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# THE FIRST-PAST-THE-POST SYSTEM: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

*Amogh Mittal\* & Pranay Gulati\*\**

## Abstract

The first-past-the-post-system (FPTP), even though widely in use, is still bereft of well founded criticism. The two central and arguably natural inadequacies of the FPTP system which are discussed in the paper are strategic voting and gerrymandering. These two have been selected for detailed analysis on the basis of their prevalence in democracies, and their interconnectedness, both of which make it tougher for any state to cure these. Tactical voting is often taken recourse to by more financially strong parties by fielding candidates with the sole intention of diverting votes from a rival candidate, while ensuring that the votes of their own party remain unaffected. This problem lies at the confluence of the three main ills that politics in general faces: money, greed and unrepresentative measures. Gerrymandering, on the other hand, reflects the worst of the desperation to win. By demarcating constituencies according to the whims and fancies of the ruling party, the aim is to essentially eliminate the chances of any rival candidate being able to win.

## I Introduction

THE FPTP system is an electoral system in which the voter cast his vote for the representative and the representative which achieves the majority wins the election. The voters voting for candidates, who do not get majority, waste their vote in such a system. The advantages of FPTP are that this concept is easy to understand, and ballots can more easily be counted and processed than in

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\* Student, BA. LLB (H), Rajiv Gandhi National University of Law, Punjab.

\*\* Student, B.Com. LLB(H), Gujarat National Law University, Gandhinagar.

preferential voting systems. In a political environment, FPTP enables voters to clearly express a view on which party they think should form the next government.

FPTP is a plurality voting system which favours the larger parties with geographically concentrated support who tend to gain a disproportionately large share of seats, while smaller parties with more evenly distributed support are left with a disproportionately small share.

Any democracy, in order to fulfil its ultimate goal, has to be inclusive; and this cannot be sacrificed at the altar of stability and simplicity. In the modern world, there is a fast growing recognition that the FPTP system may not completely fulfil the goal of representative democracy. The reasons for the same are being recognised around the world, and the paper suggests the two major problems with the FPTP: gerrymandering and tactical voting.

## II Problem of gerrymandering

Gerrymandering is a practice intended to establish a political advantage for a particular party or group by manipulating district boundaries. The resulting district is known as a gerrymander.<sup>1</sup> Gerrymandering is notably used by the ruling party or a particular party who has the power to redraw the map for their own political advantage. The societies which use the single winner electoral system are more likely to have parties gerrymandering for their advantage. The tactic of gerrymandering has been used by many ruling parties in various countries to get political advantage against the opposition; for example, in Malaysia, the ruling party has been accused of using the tactic of gerrymandering since 1957, when the ruling party, Barisan Nasional, was accused of controlling the election commission by revising the boundaries of constituencies. For example, during the 13<sup>th</sup> general election in 2013, Barisan Nasional won 60 percent of the seats in the Malaysian Parliament despite only receiving 47 percent of the popular vote.<sup>2</sup> The objective of using gerrymandering by parties is to maximise the effect of the votes of their supporters and minimise the effect of the votes of the opposition by concentrating the votes of a particular party or by distributing the voters of a community into different districts to reduce their impact. A gerrymander's main

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1 Charles Elster, *The Big Book of Beastly Mispronunciations* 224 (Houghton Mifflin, 1999).

2 "What's Malay for gerrymandering?" *The Economist*, available at: <https://www.economist.com/asia/2014/08/09/whats-malay-for-gerrymandering> (last visited on July 31, 2019).