

# Westminster Hall Debate on Proportional Representation

Electoral Reform Society Briefing, April 2019  
Westminster Hall, Tuesday 23 April, 4:30pm

We welcome Tuesday's debate on Proportional Representation (PR). The polarising Westminster voting system is fundamentally out of sync with how voters want to be represented today. Study after study shows voters feel powerless and distant from political decisions: updating Parliament's outdated electoral system would help to remedy this.

The ERS believes Westminster's voting system is no longer fit for purpose – the last three General Elections have demonstrated this, failing to produce strong majorities. It is a 19th century system failing on its own terms.

The ERS believes that a fair, proportional voting system which gives voters real choice and a strong voice would help meet the desire for more responsive politics. We cannot keep using the same broken tools while public trust disappears.

## Key points

- The 2017 General Election was the third election in a row where Westminster's voting system failed to deliver on its supposed key strength – that of producing a clear, strong majority government.
- Westminster is almost alone among modern democracies in the way MPs get elected. In Europe, only France and the authoritarian state of Belarus use similarly disproportional electoral systems.
- 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.
- Voters believe that seats should closely match how people vote at the ballot box. This is a key democratic principle which is not being met by the current system. Only 14% of people oppose switching from FPTP to Proportional Representation<sup>1</sup>.
- Whilst PR systems do not guarantee better gender diversity they do present less of a barrier. Under a PR system, the Welsh Assembly was the first legislative body in the world to have an equal number of women representatives.
- At a local level, First Past the Post is creating electoral deserts with many uncontested wards and seats. Scotland has been using a fairer voting system for local elections (the Single Transferable Vote – STV) since 2007. Voter choice has more than doubled, uncontested seats have been virtually eliminated. Wales too is now considering allowing councils to switch to a system of PR<sup>2</sup>.

1. Polling by BMG (August/Sept 2018).  
Sample 3014, data weighted.

2. 'Reforming Local Government' white paper: <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/consultations/2018-02/170130-white-paper-en.pdf>

3. 'Wasted votes' are calculated as votes for losing candidates or votes for winning candidates over and above what they needed to win the seat.

## First Past the Post is increasingly dysfunctional – Evidence from the 2017 General Election

- **Wasted votes:** over 22 million votes (68%) had no impact on the result<sup>3</sup>.
- **Volatile voting:** the 2017 election saw the second highest aggregate

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electoral volatility (the movement of votes between parties) since 1931 – the most volatile was 2015 – showing voters are increasingly switching sides and shopping around.

- **Tiny margins:** less than 0.0017% of voters choosing differently would have given the Conservatives a majority. The 2017 election saw a rise in very marginal seats: eleven seats were won by fewer than 100 votes.
- **The ‘hold your nose’ election:** ERS estimate 6.5 million people voted tactically, alongside smaller parties standing aside in some areas<sup>4</sup>.
- **A divisive system:** First Past the Post is exaggerating divisions in the UK – Labour secured 29% of South East vote but got just 10% of seats, while Conservatives won 34% of the North East vote but got just 9% of seats. Meanwhile, the SNP continue to be over-represented in Scotland, as is Labour in Wales, while in Northern Ireland voters are forced into two camps.
- **Seats not matching votes:** The voting system is struggling to keep up with huge changes in partisan alignment and looks set to become increasingly disproportional.

4. <https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/latest-news-and-research/publications/the-2017-general-election-report/>

## Why now?

The recent fissures in the main political parties increase the urgency of the need for real political reform: the party system is fragmenting but the structures of Westminster remain locked in the 19th century.

The voting system contributes directly to the political impasse witnessed at the national level: polarising our politics and encouraging a majoritarian mindset – despite hung parliaments now becoming the norm.

The recent changes to party politics in the UK will have profound and highly unpredictable effects on the main parties, leading to a ‘lottery election’ for voters as they try to ‘game the system’. Recent YouGov polling<sup>5</sup> shows 37% of voters no longer back the two main parties. This will have highly unpredictable effects in a General Election.

5. <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2019/04/05/support-slides-simultaneously-labour-and-tories>

For Labour, a surge in votes no longer means a surge in seats, as the 2017 General Election showed: a 10% increased vote share from 2015 returned the same number of seats as the party’s 2010 defeat. Similarly, the Conservatives increased their share of the vote by 5.5% but actually lost 13 seats.

There are significant dangers in failing to reform Westminster’s struggling system. New research published by the Hansard Society has found that the UK public is increasingly disenchanted with the system of governing – support for which has reached a 15-year low, worse than in the aftermath of the MPs’ expenses scandal. There are risks in failing to address this democratic crisis – when asked whether “Britain needs a strong ruler willing to break the rules”, 54% of respondents agreed and only 23% said no<sup>6</sup>.

6. <https://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/publications/reports/audit-of-political-engagement-16>

Now is the time to move to a truly representative, participatory politics, where every vote counts and people know their voice will be heard.

## Q&A

### Isn’t First Past the Post well-established in the UK?

PR is also well established in the UK. 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.

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.

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### **What about the constituency link between voters and MPs?**

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 the Additional Member System (AMS), voters choose 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. Preferential systems make it worthwhile to reach out to all voters – not just those in marginal seats.

### **Do voters understand PR systems?**

Voters in the UK are already experienced in using a wide variety of systems. From AMS in Scotland, Wales and for the London Assembly, STV in Northern Ireland and local government elections in Scotland, and the Supplementary Vote (SV) for electing Mayors and Police and Crime Commissioners. Most 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 of voters using only one preference declined everywhere. 86% of all ballot papers contained a second as well as a first preference, and 65% of voters in constituencies with 11 or more candidates expressed three or more preferences.

### **Doesn’t PR let in extremists?**

Most countries with PR electoral systems use thresholds (typically around 4–5%) to ensure parties command the support of a significant section of the electorate before entering the legislature. By contrast, rather than keeping fringe views out, First Past the Post’s winner-takes-all mentality could quickly allow extremists to gain seats and power.

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 as such. 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, there has not been a rise in the election of candidates with extremist political views<sup>7</sup>.

7. <https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/2012-Scottish-Local-Elections.pdf>

### **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. Politics has changed significantly since 2011.

## **Resources**

- Further information about voting systems: <https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/voting-systems/>
- ERS’ report on the 2017 General Election: <https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/latest-news-and-research/publications/the-2017-general-election-report/>