

The Electoral Reform Society warmly welcomes the decision to debate the petition ‘**To make votes matter, adopt Proportional Representation for UK General Elections**’ in Westminster Hall on 30th October 2017.

103,495 citizens have signed this petition and it is very welcome that it is now being debated in the House of Commons.

- The Westminster voting system is no longer fit for purpose. The last three General Elections have demonstrated that First-Past-the-Post is unable to cope. It is a 19th century system failing on its own terms.
- 1 in 5 voters were planning to vote tactically at the 2017 General Election and 22 million votes did not directly elect an MP. Parties and voters are being let down by the system.
- 33% of people don’t think that voting for their preferred party will make a difference; 44% of people don’t feel that the UK Parliament is capable of understanding and effectively representing their concerns¹.
- PR systems are used across the UK. The House of Commons is the only Parliament in the UK using this out-of-date system.

Why PR and why now?

As each election passes, the system we use to elect representatives to the Westminster Parliament becomes increasingly out of date and increasingly unfit for the job.

First-Past-the-Post is a system designed to deliver single party majorities in party systems with two dominant parties. It is a system intended to deliver decisive results and stability, and yet has repeatedly failed to do so.

The last three General Elections have shown First-Past-the-Post failing to deliver on its own terms. In 2010 it produced a hung Parliament – something not meant to happen under Westminster’s winner-takes-all voting system. In 2015 it produced the most disproportionate election ever. In 2017 it failed to deliver a single winner despite the two largest parties achieving their highest vote share for decades.

First-Past-the-Post is a system designed for the 19th century and it is increasingly out of date in our 21st century politics. It is no longer the right system for our multi-party, diverse and volatile political system. It is a system that is failing voters and parties alike.

A system that fails parties and voters

Our [General Election report](#) highlights how First-Past-the-Post is not only failing voters but skewing outcomes for all political parties.

Despite achieving the highest vote share since the landslide of 1983, First-Past-the-Post did not give the Conservatives enough seats to form a majority. Likewise despite achieving the highest vote share since the landslide of 1997, the Labour Party were left 60 seats short of a majority. For the first time since 1970 over 80 percent of votes went to just two parties and yet First-Past-the-Post could not deliver a majority government.

Regional dynamics mean that despite parties making gains in unexpected areas, voters' choices are still being marginalised because of where they live.

- In South West England, nearly 15 percent of the vote share returned the Liberal Democrats only one MP out of the 55 representing that region (less than 2% seat share).
- Labour's historical under-representation in the South East continued in 2017, despite gaining 4 seats this election, the party won 28.6 percent of votes in the South East and just 8 seats (9.5% seat share).
- In the North East the Conservatives increased their vote share by 9.1 percent (up to 34.4%) and yet only retained the three seats they held in 2015 (10.3% of seat share).

First-Past-the-Post is ensuring parties remain under-represented in these areas despite a growth in support and voters are not getting the representation they want.

The UK political system has changed dramatically. We now live in a multi-party era with different parties in power in each of our nations in recent years. Yet the system is forcing voters to narrow their choices. Our research found that **1 in 5 voters were planning to vote tactically at the General Election**, double the number who said so in 2015.

And a huge number of votes are being wasted. First-Past-the-Post takes no account of votes for the winning candidate over and above what they need, or for the losing candidates' votes. This general election saw **over 22 million votes (68%) wasted** in this way.

The electorate are no longer loyal to just one party. The 2015 and 2017 elections saw the **highest level of aggregate voter volatility (movement between parties) since 1931**. We are witnessing huge changes in partisan alignment and our system is struggling to keep up.

PR is a UK system

Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and the London Assembly all use proportional systems. Voters using these systems show no appetite to replace them with First-Past-the-Post. The House of Commons is the only Parliament in the UK using this out-of-date system.

Proportional systems used in other elections in the UK have enabled parties to maintain a political presence when their fortunes at the national or UK level have fluctuated, providing the party with a base from which to build future success.

Under a PR system, the Welsh Assembly, was the first parliament in the world to have equal number of women and men, assisted by a more open voting system.

What about the Constituency link?

All the UK based proportional systems (except closed lists used in European elections) have a constituency basis.

Under STV constituencies are larger (equal to 3 to 6 current constituencies) but voters have more than one representative to whom they can turn; reflecting today's political diversity. Under AMS voters chose a constituency representative the same as under First-Past-the-Post.

In addition, proportional systems increase competition and make it worthwhile for candidates and activists to campaign on their own patch – wherever that is. Since changing to STV for local government elections in Scotland, no council seat has been uncontested. Preferential systems make it worthwhile reaching out to all voters to get second and third preferences.

Do voters understand these systems?

Voters in the UK are already experienced in using a wide variety of systems. From the Additional Member System (AMS) in Scotland, Wales and for the London Assembly, the Single Transferable Vote (STV) in Northern Ireland and local government elections in Scotland and the Supplementary Vote (SV) for electing Mayors and PCCs. All UK voters will have used more than one electoral system.

In Scotland where STV is used for local government elections, voters' use of the system has become increasingly sophisticated. In the 2012 Scottish local government elections, for which STV had first been used in 2007, the number voters using only one preference declined everywhere. 86.3% of all ballot papers contained a second as well as a first preference and over 65% of voters in constituencies with 11 or more candidates used three or more preferencesⁱⁱ.

Doesn't PR let in extremists?

In practice, countries with PR electoral systems tend to use thresholds (typically under 10%) to ensure parties command the support of a significant section of the electorate before entering the legislature.

In principle a system should not be designed to exclude. It is the marginalisation of voters' voices that causes them to become more urgent and more extreme. Given the space to be heard, positions which are unjustified and unjust, are quickly exposed.

We already use a number of PR systems across the UK for different elections and over the many years that these systems have been in place, have not seen a rise in the election of candidates with extremist political views.

Haven't we already had a referendum on this?

No. The AV referendum gave voters a choice of two systems, neither of which was proportional.

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ⁱ Polling conducted by BMG on behalf of the Electoral Reform Society. Fieldwork: 16 - 20 October 2017. Sample: 1506 GB adults aged 18+.

ⁱⁱ Curtice, J. (2012) 2012 Scottish Local Government Elections. Electoral Reform Society <https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/2012-Scottish-Local-Elections.pdf>