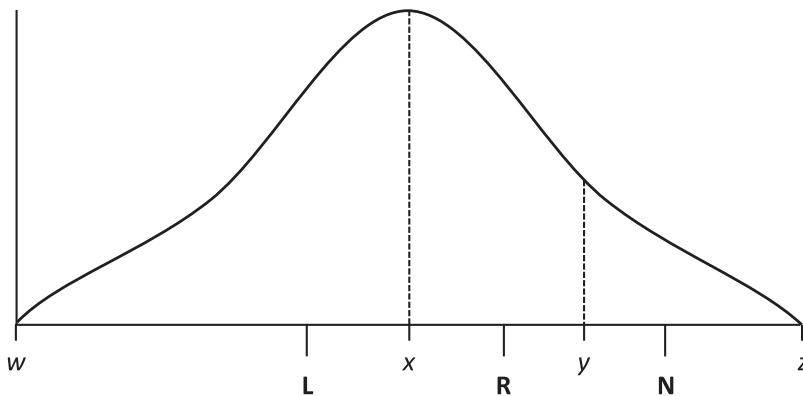
Figure 3 Defection of right-wing voters

majority. This complicates the simple model of accountability found in normative defences of majoritarianism.[1]

The Conservative government and immigration policy

The foregoing theoretical discussion is directly relevant to the Conservative government that lost office in 2024. Election outcomes are multi-causal in nature and the Conservatives' defeat was no different. The country was in the midst of a cost-of-living crisis, as government borrowing during the Covid pandemic of 2020–21 and the Russia-Ukraine war caused inflation to surge, energy prices to spike and ultimately interest rates and taxes to rise. On top of that, the prime minister, Boris Johnson, had been forced out of office over his personal conduct, while his successor, Liz Truss, resigned after just six weeks when her economic policy imploded. All this damaged the Conservatives' electoral appeal. With Labour moderating under a new leader, Keir Starmer, the Conservatives faced an uphill task in the 2024 election.

The *scale* of the Conservative defeat, however, was exacerbated by the loss of right-wing voters and the appeal of a niche party. The principal policy failure explaining the right-wing defection was immigration (Breckwoldt et al., 2024). Certainly, other issues were salient in the election, especially the cost of living and the NHS, and for many centrist and leftist voters, these were more important (More in Common/UCL 2024: 47–54). Nevertheless, immigration is central to understanding the split on the right.

The 2024 election was the culmination of 14 years in which Conservative-led governments continually failed to deliver on their immigration pledges. During this time, Conservative manifestos repeatedly promised to reduce immigration. The most famous pledge came in 2010:

> Immigration has enriched our nation over the years and we want to attract the brightest and the best people who can make a real difference to our economic growth. But immigration today is too high and needs to be reduced. We do not need to attract people to do jobs that could be

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[1]The problem of accountability identified in this article also holds within a 'valence' theoretical framework (Clarke et al., 2009). In a valence setting, voters and parties agree on the desired outcomes of public policy, with the debate over which party is most competent to deliver. If the governing party has been weak on delivery, but the main opposition party is considered even less competent, voters face the same dilemma. This article adopted a spatial approach, albeit one that incorporates governmental delivery on pledged policies, because it reflects the reality of immigration policy, where actors do not agree on desired outcomes but have different positional preferences (increase, decrease, keep the same). This is true of the other major issues defining British politics in the past decade, namely, Brexit and Scottish independence (for/against). On valence and the 2024 UK election, see Surridge (2025).

carried out by British citizens, given the right training and support. So we will take steps to take net migration back to the levels of the 1990s – *tens of thousands a year, not hundreds of thousands*. (Conservative Party 2010: 21. Emphasis added)

With Britain still an EU member in 2010, it was difficult for any British government to control EU migration, and so the Conservatives proposed limiting the scale and type of non-EU migration. However, annual net migration was running at 300,000 by the 2015 election, by which time the Conservatives were promising an in/out EU referendum. Nevertheless, the party pledged to 'keep our ambition of delivering annual net migration in the tens of thousands, not the hundreds of thousands' and 'control migration from the European Union, by reforming welfare rules' (Conservative Party 2015: 29). Likewise, in the 2017 election, held a year after the Brexit referendum, the Conservatives reiterated 'our objective to reduce immigration to sustainable levels, by which we mean annual net migration in the tens of thousands, rather than the hundreds of thousands we have seen over the last two decades' (Conservative Party 2017: 54).

The Conservatives had won the 2019 election on a promise to 'get Brexit done' (Allen 2021; see also Russell and James 2023). 'Taking back control' of Britain's border had been a major driver of the vote to leave the EU (Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley 2017). The implementation of the Johnson government's negotiated exit deal with the EU would end the free movement of labour from the bloc, with a new immigration system put in its place. The Conservatives' 2019 election manifesto proposed an 'Australian-style' immigration points system and special visa routes (e.g. NHS visa), which would, echoing the 2010 pledge, attract 'the best and the brightest':

Only by establishing immigration controls and ending freedom of movement will we be able to attract the high-skilled workers we need to contribute to our economy, our communities and our public services. There will be fewer lower-skilled migrants and *overall numbers will come down*. And we will ensure that the British people are always in control. (Conservative Party 2019: 20. Emphasis added)

Even by the standards of previous broken pledges to reduce immigration, the Conservative government's post-2019 performance represented a major violation of their voters' trust. Net migration surged to record-breaking levels following the introduction of new immigration rules from 2021. It had been running at 200–300,000 per year for most of the previous decade, peaking at 321,000 in the year ending (YE) 2016 Q2. After a sharp fall because of travel restrictions during the pandemic in 2020, net migration climbed to 484,000 in YE 2021 Q4, 872,000 in YE 2022 Q4 and reached a high of 906,000 in YE 2023 Q2. With EU net migration

turning negative, the post-2021 surge was driven entirely by non-EU migration. The gross immigration figure, indicative of a changing composition of the population, reached 1,320,000 in YE 2023 Q2 (Sturge 2024). These developments were without historical precedent in Britain. Right-wing critics dubbed this surge, the 'Boriswave' (Jones 2024).

Concern over the new immigration rules focussed on two areas.[2] First, over two-thirds of skilled-worker visas were issued to workers in the health and social care sector, driven considerably by extending eligibility to relatively low-paid care workers. There were also compliance problems, with organizations unconnected to the care sector found to be sponsoring visa holders (Migration Advisory Committee 2023: 23–35). Second, study visa holders were permitted to work for two years after graduation at any salary or skill level. This led to a large influx of students from poorer countries to study taught Master's degrees at less selective and lower-cost universities. As students could initially also bring dependants (who were permitted to work), the graduate visa became a backdoor route to low-wage immigration (Migration Advisory Committee 2023: 40–56).

For most of the Conservatives' period in government, immigration/asylum was in the top three issues cited by respondents in YouGov's tracker polls, alongside the economy and health. For the coalition's period in office, it was second behind the economy as the most salient issue, moving into first place in 2014 and staying there until the Brexit referendum in 2016, when it fell back. Brexit itself was the most salient issue until 2020 and many voters may have believed that immigration would now be under more 'control'. The issue regained traction under Rishi Sunak's premiership and was in the top three issues up to the 2024 election. Among Conservative supporters, it was the most important issue for 11 months before the election.[3]

The Conservatives' performance on legal immigration can be presented in terms of the theoretical exposition in Fig. 2 above. Given their 'restrictionist' manifesto pledges, their liberalizing decisions in government, especially from 2021, amounted to a centrist shift. Labour held a relatively liberal position on legal migration and had not set targets for reducing it. Labour supporters also viewed immigration in strongly positive terms, more so than Conservative supporters (UK in a Changing Europe 2024: 91). The electoral risk to the Conservatives came from right-wing voters. Any hope they might 'hold their noses' was dashed by the government's performance on *illegal* migration.

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[2]This paragraph is based on findings in the 2023 annual report of the Migration Advisory Committee, an independent body that advises the government on migration.

[3]Detailed polling data on the most important issues from 2011 to 2024 is available from YouGov (2024).

'Stop the boats'

Although the number of illegal migrants was considerably smaller, the political damage to the government was enormous. The most obvious source of illegal migration was 'small boats' crossing the English Channel from France. In 2018, just 299 migrants were known to have crossed the channel in small boats that year, but as the viability of crossing was demonstrated, traffickers increased the boat sizes and migrant numbers. In 2019, a further 1,843 migrants reached the UK this way. A year later, this rose dramatically to 8,462, despite the pandemic; it more than trebled to 28,526 in 2021 and surged to 45,755 in 2022. The numbers fell back to 29,437 in 2023. In the first six months of 2024 leading up to the election, the figure was 13,489 (Home Office 2024).

The political problem for the government was that the crossings demonstrated a loss of control of the country's borders. This was compounded by the housing of channel migrants in hotels around the country, sometimes sparking local opposition (BBC News 2023). Most channel migrants applied for political asylum on reaching the UK. The government found itself restricted by human rights laws as it tried to deal with the problem. It sought to tighten asylum rules in the Illegal Migration Act 2023 and devised a plan to send asylum-seekers to purpose-built facilities in Rwanda while their cases were decided. The plan faced legal challenges, with the Supreme Court ruling that Rwanda was not a safe country to which to send asylum-seekers. The government sought to circumvent the ruling by introducing the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Act in 2024. The Act asserted that Rwanda was a safe country for the purposes of transferring asylum-seekers. However, there were doubts over its compatibility with the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), and legal challenges were expected. Ultimately, the 2024 election was called before the Act was tested. The Rwanda policy was abandoned by the incoming Labour government (BBC News 2024).

In the eyes of right-wing critics, the Rwanda plan embodied the government's inability to 'stop the boats'. It looked bound to fall foul of the ECHR, which the government would not countenance leaving. Relating this to the theoretical exposition in Fig. 2, the Conservatives had likewise made 'restrictionist' manifesto promises to tackle illegal migration. But they failed to devise effective legal-administrative means to prevent outcomes reverting to a liberal status quo of high numbers and few removals, irrespective of hard-line ministerial rhetoric. For many former Conservative voters, the small-boats issue would be a crucial reason for abandoning the party.

The British general election of 2024

The 2024 election was a catastrophe for the Conservatives, who slumped to the lowest share of the vote and lowest number of parliamentary seats in their history.

The party saw its vote share drop by 20 percentage points (pp) on its 2019 performance, while it won only 121 seats (Table 1). Labour won 411 seats for a parliamentary 'super-majority' of 172, albeit on only 33.7% of the vote. Reform UK improved on the Brexit Party's vote performance by over 12pp, but won only five seats. The Liberal Democrats made modest improvements in vote share but converted their votes into 72 seats, their highest in the post-war era. Turnout, however, fell sharply to 60%, the second-lowest in a century (Curtice 2024; Hennig 2024).

The Conservatives' 2019 voters responded in different ways in the 2024 election. According to the pollster, Focaldata, the Conservatives retained in 2024 just 45% of the voters who supported them in 2019. They lost an aggregate of 19% of their previous voters to parties to their left (Labour 11%, Liberal Democrats 6%, and Greens 2%), another 20% to Reform to their right, and a further 15% who did not vote (Flynn 2024). Those who switched to Labour and the Liberal Democrats would have included many centrist voters who found themselves with an opportunity to 'throw the rascals out' (Surridge 2025). As per Fig. 3, Conservative defectors to Reform may have realized the latter could not win the election and might let in Labour: Tory campaign messaging about stopping a Labour 'super-majority' emphasized this point (Zeffman 2024).

Table 1 UK general elections, 2019–24

	Votes %			Seats %			Seats-Votes %	
	2019	2024	Change	2019	2024	Change[a]	2019	2024
Conservative	43.6	23.7	−19.9	56.2	18.6	−38.6	+12.6	−5.1
Labour	32.1	33.7	+1.6	31.1	63.2	+32.5	−1.0	+29.5
Liberal Democrat	11.5	12.2	+0.7	1.7	11.1	+9.8	−9.8	−1.1
Brexit/Reform UK	2.0	14.3	+12.3	0	0.8	+0.8	−2.0	−13.5
Greens[b]	2.7	6.7	+4.0	0.2	0.6	+0.5	−2.5	−6.1
SNP	3.9	2.5	−1.4	7.4	1.4	−6.0	+3.5	−1.1
Plaid	0.5	0.7	+0.2	0.6	0.6	+0.3	+0.1	−0.1
Other	3.7	6.2	+2.5	2.9	3.7	+0.8	−0.8	−2.5
Total	100.0	100.0		100.0	100.0			
Turnout %	*67.3*	*60.0[c]*						
Gallagher index							*11.8*	*23.6*

Sources: Uberoi et al. (2020: 6–25); Cracknell and Baker (2024: 7–23); Gallagher (2024).
[a]Change in seats based on comparison with notional % won in 2019 under 2024 constituency boundaries.
[b]'Greens' include three separate parties in England & Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland.
[c]Electoral Commission's revised turnout figure for 2024.

The Conservatives' loss of votes in both ideological directions saw the party shed two-thirds of its parliamentary seats. Large Tory majorities were overturned by Labour in the Midlands and Northern England, and by the Liberal Democrats in the South. Reform siphoned off votes from the Conservatives in scores of constituencies, allowing them to be won by Labour and the Liberal Democrats (Breckwoldt et al., 2024: 29–32). There was also significant tactical voting by Labour and Liberal Democrat supporters, voting for whichever party was the closest local challenger to the Conservatives (Breckwoldt et al., 2024: 43–6; Curtice 2024: 12).

In the 2019 election, the Brexit Party had stood down candidates in hundreds of Conservative-held constituencies after coming under pressure not to split the right-wing/pro-Brexit vote (Ford et al., 2022: 205–6). There was no repeat of that gesture from Reform in 2024. Thus, despite the two right-wing parties winning a combined 38.0% vote share in 2024, their combined seat share was just 19.4%.[4] Reform was most disadvantaged by FPTP, with a surplus-seat score (% seats minus % votes) of −13.5%.[5] Labour was the principal winner, its +29.5% being the largest surplus-seat score of any UK party in the post-war era. The Gallagher index (Gallagher and Mitchell 2008), an overall measure of disproportionality, where 0 is perfectly proportional and 100 is maximum disproportionality, hit a post-war high of 23.6 in 2024. Although the effective number of parliamentary parties was in line with post-1945 norms at 2.24, the effective number of electoral parties stood at 4.76, the highest in over a century (Gallagher 2024).[6]

Pollsters agreed that immigration and asylum were core reasons for the Conservatives' loss of right-wing voters. The think-tank and pollster, More in Common, found that 63% of 2024 Reform voters had supported the Conservatives in 2019. Crucially, '[t]he Conservatives' failure in meeting their pledge to bring down immigration levels and stop channel crossings is key to why Reform voters splintered so dramatically from the Conservatives'. When asked to list the main reasons why they voted as they did, the most popular response by Reform voters was the level of immigration (64%), with asylum-seekers crossing the channel also heavily cited (51%) (More in Common/UCL

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[4]A simple addition of the Conservative and Reform vote in 2024 would have delivered 302 seats (Breckwoldt et al., 2024: 16), although in practice, many Reform voters would not have switched to the Conservatives.

[5]On the composition and location of Reform's electoral support in the 2024 election, see Heath et al. (2025).

[6]On electoral-system bias in Britain, see Johnston and Pattie (2006: 266–303).

2024: 113–116).[7] This survey also found that non-voters in 2024 included a bigger proportion of 2019 Conservative than Labour voters. Among Conservative-to-abstainers, it was the first time abstaining for fully 77%. If the party had mobilized its abstaining 2019 supporters, it would have won an extra 33 seats (More in Common/UCL 2024: 31–3).

The Conservative think-tank, Onward, in collaboration with Focaldata, found that most 2019 Conservative voters who defected in 2024 were restrictionist on immigration policy. Fully 92% of Tory defectors to Reform wanted immigration 'cut a lot'; among defectors to abstention it was 83%, and even among defectors to Labour and the Liberal Democrats it was 59% and 53%, respectively, compared to 65% among 2024 Conservative voters (Breckwoldt et al., 2024: 114). On 'small boats', the proportion of Tory defectors agreeing/strongly agreeing that channel migrants were not refugees but economic migrants coming to Britain to work or claim benefits was 90% for defectors to Reform, 84% for defectors to abstention, 72% for defectors to Labour and 70% for defectors to the Liberal Democrats, compared with 81% for 2024 Conservative voters (Breckwoldt et al., 2024: 116; see also; More in Common/UCL 2024: 55).

First-past-the-post, accountability, and party fragmentation

The problem of accountability for non-centrist voters is germane to two-party competition under FPTP. However, the British case demonstrates that this problem is particularly acute in the context of party fragmentation, driven by social and partisan dealignment. The damage to the Conservatives in 2024 was hugely exacerbated by the availability of third/minor parties and the willingness of voters to support them. In previous eras, the damage may have been more muted.

In the era of aligned electorates from 1945 to the mid-1970s, Labour and the Conservatives could each count on a large core vote, with elections decided by floating centrist voters (Denver and Johns 2021: 63–71). There were no rival non-centrist parties of note and social norms kept turnout high. Of the four responses for alienated non-centrist voters discussed earlier, two—abstention and third-party support—were less likely to be considered, leaving voting for either major party as the main options. Voter discontent was subsumed into the rhythm of two-party competition, with centrists switching parties and non-centrists remaining loyal to their proximate major party.

The onset of dealignment, driven by social, technological, and ideological change, from the 1970s onwards, left increasing numbers of voters less strongly

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[7]Another pollster, Ipsos, found that the most important issue cited for Conservative-to-Reform switchers was asylum and refugees (69%), followed by general legal immigration (52%) (Pedley et al., 2024).

attached to the main parties out of partisan loyalty, with a more transactional view of support (Dalton 2002; Heath 2017). New parties, such as the Greens and UKIP/Reform UK, later emerged on the ideological flanks to attract protest voters. Social norms for participating in elections weakened, making abstention more common. In this context, major parties must work harder to maintain their electoral coalitions of support, with the threats of abstention and third-party defection ever-present. It has become particularly pressing over the last 20 years with a series of electoral 'shocks': mass migration, the global financial crisis, the innovation of a coalition government, Scottish nationalism and Brexit all disrupted traditional voter-party attachments in Britain (Fieldhouse et al., 2020).

This has had consequences for the operation of accountability in the party system. Without a large core vote, and uncertain of retaining non-centrist support after unsuccessful periods in office (or indeed, in opposition), there was a greater chance of major parties facing heavy electoral defeats under FPTP. In the era of alignment, only one election saw the Labour-Conservative interval in seat shares exceed 20 percentage points (in 1945). In the era of dealignment, there have been seven such occasions (1983, 1987, 1997, 2001, 2005, 2019 and 2024) (Quinn 2013: 383; Uberoi et al., 2020: 8; Cracknell and Baker 2024: 8).

The task of maintaining their electoral coalitions is now a vital element of competition for the major parties in a two-party contest for government. It is still possible to accomplish, as both major parties did in 2017 and the Conservatives did again in 2019 (Cowley and Kavanagh 2018; Ford et al., 2022). But when either main party loses core voters, it can produce significant party fragmentation, which is distorted by FPTP. In the 2024 UK election, widespread defection by right-wing voters from the Conservatives to Reform UK succeeded in 'throwing the rascals out', but Reform struggled to convert votes into seats. The price these voters paid was a 'super-majority' for Labour.[8]

Another example is New Zealand's penultimate FPTP election in 1990. A Labour government re-elected in 1987 had broken its promises to left-leaning supporters to slow down free-market reforms.[9] In the 1990 election, Labour's vote share plummeted from 48% to 35%, while the centre-right National Party increased its vote from 44% to 48%. Most of Labour's defecting supporters switched to two left-wing parties, the Greens (7%) and NewLabour (5%). Together with other smaller parties, the broad centre-left 'bloc' won over 50% of the vote. However,

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[8]The dearth of individual-level data on preferred governing options means caution is required in ruling out a preference for Labour over the Conservatives among Reform voters, e.g. on economic grounds. Nevertheless, on immigration/asylum, the key issue for these voters, Labour did not reflect their restrictionist views.

[9]Like the British Conservative government from 2019 to 2024, the New Zealand Labour government underwent multiple mid-term changes of prime minister from 1987 to 1990.

only NewLabour among the minor parties won a (solitary) seat. The split leftist vote deprived Labour of votes in districts that it ultimately lost to National, which secured 67 of a total of 97 seats (up from 40 previously) to Labour's 29 (down from 57). The exercise of 'accountability' by left-wing voters created a legislative 'super-majority' for the right (Vowles and Aimer 1993; Renwick 2011: 197).

New Zealand switched to PR in 1996 and a more fragmented legislative party system emerged. Although electoral reform is periodically salient in Britain, FPTP appears entrenched for the foreseeable future. But is FPTP compatible with a fragmenting electoral arena? Fragmentation is driven by new issues and key events, such as the referendums on Brexit and Scottish independence, both of which propelled support for smaller parties (UKIP/Brexit Party/Reform and the SNP) (Fieldhouse et al., 2020: 138–87). A broader socio-cultural values division now cross-cuts the traditional left-right cleavage (Surridge 2025), reconstituting electoral coalitions of support around issues such as climate change (Green Party), immigration (Reform) and Muslim identity/solidarity (Muslim independents) in 2024.

It is possible for small parties to find a role within the dynamics of two-party competition under FPTP. The Liberal Democrats achieved this by becoming primarily an anti-Conservative party in affluent rural areas where Labour struggled (Russell and Fieldhouse 2005; Quinn 2017). The party benefited from anti-Conservative sentiment and tactical voting in 1997 and 2024, both elections producing Labour landslides (Curtice 2024: 12).[10] A variation on this pattern occurs when small parties enjoy geographically concentrated support because of a secondary cleavage, such as the SNP in Scotland on the constitutional question (Johns and Mitchell 2016).

In advance of making parliamentary breakthroughs (if they ever arrive), small parties may act as 'spoilers'. By detaching support disproportionately from one major party in a constituency, they can hand victory to the other major party, even if the latter's support remains unchanged (as per Fig. 3). This was the case with Reform in 2024. It secured 20.0%–29.9% of the vote in 139 constituencies, none of which it won, but it damaged the Conservatives, who had (notionally) won 95 of these constituencies in 2019 but only 33 in 2024. The other 62 constituencies fell to Labour; in 53 of these, the combined Conservative-Reform vote was greater than Labour's.

Spoiler parties can disrupt the operation of accountability under FPTP. Reform's presence made Conservative-Labour and Conservative-Liberal Democrat marginal constituencies easier for Labour or the Liberal Democrats to win in 2024.

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[10]The Liberal Democrats' participation in a Conservative-led coalition from 2010 to 2015 contradicted their anti-Conservative electoral strategy and precipitated a largescale defection of their voters. See Cutts, Russell and Townsley (2023); Fieldhouse et al. (2020: 113–37); Wager (2024: 138–69).

Even previously safe Conservative seats were lost (Curtice 2024; Ford 2024). The effect was to make the Conservatives' overall defeat even heavier than in a purely two-party setting.

This undermines a second dimension of accountability, namely, the ability of the *opposition* to hold the government to account. Electoral accountability occurs once every few years, but *ongoing* accountability in parliament is provided by the opposition parties scrutinizing the government. The main opposition party offers itself as an alternative government-in-waiting (Johnson 1997). When FPTP creates super-majorities as a by-product of third-party electoral support, the opposition may be hugely under-represented in parliament. That can hinder its ability to hold the government to account, with few opportunities to put it under pressure in parliamentary votes, and possibly lacking sufficient personnel (of requisite quality) to fill frontbench roles. If the parties' vote shares had been converted proportionately into seats in 2024, the right-wing 'bloc' of the Conservatives, Reform and Northern Irish unionists would have won a combined 255 of 650 seats, significantly greater than the 134 they won under FPTP. Stronger representation would have boosted the right's parliamentary prominence and its ability to hold the government to account.

## Proportionality and accountability

Given the problems of 'throwing the rascals out' in the context of fragmenting electoral choice under FPTP, it is instructive to consider an alternative understanding of 'accountability' that owes more to proportional democracy. The party system is the crucial mediating variable. Party systems are patterns of inter-party relationships that constitute a *structure of competition for government* (Sartori 1976; Mair 2006; Casal Bértoa and Enyedi 2021). In the mature proportional democracies of Western Europe, these patterns generally follow one of two formats (Quinn 2023: 654–6). The first involves parties forming a series of ideologically overlapping coalitions, e.g. liberals and social democrats, liberals and Christian democrats, etc., with 'mainstream' efforts to keep the radical left and radical right out of government. These are the classic 'consensual' democracies that are often discussed in relation to PR, with cabinets chosen in post-election elite negotiations. The party systems of Germany, Austria, and Benelux are the principal examples.[11]

The second type involves 'bipolar' systems in which the parties divide into left and right 'blocs', whether in formal alliances or looser associations (Mair 2006). Governing coalitions tend not to 'overlap' ideologically because they are usually formed by some or all of the parties in one bloc. Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Spain, and Portugal are examples. Beyond Europe, post-1996 New Zealand is another. In

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[11]On patterns of coalition formation in Western Europe, see Bergman, Bäck and Hellström (2021).

bloc-based systems, voters can switch between blocs, but they may also switch *within* blocs. This is advantageous for non-centrist voters, who can defect from one party to an ideologically proximate one in the same bloc, increasing the relative intra-bloc influence of the latter party while maintaining the overall strength of the bloc as a whole. Voters have a clearer role in choosing governments in bloc-based than in consensual multi-party systems. In general, intra-bloc switching does not boost the rival bloc, as it can under FPTP.[12] In terms of accountability, when one bloc governs, the rival bloc can present itself as a coalition-in-waiting.

By way of illustration, Fig. 4 shows the proportion of legislative seats won by parties in the Norwegian left and right blocs since 2005. There was significant intra-bloc vote-switching, with the Labour Party declining in size, while radical-left parties and the agrarian Centre Party grew. The left governed from 2005 to 2013 as a three-party majority coalition (Allern and Karlsen 2014) and formed a Labour-Centre minority coalition (with left-wing support) in 2021. The right bloc governed from 2013 to 2021, with the Conservatives in office throughout, joined by the radical-right Progress Party (2013–20), the Liberals (2018–21) and the Christian Democrats (2019–21). Landslide victories are possible when enough centrist voters switch between blocs, as in 2021 (Aardal and Bergh 2022).
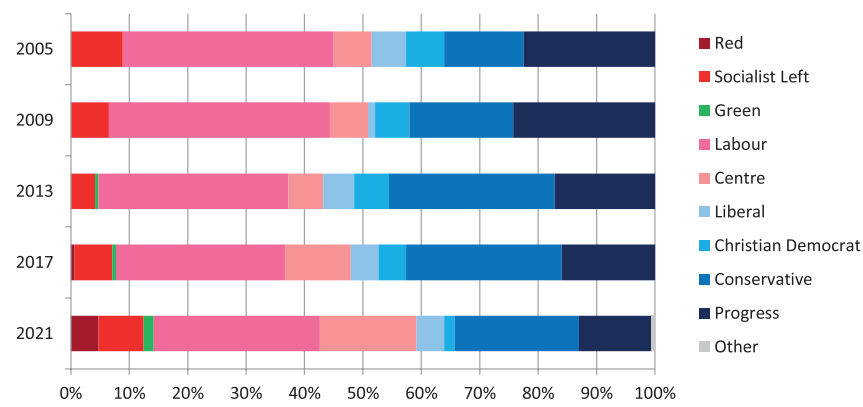
Source: Döring and Manow (2024).

Note: Left bloc = Red, Socialist Left, Green, Labour, Centre. Right bloc = Liberal, Christian Democrat, Conservative, Progress.

Figure 4 Proportion of Legislative Seats by Party in the Norwegian Storting

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[12]An exception is when intra-bloc vote-switching drags a party below an electoral threshold for legislative representation, damaging the whole bloc.

Given Britain's majoritarian 'adversarial' heritage, a switch to PR would more likely produce a 'bipolar' multi-party system divided into left and right blocs, than a German-type 'consensual' one of overlapping centrist coalitions (Bale 2023; Quinn 2023). The major party rivalry between Labour and the Conservatives is similar to the Labour-National rivalry in New Zealand, which makes grand coalitions—a feature of 'consensual' party systems—unlikely.

A bloc-based multi-party system under PR in Britain in 2024 would have enabled right-wing voters to punish the Conservatives by switching to Reform, knowing the latter would gain proportionate representation in parliament for the votes it won. This would not have indirectly delivered a super-majority for Labour, as happened under FPTP. Labour and its allies would still have won the election, but by less. Likewise, PR might have delivered victory for New Zealand's left bloc in 1990, rather than the landslide victory the right enjoyed under FPTP. 'Accountability' can be understood not only as 'throwing the rascals out' but additionally as intra-bloc switching. Had New Zealand's left returned to power under PR in 1990, Labour's dominance would have diminished as the bloc's centre of gravity shifted to the left. Holding Labour 'to account' would have entailed forcing it to compromise with left-wing parties (Quinn 2016).

PR is not a panacea. Scandinavian bloc politics can be volatile, with tensions between centrist and radical parties. Norwegian Liberals and Christian Democrats were initially reluctant to join the Progress Party in government, and Progress left the coalition in 2020 because of disagreements with other parties (Aardal and Bergh 2022). Similar tensions could beset relations between the British Conservatives and Reform under PR. However, their electoral competition would be less likely to magnify the power of the left than under FPTP.

Conclusion

Mandates and accountability, the twin normative pillars of majoritarianism, are typically viewed sequentially, with the former preceding the latter. In fact, every individual election is simultaneously a judgment of accountability on the previous government and the furnishing of a mandate to the next (or continuing) government. Individual voters are given one vote to achieve both tasks. For centrist voters with a choice of either main party, the tasks are complementary. But non-centrist voters disillusioned with the major party on their ideological flank face a dilemma: 'throwing the rascals out' entails installing a more ideologically distant government. This problem confronted right-wing British voters in 2024. In an era of party fragmentation, it could arise more regularly.

One response is to dismiss its importance. After all, a government that dramatically broke its promises was severely punished by British voters in 2024. 'Accountability' trumped 'mandate'. Yet, mandates remain important for

majoritarian democracy, providing single-party majority governments with legitimacy by linking manifestos to voter choice (Hofferbert and Budge 1992; Powell 2000: 69–88). When the vote is split on one ideological flank, as in 2024, FPTP creates 'super-majorities'. That Labour's overwhelming parliamentary dominance was based on 33.7% of the vote raises questions over the degree of public consent to the government's platform.

The disproportionality of outcomes affects not only the defeated major party and proximate niche parties. It also impacts small parties proximate to the victorious party. If the 2024 UK election had been decided proportionately, Labour would have won 219 (of 650) seats, the Liberal Democrats 79, and the Greens 44. A red-yellow-green 'traffic-light coalition' (Faas and Klingelhöfer 2022) would have enjoyed a solid majority. The influence of the Liberal Democrats and Greens may have produced policy differences with a majority Labour government.

The dilemmas explored in this article could feasibly emerge at the next general election. If Labour is unpopular and leaks votes to left-leaning parties, it could find itself facing the same problems, given that it lost votes to the Greens and independents in 2024 (Curtice 2024: 13). Such problems are likely to become more common amid weak partisan loyalties and the rise of 'challenger' parties (De Vries and Hobolt 2020; Fieldhouse et al., 2020; Denver and Johns 2021: 71–91).

To avoid a repeat of right-wing vote-splitting, the Conservatives will hope to squeeze Reform's vote. Failing that, they could seek either an unofficial 'non-aggression pact' based on tactical voting (as with Labour and the Liberal Democrats in 2024) or a formal electoral pact in which each party stood aside for the other in different constituencies. However, Reform might aim to supplant the Conservatives as the main party of the right and seize its vote in the dramatic but rare process of 'surge-and-collapse' under FPTP (Ware 2009). This happened in Canada's federal election of 1993, when the Progressive Conservatives were overtaken by the right-wing Reform Party of Canada (Bélanger 2004). But the Canadian right remained split for a decade; there is no guarantee that the British right will overcome its divisions by the next election.

The alternative to these strategic calculations would be electoral reform (Renwick 2011). A previous British attempt to abandon FPTP was defeated in a referendum in 2011, but it was pitched against the majoritarian 'alternative vote'. Support for PR has traditionally centred on the Liberal Democrats. More recently, the Labour left and the trade-union movement have shown interest (Herbert 2024). PR also now enjoys support on the right, with Reform UK leader, Nigel Farage, advocating it (Quinn 2023). Accountability is not typically considered a normative desideratum of PR. But allowing voters to switch parties within one ideological bloc, without empowering the rival bloc, offers a form of accountability that avoids parliamentary 'super-majorities' on weak electoral mandates.

Conflict of interest statement

None declared.

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