

Peterloo 200

The Path to Proportional Representation

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Make Votes Matter

Make Votes Matter (MVM) is the cross-party movement to introduce Proportional Representation (PR) to the House of Commons.

MVM formed in the aftermath of the hugely disproportionate 2015 general election and is now the leading organisation working towards making seats match votes. MVM combines the power of people taking grassroots action with coordinated activity by an Alliance of politicians, public figures, parties and organisations to win PR in years, not decades.

MVM does not endorse or support any party or alliance of parties but aims to encourage all parties, organisations and individuals to support the adoption of a proportional voting system for general elections so that Parliament, specifically the House of Commons, reflects the voters.

This report is based on literature review and research carried out by MVM and Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform activists who are Labour Party members, in order to make the case for Proportional Representation to the Labour movement. The report does not represent an endorsement of Labour's or any other political ideology on the part of MVM.

www.makevotesmatter.org.uk

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Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform

The Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform (LCER) has for over 45 years worked inside the Labour Party and trade union movement to change Labour's policy on voting reform. It worked, with the late Robin Cook and with Jeff (now Lord) Rooker, to include the way we elect MPs on the agenda of Labour's Plant Commission and then to defend John Smith's promise "to let the people decide".

LCER were instrumental in getting voting systems where seats broadly reflect the votes cast for the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly of Wales and the Greater London Assembly. When the Jenkins Commission recommendation of Alternative Vote Plus was shelved, LCER worked to keep voting reform on the agenda. LCER had no alternative but to join with other electoral reformers in the Labour Yes! Campaign in the 2011 AV referendum.

Its prime objective was always to emphasise Labour's role in rejecting the current voting system and replacing it with one in which seats in the House of Commons broadly reflect the votes cast, in the context of wider constitutional reform offered now by a Constitutional Convention.

Since 2015 LCER has highlighted the need for Labour to drop its default support of the status quo and has worked closely with Make Votes Matter to provide speakers to Constituency Labour Party meetings, organise fringe meetings at Labour Party conferences and coordinate with pro-reform Labour MPs.

www.labourcampaignforelectoralreform.org.uk

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Acknowledgements

This report was researched and compiled by Owen Winter, Youth Officer of Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform and co-founder of Make Votes Matter, who can be found on Twitter @OwenWntr. The report was edited by Joe Sousek.

This report draws heavily from *The Many Not The Few: Proportional Representation & Labour in the 21st Century* researched and drafted by Joe Sousek with contributions and editing from Mary Southcott, on behalf of Make Votes Matter and the Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform. Many thanks should go to Joe and Mary for their crucial work in this area.

Thanks should also go to Tuuli-Anna Huikuri, Dr Nicholas Martindale, Professor Deborah Oxley, Professor Petra Schleiter and Dr Matthew Williams for their teaching and support in the areas of quantitative methods, comparative politics and political history.

For their particular work on this report, many thanks should go to René Bach, Hubert Kwisthout, Tim Ivorson, Klina Jordan and Joe Sousek.

For their invaluable support of the campaign, many thanks should also go to Mark and Marian Tucker, Network for Social Change, the Andrew Wainwright Reform Trust, the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust, and all of the supporters and activists who make the campaign possible.

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First published by the Independent Publishing Network in August 2019
ISBN: 978-1-78972-247-5 (paperback)
ISBN: 978-1-78972-248-2 (PDF)

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Printed and bound by Solopress
Designed and typeset by René Bach
Cover image: www.everipedia.org/wiki/lang_en/Peterloo_Massacre

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

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i | Executive summary

From the Peterloo Massacre in 1819, through the Chartist and suffrage campaigns, to the rise of the Labour Party, working people have always understood that political equality is the only means of creating an egalitarian society.

This report tells the story of Peterloo and the struggles for democracy that followed. It explores the democratic inequality that still exists in 21st century Britain, and asks the question: "who stands to benefit?" Presenting the findings of research into the societal outcomes of democratically equal societies, it makes the case that the UK must adopt a system of Proportional Representation if it is to become a society run in the interests of the many, not the few.

The Peterloo Massacre

On 16 August 1819, sixty thousand working-class men, women and children met at St Peter's Field in Manchester to call for universal male suffrage, parliamentary representation for industrial towns, and the repeal of the Corn Laws. This meeting came at the height of a post-war economic depression exacerbated by the self-interested policies of the landed elite who dominated Parliament. Around half of the population of Manchester and its surrounding towns turned out because they understood that the only way to alleviate the suffering of their communities was to break into the political system



Peterloo Massacre, a coloured engraving by Richard Carlile.

To Henry Hunt, Esq., as chairman of the meeting assembled in St. Peter's Field, Manchester, sixteenth day of August, 1819, and to the female Reformers of Manchester and the adjacent towns who were exposed to and suffered from the wanton and fiendish attack made on them by that brutal armed force, the Manchester and Cheshire Yeomanry Cavalry, this plate is dedicated by their fellow labourer, Richard Carlile.

The authorities responded to this peaceful assembly with violent repression. In one of the most explicit examples of class conflict in British history, eighteen were killed and around 700 injured. Though the protesters' demands would not be met for many years, the event aroused huge public sympathy and bolstered support for democratic rights.

Suffragettes, England, 1908

A suffragette meeting in Caxton Hall, Manchester, England circa 1908. Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence and Emmeline Pankhurst stand in the center of the platform.



The path to democracy

The story of Britain's campaigns for democracy is grounded in the understanding that society cannot be run in the interests of ordinary people unless ordinary people have access to the political system.

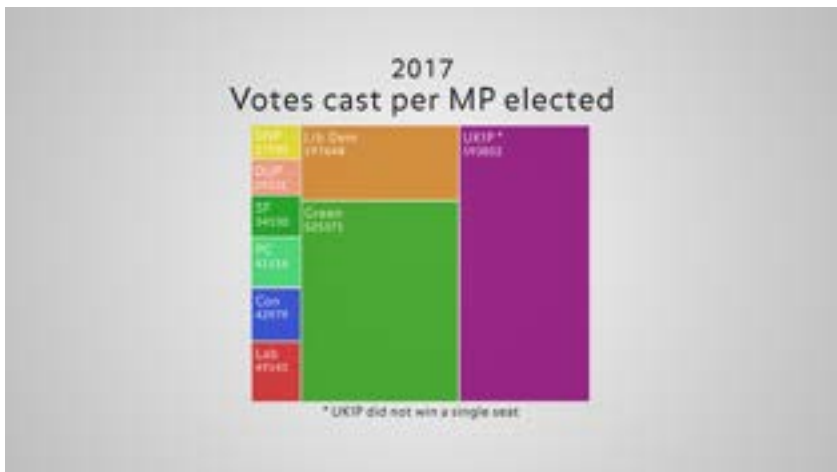
Whether it is newly empowered merchants repealing the Corn Laws, newly enfranchised workers attaining the 'People's Budget' of 1909, newly enfranchised women winning legislation on the issues affecting them, or the fully enfranchised working class electing the first Labour government, advances in democracy have always been crucial in allowing ordinary people to assert their interests.

Whenever people have gained access to political power, they have used it to shape the policies that affect their lives. They accomplish this in two ways: by influencing politicians, who need their votes in order to remain in office, and by electing new politicians who share their identity, concerns and priorities.

Democratic inequality in 21st century Britain

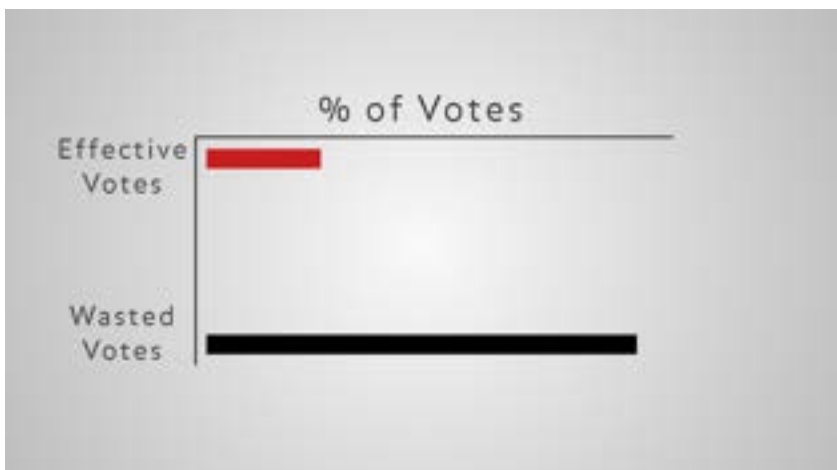
Voter inequality is inherent to the UK's First Past the Post (FPTP) electoral system, with the value of each person's vote varying widely depending on where they live and who they vote for. This is revealed both by the outcomes of general elections and the strategies of political parties who seek to exploit voter inequality in order to win seats.

- The number of votes per MP elected for each party varies wildly, with one party needing 23,033 votes per MP in 2015, and another needing 3,881,099. Some votes were worth 19 times as much as others in 2017, and over 168 times as much as others in 2015.



– Votes cast per MP elected in 2017

- Parties use increasingly sophisticated techniques to map and ruthlessly target the privileged voters in marginal constituencies, while ignoring the majority whose votes carry little value. Momentum mounted a successful initiative to concentrate as much campaign activity as possible in just one quarter of parliamentary seats in 2017.
- Parties have spent up to 22 times as much on privileged voters than on lower value voters and consistently spend more in marginals than in safe seats.



– Effective votes vs. wasted votes: 68% of votes did not count towards the outcome in 2017

Those who have the least influence over general elections find themselves in *voter poverty*. One quarter of parliamentary constituencies have not changed hands since 1979. People who vote for winning parties in safe seats see the value of their votes diminished, while those who vote for losing parties have never had the slightest impact on how they are represented or how the UK is governed.

The alternative to democratic inequality is Proportional Representation; electoral systems in which all votes carry equal value regardless of where and for whom they are cast.

Who benefits from inequality?

Because votes are highly unequal in value, Parliament does not reflect the votes cast in our general elections. Both Labour and the Conservatives have at times won a majority of seats with the support of less than 37 per cent of the voters, while other parties securing large vote shares win little or no representation.

But these distortions in the make-up of Parliament do not 'balance out' in the long run. Instead, there is consensus among experts that "First Past the Post has a pronounced conservative bias", producing (along with other majoritarian electoral systems) significantly more right-wing governments than proportional systems.

- Since World War II, every developed country with a majoritarian electoral system has had a parliament that is on average well to the right of its voters.
- Two-thirds of all governments formed in these countries since WWII have been right-wing, despite left-wing parties winning slightly more votes in almost all of the countries.
- In the UK, the Conservatives have been in power for 63% of the time since 1950. This is despite receiving 41 per cent of the votes cast throughout this duration, compared to Labour's 40 per cent. Furthermore, most votes went to parties to the left of the Conservatives in 18 of the 19 general elections in this period.

In contrast, countries with proportional systems have been level playing fields with no bias in either direction, though they have seen



– With PR, seats match votes

significantly more left-wing governments than majoritarian democracies due to the lack of a right-wing bias.

This bias comes about throughout the world because progressive voters are consistently over-concentrated in urban areas, where progressive parties pile up vast mountains of wasted votes.

- Labour currently holds 34 of the 35 safest seats, in which Labour received over a million more votes than it needed to win them all: enough votes to win around 40 average constituencies outright.
- In inner Manchester's five parliamentary constituencies, Labour received enough excess votes that had no impact on the election to win four additional average seats.

The right-wing bias is also accounted for by another complementary explanation. In proportional systems, voters with varying interests can elect politicians who represent them who are incentivised to work together to redistribute wealth from the richest. In majoritarian systems, however, progressive voters must rally behind a single party to avoid right-wing government, which happens much more rarely.

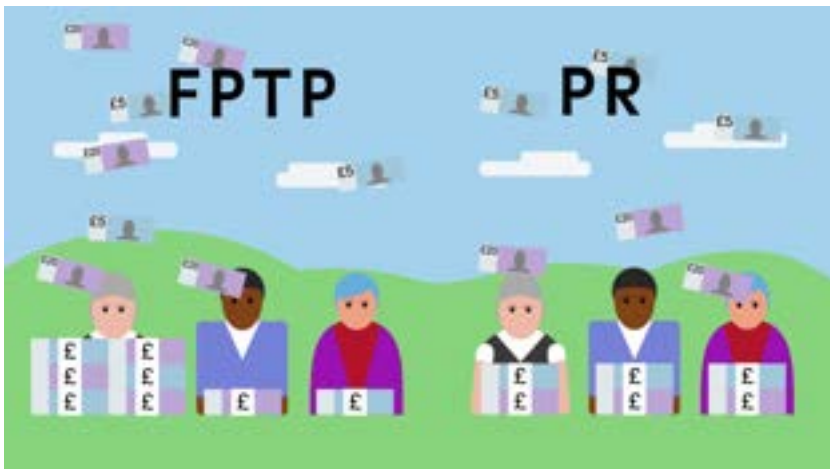
The consequences of equality and inequality

The democratic inequality inherent to FPTP is a key driver of the social

and economic equality that is endemic in British society. Eliminating voter inequality by introducing Proportional Representation would be transformative.

There is broad consensus amongst academics that countries with low democratic inequality produce far better outcomes than those with high democratic inequality:

- Countries with PR tend to have significantly lower levels of income inequality than those with majoritarian systems.
- Among the 36 OECD member countries, the 13 with the lowest levels of income inequality all use PR. The three that use FPTP come 20th (Canada), 31st (UK) and 33rd (USA).
- Countries with PR tend to have lower levels of poverty. In terms of the poverty gap, countries with FPTP come 19th (Canada), 32nd (UK) and 34th (USA) among 36 OECD countries.
- Countries with PR tend to spend 2-3 per cent of GDP more on social security and welfare compared to majoritarian systems.
- In countries with proportional systems, trade unions are more influential and are subject to more favourable trade union laws, larger shares of workers are in unions, and collective bargaining is conducted through far more centralized processes.



– With PR, wealth is more evenly distributed

Based on original research, we can reveal that the level of voter inequality in a society has a significant impact on its level of economic democracy: one of the Labour Party's key contemporary issues. Looking at the Economic Democracy Index (EDI), an international measure of the control people have over the economic decisions that affect their lives, we find:

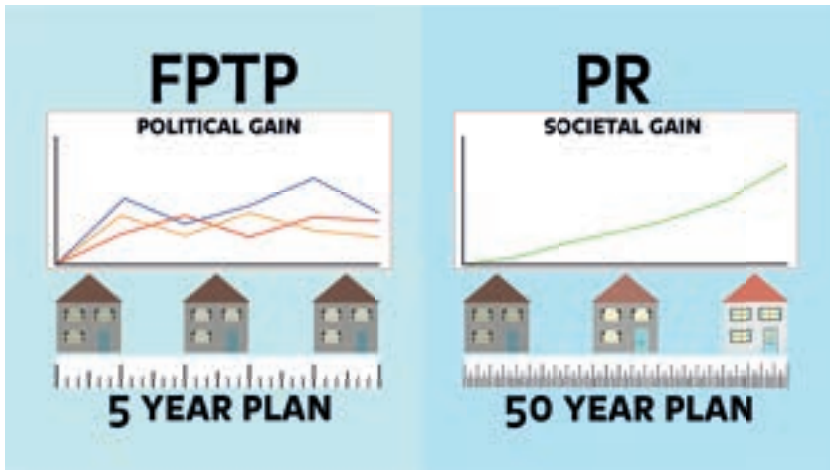
- A country with the same population and economic development as Britain could expect its level of economic democracy to improve by 25 per cent if it moved to a typical PR system.
- For the UK, this would take us from the 25th highest level of economic democracy (out of the 32 countries for which there is data) to the 14th highest.

The reason countries with PR perform so much better is that democratic equality enables ordinary people to advance their own interests in the same way as the earliest British reformers: they can influence politicians, who need their votes in order to remain in office, and they can elect new politicians who share their identity, concerns and priorities. FPTP limits the ability of ordinary people to influence political parties, who only need to court privileged voters to retain control, and limits the ability of ordinary people to elect new representatives who reflect their needs.

Countries with low voter inequality also:

- Are better equipped to take a long-term approach to policy making, rather than focussing on short-term partisan gain.
- Have a significantly better record on environmental policy and climate action, owing to better political representation of 'diffuse interests', leading to a better informed and more sophisticated national debate.
- Political scientist Salomon Orellana found that countries with a pure PR system could expect to have an 11 per cent improvement in CO₂ emissions, towards a reduction in emissions, compared with countries with voting systems like the UK's.

- Even have a lower likelihood of armed conflict, with potentially grave decisions requiring consent on behalf of the majority of voters, rather than consent on behalf of the voters of a single governing party.



– Under proportional voting systems, countries tend to take a more long-term approach to decision making

FPTP in single-member constituencies incentivises parties to select candidates who are perceived as a “safe pair of hands”. Preconceptions and prejudice means this often turns out to be well-off, university-educated, white men.

- In early 2019, the Labour Party was criticised for selecting just 6 BAME candidates in its 99 top target seats (elected under FPTP). In contrast, in the 2019 European Parliamentary elections (under PR) 26 per cent of Labour’s candidates, and 20 per cent of those elected, came from a BAME background.
- More women MPs are elected under PR. 47 per cent of UK MEPs are women, compared to 32 per cent of MPs in the House of Commons. The Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly and Northern Irish Assembly (all elected by PR) each has a larger proportion of women representatives than is found among that nation’s MPs.
- Countries with systems of PR elect around twice as many under 30 year old MPs as those with mixed systems, and 15–20 times as many as those with majoritarian systems.

Understanding democratic socialism

The findings of this report reveal a fundamental misunderstanding at the heart of the Labour Party, which remains the only socialist party in a developed country to support First Past the Post for general elections.

Democratic socialists believe democracy gives rise to an equal society; that the many can use democracy to outvote the privileged few and reshape society in the interests of their communities. But this is true only when everyone has a vote that counts equally.

Instead of empowering the many, FPTP has consistently over-empowered the right and entrenched economic and social inequality, creating in the UK one of the most unequal societies anywhere in the developed world.

In every other area of public policy, the Labour Party fiercely advocates the principle of equality: in education, health, wealth, identity and social justice. It is time that Labour extended this principle to the ballot box by embracing Proportional Representation.



– The campaign to Make Votes Matter

Myths about Proportional Representation

Most European democracies have benefited from higher levels of voter equality since the early 20th century. However, in the UK there remain a number of myths surrounding PR. From the AV referendum to the rise of the far-right, this section deals with some of the most common myths.



The time is now

Since the 2015 general election, there has been a surge in support for PR. The public, the Labour Party and MPs themselves are waking up to the need for a voting system that makes all votes count equally. 200 years on from Peterloo, we should draw on the experience of past campaigners to demand democratic equality in the 21st century.

ii | Foreword

[Clause IV] commits us to putting power and wealth in the hands of the many, not the few. I cannot think of a better slogan for us than to demand an electoral system that puts power in the hands of the many voters and not the few.

– Robin Cook, 2005¹

The Peterloo Massacre is one of the most overlooked events in British history. 16 August 1819 set the scene for the coming century of struggle for democracy in the UK.

At the time, the meeting of 60,000 protestors at St. Peter's Field, Manchester, was the largest in our history. In an era when England's second town sent no MPs to Westminster, ordinary working people, primarily the spinners and weavers of Manchester's surrounding towns, turned out to demand representation in Parliament. The authorities responded with violence. Indeed, among those who were killed was 19-year-old Joseph Whitworth, from Hyde, which is today in one of our constituencies. Although their aims were not met for many years, the brutal suppression of the marchers caused a huge shift in public opinion which set the wheels in motion for gradual reform that culminated in universal male suffrage and the first votes for women in 1918, and full equal suffrage in 1928.

Peterloo is also significant because it showed that working people understood that economic liberation could not take place without democratic representation. At the time, industrial Manchester's already wretched working and living conditions were compounded by a deep economic depression. The protestors recognised that they could not alleviate this suffering while Parliament represented only the elite. Why would Parliament care about Manchester while it was not represented by even a single MP?

With reform in the 20th century this idea was gradually realised. Each of the Reform Acts were followed by corresponding policy changes as newly enfranchised classes asserted themselves. After the 1832 Great Reform Act, industrialists and merchants gained greater representation. By 1846, they used this power to repeal the Corn

Laws which had existed to protect the wealth of rich landowners. Following further extensions of the franchise to some working men in urban areas (in 1867) and rural areas (in 1884), Parliament turned its attention to social reforms demanded by the working class. This culminated in the People's Budget of 1909, which placed new taxes on the rich with which to "wage implacable warfare against poverty and squalidness". When the first women finally won the vote in 1918, it was followed by a slew of bills aiming to deal with 'women's issues'. And although it took many years, universal suffrage allowed working people to build the Labour Party, win representation in Parliament, and fundamentally reform the state to address the interests of the many.

But today, the UK remains one of the most economically unequal societies in the developed world, with the 6th worst income equality of the 36 OECD nations and the 2nd worst of those in Europe. This report makes the case that democratic inequality, arising from a long outdated electoral system, has been a substantial barrier to reducing economic inequality, creating an egalitarian society, and addressing issues of social justice.

By adopting Proportional Representation (PR) we can instead create a democracy in which all voters have equal access to representation and political power. This report draws on substantial academic evidence showing why this is far more likely to lead to the kind of society that we in the Labour Party want to create: one with, for example, lower economic inequality, greater economic democracy, and an effective response to the climate crisis.

Let us be clear: these policies must be fought for whatever the electoral system. But there is increasing evidence that workers, trade unions, activists and political parties are better placed to fight for them under systems in which all votes count equally. By adopting PR, we can significantly shift the balance of power in the UK, from the few, to the many.

Labour remains the only socialist party in the developed world to support the use of First Past the Post for general elections. It is time for us to learn from our sister parties and embrace PR. Indeed, this is already happening. One third of Labour MPs have come out in favour of PR. At the time of writing, 69 Constituency Labour Parties

have passed pro-PR motions since 2017, with dozens more debates scheduled. Two affiliated unions now support PR as policy, and one of the two unions with policy against PR is reviewing its position following calls from its membership.

200 years on from the Peterloo Massacre, we should remember and celebrate those who fought for democracy before us. We should take inspiration from their understanding that only through greater democracy can we transform society. We hope you will consider the arguments and evidence in this report and join us in calling for a democracy fit for the 21st century.



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Labour MP for Ealing Central
and Acton

iii | Introduction to the political consequences of electoral systems

[The electoral system is] the most specific manipulative instrument in politics.

– Giovanni Sartori, 1968

In a representative democracy the political desires of the population are usually executed by politicians who are chosen through an election. Electoral systems play a crucial role as the mechanism for voters to choose their representatives. It is for this reason that different electoral systems have a significantly different effect on policy outcomes.

Logically, this makes perfect sense. The way that we choose our elected representatives is bound to have an impact on policy-making as a whole. This report draws on the evidence from political scientists and economists, including some of our own work, to argue that a proportional electoral system would have a transformative effect on politics in the UK.

In our own research, we have looked at countries around the world to compare their political systems. We have found huge variety but also identified some common themes. One of the major distinctions is between 'majoritarian' electoral systems, such as the First Past the Post (FPTP) system used in the UK, and 'proportional' systems.

It is widely accepted by experts that FPTP has a pronounced conservative bias. Countries with majoritarian systems have generally seen significantly more right-wing governments than those with systems of Proportional Representation. Indeed, the available evidence suggests that countries that retain majoritarian systems should expect to see a greater frequency of right-wing governments in the future.

Furthermore, countries with more proportional systems have been more successful in delivering the kind of outcomes associated with egalitarian, compassionate societies. A body of research has confirmed that proportional democracies have lower rates of poverty,

higher social spending, stronger trade unions with a greater stake in policy-making, have taken more effective action on climate change, and are more likely to redistribute wealth, to name but a few.

Politicians may be tempted to see social outcomes primarily as the result of decisions taken by individuals and parties, rather than as consequences of the system in which these players operate. Yet, systems matter. As the eminent political scientist Giovanni Sartori once said, the electoral system is the most specific manipulative instrument in politics. Any political project aiming to reshape society for the better would do well to begin by considering which systems are likely to support their aims - and which will undermine them.

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1 | The Peterloo Massacre



– fig.1.1

The public are respectfully informed, that a MEETING will be held here on MONDAY 9th August, 1819, on the Area near ST PETER'S CHURCH, to take into consideration, the most speedy and effectual mode of obtaining Radical Reform in the Commons House of Parliament, being fully convinced, that nothing less can remove the intolerable evils under which the People of this Country have so long, and do still, groan

– Manchester Observer, 31 July 1819¹

Democracy did not fall into the lap of the British people. We revel in the myth that universal suffrage was a serene and inevitable progression: that Britain, protected by the channel, was spared the revolutions and conflict that began Europe's democratic awakening in the 18th and 19th centuries.

This narrative is convenient to those who want to minimise the struggle faced by ordinary people for many centuries, but it does not reflect reality. Britain has a history punctuated by class conflict, repression and plutocracy. The events that took place on St Peter's Field on 16 August 1819 are a testament to that struggle.



– Henry Hunt, orator and chairman of the Peterloo meeting

When sixty thousand working-class people turned out to protest in 1819, it was not so they could demand the modest right to re-elect the elite already populating Parliament. Nor did they simply turn out to ask for higher wages. Banners reading *Election by Ballot and Equal Representation or Death* stood proudly next to those reading *No Corn Laws* and *Labour is the Source of Wealth*.² What drew half the population of Manchester and its surrounding towns³ to St Peter's Field was the understanding that working people could not improve their lives without abolishing the rotten boroughs, seizing democratic rights, and breaking into the political system. In recognising that economic justice was

only achievable through representation, the weavers and spinners of Lancashire set Britain on its path to democracy.

This outpouring of popular demand for suffrage was born in the industrial revolution. In Lancashire, from the 1770s, mechanised factories led to a boom in cotton production. Manchester grew from a small town into England's second city. As the revolution progressed, the divide between manufacturers and their employees grew. The city stratified between classes, with workers living in sprawling new slums.

Poor housing might have been tolerated while wages were high and goods were cheap. But the economic boom lasted only as long as the Napoleonic wars. As peace came to Europe in 1815 there followed behind a deep and painful economic depression. This depression was compounded by a sequence of poor harvests, the worst in 1816, the 'year without a summer'. Farmers were unable to pay their rents and cheap corn flooded into the country from Europe and America. The value of farming capital plummeted and landowners turned to their allies in Parliament to protect their wealth. The Corn Laws were passed in 1815, placing tariffs and other restrictions on imported grains and greatly increasing the price of food. Slum housing and poor working conditions were no longer compensated for by high wages or low prices. The price of protecting the wealthy was paid by the working class. As their wages fell and prices rose, cheap bread vanished. It was clear that the government did not have most people's interests at heart.

But why would they? Despite having over a million of the British Isles' 20 million inhabitants, Lancashire elected only 14 of the 658 seats in the House of Commons. Manchester, the second largest town in England, had no representation in Parliament at all. With the working class entirely disenfranchised and landowning interests from the south of England hugely overrepresented in Parliament, the government essentially engaged in class warfare. The only way to solve economic deprivation, argued reformers, was a new parliamentary system.

By 1819, tensions were at an all-time high. Government loyalists feared a revolution like that which had occurred in France within living memory and the government repeatedly suspended habeas corpus

- the law preventing unlawful imprisonment without proof - to deter reformers. The Blanketeers March in 1817, with as many as 5,000 protestors planning to march on London before being dispersed, stoked fears of an insurrection and marked Manchester out as one of the most radical areas of the country. In the weeks preceding Peterloo, mass meetings were called in Birmingham, Leeds and London to show the level of national support for the Radical cause. By the beginning of August, the authorities were on tenterhooks. As the date neared for the Manchester rally, 9 August, the authorities panicked, declaring the meeting unlawful. The organisers quickly reworked the agenda and rescheduled for 16 August. The stage was set.

When Henry Hunt - the famous radical orator who would be the star attraction of the rally - left his lodgings on 16 August, he may have been pleased to see that there was not a cloud in sight. Through the morning, thousands of working-class men, women and children marched from the towns around Manchester, dressed in their best clothes and enjoying the sun. From Oldham, 200 women marched wearing white dresses. When Hunt arrived at the hustings at 1pm the turnout astonished him. He had spoken at many rallies around the country, but none like this. In fact, it was probably the largest political assembly that Britain had ever seen.

Instead of the disorganised rabble they expected, the magistrates charged with overseeing the protest witnessed a peaceful and disciplined assembly. Rather than taking this as a sign that the event would be peaceful, they apparently took it to mean something far more sinister: these people had clearly been training for an armed insurrection! Why else would protestors have arrived sober and orderly?

The authorities, by contrast, were not so orderly. Regular troops had been supplemented by hastily sworn in "special constables" and local militias, most notably the Manchester and Salford Yeomanry Cavalry (MYC). By many accounts, Yeomen were drunkenly swaying atop their horses by the time Hunt started speaking. The MYC was drawn from local loyalists, many of whom would have known the protestors. According to R J White, the MYC was mainly formed of "cheesemongers, ironmongers and newly enriched manufacturers, and the people of Manchester and district thought them a joke".⁴ In some cases, the Yeomen were the employers of those in the crowd.

By 1.15pm, nerves had got the better of the magistrates, who signed a warrant for the arrest of Henry Hunt and the other speakers. By this time there was no way that special constables would be able to push through the crowd to get to the speakers unaccompanied. The MYC, stationed a few streets away, was ordered to accompany the special constables to the speakers' platform.



– fig.1.2

The Yeomen stormed through the city on horseback towards the rally. There fell the first victim of the day, two-year-old William Flyde. Whether he was trampled by horses or died when his mother was knocked down by a horse is unclear, but neither William nor his mother was participating in the rally. As historian Joyce Marlow put it, "it was bitterly appropriate that the first death of Peterloo should be that of a two-year-old child whose mother was not even at the meeting".⁵

Hunt began to address the meeting at 1.40pm. He was barely two sentences into his speech when the Yeomanry arrived, sabres drawn. As they pushed their way through the rally to execute the arrests, Hunt calmed the crowds and declared that he would be arrested peacefully.

The drunken Yeomen struggled to control their horses in the dust and heat, with the crowd hemming them in. Chaos ensued. Horses reared. The MYC went mad, slashing indiscriminately with their sabres, and the crowd panicked.

It was at this moment that the regular cavalry arrived at a scene of mayhem. Dust concealed most of the action but the MYC appeared to be under attack. The cavalry charged into the horrified crowd.

Victims were trampled by horses or the crowd, truncheoned by constables or sabred by soldiers. All in all, around 700 people were injured and 18 lost their lives. They are listed below.⁶

John Ashton, aged 41, from Oldham, sabred and trampled.

John Ashworth, from Manchester, special constable, trampled by cavalry.

William Bradshaw, aged 16, from Whitefield, sabred and trampled.

Thomas Buckley, aged 62, from Chadderton, sabred and stabbed by a bayonet.

Robert Campbell, aged 57, from Manchester, killed by a mob the day after the massacre.

James Crompton, from Barton-upon-Irwell, trampled.

Edmund Dawson, aged 19, from Saddleworth, sabred.

Margaret Downes,
sabred.

William Evans, from Hulme, special constable, trampled by cavalry.

William Fildes, aged 2, from Manchester, trampled as the MYC made their way to St Peter's Field.

Samuel Hall, from Manchester, sabred and trampled.

Mary Heyes, aged 44, from Chorlton Row, trampled and died giving birth prematurely soon after Peterloo.

Sarah Jones, from Manchester, beaten by truncheons.

John Lees, from Oldham, a veteran of Waterloo, sabred and beaten by truncheons.

Arthur O'Neill, aged 40, from Manchester, beaten by truncheons and trampled by the crowd, died from his injuries.

Martha Partington, aged 38, from Eccles,
died after being thrown into a cellar by the pressure of the crowd.

John Rhodes, aged 22, from Middleton,
sabred.

Joseph Whitworth, aged 19, from Hyde,
killed by a musket ball.

The Peterloo Massacre was the brutal suppression of a popular demonstration for equal representation. The main demands of the protestors - parliamentary representation, expansion of the franchise and repeal of the Corn Laws - were not met for many years, but the event caused a rapid shift in public opinion. National newspapers condemned the actions of the magistrates and MYC, and aroused huge public sympathy. The demonstration showed the breadth of support for parliamentary democracy and that the time for reform had come.

A popular enlightenment had occurred since the Industrial Revolution. The constitution could no longer be considered in isolation, for it was the Corn Laws imposed by a Parliament reserved for the landed elite that had caused such misery for working people. Courting their sympathy or charity would not be enough to alleviate the suffering of the working class. Working people needed to gain access to Parliament and to political power. Only an overhaul of the political system would deliver long-lasting change.

2 | The path to democracy

*Rise like Lions after slumber
In unvanquishable number,
Shake your chains to earth like dew
Which in sleep had fallen on you-
Ye are many - they are few*

– Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Masque of Anarchy*, 1819

The story of Britain's campaigns for democracy is grounded in the understanding that society cannot be run in the interests of ordinary people unless ordinary people have access to the political system. The incremental change achieved was not inevitable. Changes were begrudgingly granted by the establishment only when public pressure became irresistible. And while Britain now enjoys universal adult suffrage, the democracy granted was limited: with the First Past the Post (FPTP) electoral system and an unelected second chamber intended to defend the power of the ruling classes.

The attitude of the establishment towards enfranchisement is typified in Walter Bagehot's *The English Constitution* (1867), in which he says,¹

"...what I fear is that both our political parties will bid for the support of the working man ... I can conceive of nothing more corrupting or worse for a set of poor ignorant people than that two combinations of well-taught and rich men should constantly offer to defer to their decision, and compete for the office of executing it. Vox populi will become vox diaboli if it is worked in that manner."

Although the demonstration at St Peter's Field failed in its goals, the Peterloo Massacre should not be underestimated as a turning point. Universal male suffrage would not be won until 1918, and women had to wait another decade, but Peterloo marked a significant shift in public opinion and laid the groundwork for future radical campaigns. For the next century, ordinary people would continue to try to break into the political system.

Their first success came in 1832. Although there had been no parliamentary reform in the immediate aftermath of Peterloo,

by the 1820s popular pressure had begun to seep through into Parliament. Members of Parliament would not accept that working people should be granted the vote, but they did recognise that the new towns and cities, including Manchester, should have some form of representation. The result was a bill introducing uniformity to the system, representing the communities of Britain. The legislation did not significantly increase the size of the electorate but reformers swung behind it as the first step towards enfranchisement.

When the House of Lords attempted to block the bill in October 1831, unrest broke out in Nottingham and Derby. In Bristol a mob ran riot for three days. Peterloo had sparked the popular imagination for parliamentary reform, and the public would not accept stalling from the Lords.

Although the 1832 Reform Act was relatively timid, it abolished many of the rotten boroughs and granted representation to new industrial towns like Manchester. It also started the move towards decision-making based to a degree on public opinion rather than special interests of the traditional ruling class, even if the section of the public in question was small. The new industrialist and merchant classes were strengthened in opposition to the old landed gentry. It is no surprise, therefore, that MPs repealed the Corn Laws in 1846. MPs representing new money had made their breakthrough into the parliamentary system. It was in their interests to overturn the economic order built by the landowning class for their own benefit.

The 1832 Act did not settle the issue of suffrage, and popular support for male enfranchisement quickly began to organise. In 1838, the People's Charter was published, with six demands:

- (1) universal manhood suffrage;
- (2) a secret ballot;
- (3) annual elections;
- (4) equal constituencies;
- (5) wages for Members of Parliament;
- (6) abolition of the property qualification for standing to be an MP.

Working-class people swung behind these calls in their millions, creating the Chartist movement. Other campaigns were drawn under the Chartist banner as working-class social and religious

reformers embraced democratic empowerment as the key to social and economic transformation. Among them was the early trade union movement, stemming from the 1834 deportation of the Tolpuddle Martyrs; agricultural workers persecuted for organising to win better working conditions.



—fig.2.1

Chartist methods focused on mobilising mass support for their aims through petitions and rallies. The first petition, in 1839, amassed 1.25 million signatures. The second, in 1842, recorded over 3 million. When these were rejected by Parliament, popular unrest followed and was crushed. The third and final big push of the Chartists came in 1848, inspired by revolutions in Europe.

It is no coincidence that support for the Chartists waxed and waned with economic conditions. During periods of depression, from 1839 to 1842 and briefly in 1848, working-class support for parliamentary reform blossomed. Again, reform movements were underpinned by the understanding that economic emancipation could only occur in a democratic system that gave people access to political power. This theme is most clearly visible, and calls for democratic rights most urgent, in times of intolerable economic hardship.

Although the Chartists declined in the 1850s, a period of relative economic growth, the tide had turned in Parliament. By the 1860s, most MPs recognised the need for parliamentary reform and popular

pressure began to recover. The more middle-class Reform Union formed in 1864, followed by the working-class Reform League in 1865. The League soon had 60,000 members and over 400 branches.² Reformers realised their chance and undertook high profile agitation. In 1866, a national rally in Hyde Park was banned by the Commissioner of Police, resulting in large crowds breaking down the railings and surging into the park. In 1867, MPs passed the Second Reform Act, extending the electorate by over 80 per cent by granting the vote to householders in the urban boroughs and lowering barriers to enfranchisement. In 1884, these reforms were extended to the rural counties, almost doubling the electorate.³

For the first time, significant numbers of working-class voters had access to the ballot. This had a profound effect on politics. Politicians began to speak in terms of 'the man in the street'⁴ and previously radical proposals gained traction. In 1870, for example, W E Forster's Education Act made elementary education available to all children in England and Wales, with secondary education following in 1902. In 1890, the Housing of the Working Class Act allowed London's councils to build houses and clear slums. Parliament was beginning to raise issues concerning working-class people. In 1906, this process picked up pace. The Liberal Party struck a deal with Labour to unite the anti-Conservative vote, resulting in the reforming Liberal government which began to lay the foundations of the modern welfare state. This culminated in the 'People's Budget' of 1909. For the first time, a budget was written with the express intent of redistributing wealth to the poorest. While many social factors affected political culture up until 1909, it is certain that this budget would not have been proposed without the reforms of 1867 and 1884. Widening access to democracy had led to an economic policy that began to address the interests of the many.

Women had been far from absent from the debates about suffrage. Although the reformers at Peterloo and in Chartist campaigns were calling for universal male suffrage, women played a crucial role, both as activists and supporters. At St Peter's Field in 1819, for example, one of the most prominent and frequently recorded banners was that of the Manchester Female Reformer's Union. Women also formed Chartist Associations, both to support the aims of the charter and to call for the inclusion of women in its aims.



– fig.2.2

The Great Reform Act had mostly excluded women from the vote, and the main thrust of the Left in the 19th century was working men's - rather than women's - enfranchisement. Emulating the methods of the Chartists, suffragists organised mass campaigns, rallies and petitions as well as joining and forming trade unions. In 1897, the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies was formed. Six years later, the organisation split, with the more radical suffragettes forming the Women's Social and Political Union. Suffragettes used famously disruptive methods, including interrupting meetings, damaging property and going on hunger strike. Their protests were brutally suppressed by the Government, with around 1,000 women being imprisoned between 1905 and 1914.⁵

By 1918 most MPs supported women's enfranchisement, and the government feared the revival of a violent suffragette campaign after World War I. The first property-owning women were granted the vote in 1918 as part of the 1918 Reform Act, alongside universal male enfranchisement.

The 1918 Reform Act marked a turning point in politics. For women, this

meant a slew of bills dealing with women's issues. Although the voting age was not equalised until 1928, and few women were elected as MPs until the 1990s, the legislation passed in this period was far more advanced than previous attempts to deal with women's concerns. As Millicent Fawcett noted, there were only four pieces of significant legislation relating to women between 1900 and 1918, compared to at least 21 in the decade following enfranchisement.⁶ Once again, access to democratic representation proved the most powerful means of producing political change.

Universal male suffrage meant a more working-class electorate than ever before. Those who won the vote in 1918 were disproportionately in industrial and working-class areas, especially mining communities. It was in these areas that the Labour Party thrived after 1918.⁷ Working-class people had broken into the system and were now able to assert themselves politically, eventually allowing them to build the welfare state, National Health Service and public education system. Although Labour did not form a majority government until 1945, the roots of the left's political rise can be clearly traced to enfranchisement reforms years before.

The Peterloo Massacre of 1819 began a century of political reform. At each stage, from Peterloo to 1832, the Chartists to 1867, and women's suffrage campaigns to 1928, it took time for popular support to force Parliament to grant extensions to democracy, but without these campaigns we would not have the democratic rights we have today.

But it is not just democracy itself that these campaigns improved; they also improved the social and economic conditions of those who gained democratic rights. When ordinary people gain access to political institutions, they shape the policies that affect their lives in at least two ways:

- They can influence the politicians who are already in Parliament, who need their votes if they want to remain in office. Examples include the People's Budget, initiated by the Liberals but aimed squarely at the partially enfranchised working class, and legislation affecting women's rights, passed by male MPs after women won the vote.

- They can elect new politicians who share their identity, concerns and priorities. Examples of this include the repeal of the Corn Laws under Robert Peel, the first Prime Minister from an industrialist background, and the ascent of the Labour Party following working-class enfranchisement.

In these ways, advances in democracy allowed ordinary people to assert themselves, bringing about policies and outcomes in their own interests and in those of their communities.

These reforms were not granted easily, as some may believe. They were begrudgingly passed by an establishment that understood the power of the vote, and only once popular support had become too potent to suppress. That is also why, unlike many countries that had full-blown revolutions, Britain is left with many aspects of its outdated system.

The FPTP electoral system was retained as a constraint on the power of popular opinion, as was the House of Lords. Although the voting age was equalised for men and women in 1928, and then reduced to 18 in 1969, the path to democracy is not over – and the spirit of reformers who came before us lives on.

3 | **Democratic inequality in 21st century Britain**

The trouble is, every vote counts... and that is what's so fundamentally different from our normal election pattern.

– Iain Duncan Smith, 23 June 2016

As well as expanding the franchise, the 1918 Reform Act cemented the use of the First Past the Post (FPTP) electoral system with single-member constituencies.¹ Under this system, the country is divided into areas which each elect just one MP by a simple plurality of votes. In each constituency, the candidate with the most votes only needs one more vote than their nearest rival in order to win, irrespective of whether most people voted for them.

Having voted under this system for many years, it is easy for people in the UK to assume it is a typical form of democracy. However, it is highly unusual among comparable nations. Although 45 countries fill all the elected seats in their main legislative chambers using single-member FPTP constituencies, 39 are former colonies or territories of the British Empire, almost half are tiny states or dependencies of less than a million inhabitants, and just three are recognised as developed democracies: Canada, the UK and the US.

Suffrage campaigners put equality at the heart of their campaigns: equal access to the ballot, equal voting rights for women, equal constituencies. But inequality between voters is inherent to FPTP.

Voter inequality

Voter inequality is the varying value in people's votes, the concentration of democratic decision-making power in the hands of a relatively small percentage of the population, and resulting gap between the most influential and the least influential voters. It can be illustrated in several ways.

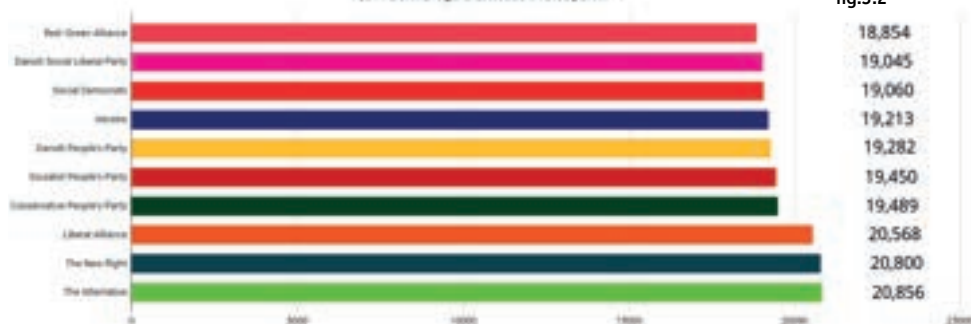
2017 German federal election: votes per MP

-fig.3.1



2019 Denmark general election: votes per MP

-fig.3.2



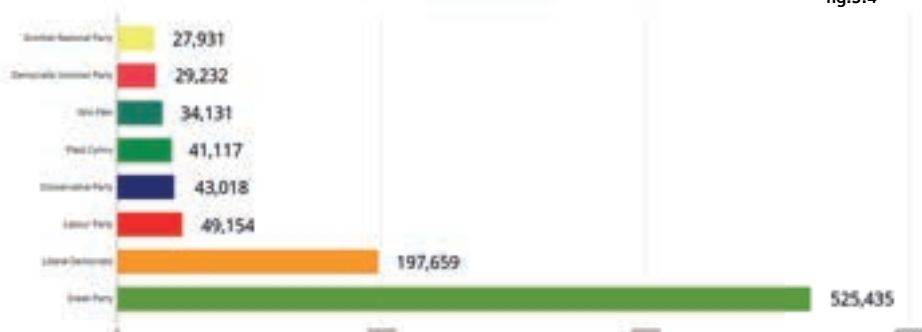
2019 UK general election: votes per MP

-fig.3.3



2017 UK general election: votes per MP

-fig.3.4



Parties

A simple and particularly notorious indicator of voter inequality is the number of votes cast per MP elected for each party, or *votes per MP*. In democracies that enjoy full voter equality, each party needs a very similar number of votes per MP. In democracies with broad voter equality, parties need broadly the same number of votes per MP, and so on.

In Germany's last federal election (fig.3.1), seven parties won seats in the Bundestag. The Greens averaged the lowest party votes per MP: 62,066. The Alternative for Germany averaged the highest votes per MP: 62,533. Votes per MP for the other five parties fell within this impressively tight range, indicating an extremely high degree of voter equality.²

Similarly, in the last Danish general election (fig.3.2), ten parties won seats in its parliament to represent Denmark proper's voters. Votes per MP ranged slightly more widely from 18,854 to 20,856.

In the UK (fig.3.3), however, the number of votes per MP varies wildly across political parties. The 2015 general election provides some staggering examples. The Democratic Unionist Party had the fewest votes per MP: 23,033. The UK Independence Party had the most: 3,881,099. If you voted for the DUP, your vote would have been worth over 168 times as much as a vote for UKIP.

The 2017 general election saw the Scottish National Party needing 27,931 votes per MP, while the Green Party needed 525,435.³ A vote for the SNP was worth 19 votes for the Greens. (fig.3.4)

These figures provide an indication of the dramatic levels of British voter inequality in comparison to more equal societies. The consequence of single-member constituencies and FPTP is that some voters have vastly more democratic influence than others. The biggest victims of this voter inequality have a tiny fraction of the influence over political decision making enjoyed by a privileged, or even an average, voter.

However, votes per MP is just one indicator of voter inequality and it does not always reveal the full picture. In particular, many people try to avoid wasting their votes by voting tactically for a candidate who is

not their preferred choice but is more likely to win in their constituency. This voting behaviour can result in less variation in the votes per MP for each party, but without reducing the underlying inequality that motivates it. In 2017, 20-30 per cent of people said they would vote tactically,⁴ accounting for much of the reduced variation compared to 2015. In very deeply entrenched two-party systems, like the United States Congress, votes for third parties are so clearly wasted - and therefore so rare - that the number of votes per MP can appear quite benign.

To reveal a fuller picture of voter inequality, we have to observe how political parties seek to exploit it during elections.

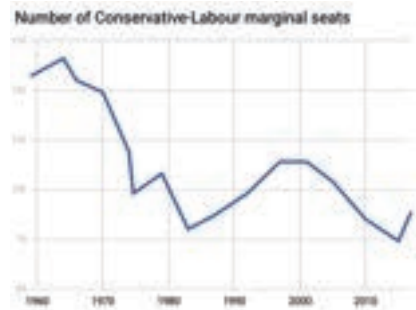
Safe and marginal seats

The candidate with the most votes can beat their nearest rival by anything from a single vote to tens of thousands of votes, but in each case it has the same result: the election of a single MP. Parties therefore have an incredibly powerful incentive to focus on the constituencies that are very close races. In these seats, they may need to win over only a handful of voters to elect an MP, whereas in another constituency they would have to persuade many thousands of voters.

Put bluntly, when any given British general election is viewed in isolation, the optimal strategy for any given party in is as follows:

- Give zero attention to constituencies you have very little chance of winning.
- Give zero attention to constituencies you have very little chance of losing.
- Give all your attention to constituencies you might either win or lose.

After a long-term decline since World War II, the number of marginal seats reached a new low in 2015, when just 120 seats were won by a margin of less than 10 per cent.⁵ Despite a slight uptick following the 2017 general



-fig.3.5

election, they remain a small minority: 169 seats, meaning just a quarter of constituencies are reasonably competitive. Most constituencies were won by a majority of more than 10,000 votes. Parties are therefore incentivised to focus their attention overwhelmingly on a small number of constituencies, which are home to a correspondingly small proportion of the electorate.⁶

Activists

The behaviour of political parties reveals that they, perfectly rationally, place vastly greater value on voters in marginal seats than on everyone else. Parties have long encouraged and enabled activists to travel to marginal constituencies where they can engage with the rare and powerful voters who may change the course of an election. In contrast, no party would expend resources bussing activists into a seat like Knowsley in the foreseeable future, won by a majority of 42,214 in 2017. This is because they are confident that any voters their activists might win over there would have zero impact on the election result.

The battle bus has been a fixture of political campaigning since the late 1970s, but in the 21st century technology is allowing parties to exploit the widely varying value in people's votes more intensively than ever before. For the 2017 general election, Momentum mapped voter inequality, identified the voters of greatest value to the Labour Party, and launched an online campaign tool called My Nearest Marginal. During the campaign Momentum told members this was, "the first time any organisation has used this kind of technology in a general election".⁷

By the eve of the election the website listed 171 marginal constituencies,⁸ again approximately a quarter of UK seats. Not only had Momentum encouraged activists to prioritise these constituencies over the other three quarters, but a volunteer car pool service was provided to get them there easily, cheaply and off the books of the official (and legally regulated) campaign budget. An accompanying telephone canvassing app allowed activists to "call Momentum members in key marginals to get them trained up and out on the doorstep."

By the end of the campaign, "My Nearest Marginal had attracted more than 100,000 unique visitors", and, "Nearly 10,000 Momentum activists knocked on 1.2 million doors on Election Day."⁹ Most of these doors undoubtedly belonged to the targeted voters in marginal constituencies.



– fig.3.6

Any political party that is serious about winning seats in British general elections understands that FPTP creates huge voter inequality. All come up with strategies to identify, reach and optimise engagement with privileged voters, while seeking to limit and reduce the energy wasted on the majority whose votes are ineffective and irrelevant to the election outcome. Momentum's energetic approach to this task provides a particularly vivid illustration of one such strategy and demonstrates how technology is enabling parties to exploit voter inequality with growing efficiency.

Campaign spending

As well as targeting high-value voters with activist footfall, parties have a strong incentive to focus their campaign spending on marginals. The optimal campaign spending campaign budget would be as follows:

- Spend 0 per cent of your budget in constituencies you have very little chance of winning.
- Spend 0 per cent of your budget in constituencies you have very little chance of losing.
- Spend 100 per cent of your budget in constituencies you might either win or lose.

In practice, regulation limits how much parties can spend on their national campaign and in individual constituencies, and local branches are likely to raise and spend at least some money to support their candidates even in unwinnable seats. However, within these limits parties vary their spending to best exploit voter inequality: spending more on high value voters and little on ineffective ones.

In a detailed study of campaign spending in the 2010 general election, the Electoral Reform Society showed that the amount of money spent on winning a single vote varied between £3.07 and 14p, meaning that some voters were valued 22 times higher than others.¹⁰ The seats on which the most money was spent were “a set of highly competitive races” (albeit including one or two unusual cases). On the other hand, the least valued seats were all safe or ultrasafe. The 50 seats with the highest spending produced an average majority of just 1.3 per cent, while the 50 with the lowest spending averaged a majority of 41.9 per cent. Spending per vote was 162 per cent higher across the top 50 seats compared to the bottom 50.

Another study examined spending by the three major parties at every general election from 1997 to 2017 and confirmed that in every case parties spent the least on average in seats in which they began the campaign furthest behind, with Conservatives and Labour also spending significantly less in seats they were defending by a large margin.¹¹

The distribution of campaign spending has real consequences for constituencies and their voters. Safe seats¹² and low local spending¹³ are both uniformly associated with low turnout, owing to a lack of engagement with voters, with bleak implications for those voters’ faith and participation in democratic decision making. The distribution of parties’ campaign spending provides an objective measure of the stark voter inequality found in British general elections. Furthermore, it proves beyond doubt that parties are fully aware of this inequality.

Microtargeting

New innovations in social media, big data and targeted online content has opened up a new frontier in election campaigning, as well as a new dimension of voter inequality. Parties have always targeted not only marginal constituencies, but the swing voters within them: those who may be persuaded to vote a particular way, as opposed to those who have already made up their minds.

Historically, parties’ attempts to identify and influence these voters have been blunt instruments. Neighbourhoods could be broadly categorised as generally voting a particular way based on local knowledge, and canvassing could provide somewhat more detailed

information, but parties lacked both the data and the communication platforms to which they have access today.

In recent elections (and referendums), campaigners have precisely pinpointed persuadable voters in target seats, and delivered large volumes of bespoke content specifically designed to influence the target voter. In the 2015 general election, the Conservative Party worked with Facebook,¹⁴ who provided them, "with the means to reach the people that mattered: key demographics in marginal constituencies". They combined, "geographical targeting along constituency boundary lines, minimising wasted impressions and focusing ad delivery on adults who lived in - rather than simply visited or worked in - the most competitive constituencies", with audience segmentation to, "target messages to those with whom they would resonate", avoiding what they called "wasted impressions". Facebook claims that targeted videos were viewed 3.5 million times during the campaign, reaching 80.6 per cent of all Facebook users in the target constituencies.

Technology has advanced so rapidly in this area that it has outstripped campaign regulation, raising a host of questions around data acquisition, advert attribution, spending limits, and even legality. Here, we limit ourselves to the consequences for voter inequality. The UK has long suffered from inequality between voters in different constituencies. Technology is increasingly able to separate out and target the important voters within marginal seats, providing the means for parties to exploit a more nuanced dimension of voter inequality with great efficiency.

Voter poverty

Like all forms of inequality, voter inequality is a sliding scale: from the most privileged to the most disadvantaged. Those stuck at the lower end over the years and decades are people who have never had any influence over the result of a general election. This can be termed voter poverty.

There are 83 seats that the Conservatives have held continuously since 1979 (notwithstanding changes to the constituency boundaries

in some cases), and 78 seats that Labour has held continuously over the same period, amounting in total to a quarter of British constituencies. Consequently, anyone living in such a seat would have to be at least 58 or older to have participated in an election in which their constituency changed hands. Among these constituencies are some, like West Dorset, that have not changed hands since 1885.

Perhaps the most obvious examples of voter poverty are individuals who have lived in such seats for their whole lives and have never voted for the winning party. Their political views and their decisions at the ballot box have never had the slightest impact on how they are represented in Parliament, and consequently on how the country is governed.

However, people who vote for the winning candidate in ultrasafe seats also see the value of their vote diminished. Votes cast for winning candidates over and above what they needed to win the constituency have no more impact on Parliament than votes for losing candidates; and the safer the seat, the greater this number. Taken together, voters for losing candidates and surplus votes for winning candidates are *wasted votes*. They make up the vast majority of votes in our general elections. In 2017, 68 per cent of votes were wasted. In 2015, the figure was 74 per cent.

Democratic inequality is rife in 21st century Britain. Iain Duncan Smith was quite correct to suggest that some votes do not count in our general elections. Some count a great deal, others have a much lower value, and others still count for nothing at all. The strategic decisions made by political parties betray an acute awareness of this voter inequality and a meticulous approach to exploiting it. This behaviour is at once contemptible and perfectly rational for as long as FPTP remains in place. We must next consider who benefits from democratic inequality and what consequences it may have for wider society.

The alternative to democratic inequality: Proportional Representation

Countries with high levels of democratic equality achieve this by using systems of Proportional Representation (PR) to elect their legislatures. PR is any system that aims to ensure that seats match votes: the share of seats a party wins matches the share of the votes it receives.

Highly proportional systems can almost eliminate voter inequality. As we saw above, in Germany's Bundestag there is hardly any difference between the numbers of votes parties need to elect an MP, meaning a vote for any of the parties carries almost identical value.

Although most systems of PR retain geographical constituencies, the distinction between safe and marginal seats is eliminated or reduced so substantially that it can no longer play a decisive role in campaign decisions. Since votes are at least broadly equal in value wherever they are cast, parties do not have an incentive to seek out any privileged section of the electorate. On the contrary, they are obliged to reach out to as much of the voting public as possible.

For this reason, parties focus on mobilising members in their communities right across the country, rather than funnelling as many activists as possible into a handful of seats. Similarly, there is no reason for a party to spend twenty times as much money per voter in one part of the country than in another. Such behaviour goes from being the optimal strategy to being counterproductive. Data driven campaigning remains a new frontier under proportional voting systems, but since all votes count equally the disproportionate influence of micro-targeting is largely curtailed.

Importantly, PR abolishes voter poverty. No one is left feeling for years or decades on end that they have no impact on elections, no representation in Parliament and no influence over national decision-making. Indeed, voters in countries with PR are consistently more likely to report that their elections are fair, are more likely to say that politicians are responsive to their concerns, and report greater satisfaction with the system overall.¹⁵

PR is used in some form in 85 per cent of developed democracies. There are systems in use across the world, and in the UK's devolved assemblies and parliaments, that retain the constituency link (including single-member constituencies) and allow people to vote for candidates rather than just for party lists.

For more information on electoral systems, see Appendix B.

In July 2019, Make Votes Matter announced the historic "Good Systems Agreement": a cross-party consensus on the features that a new voting system for the House of Commons should deliver, and on the use of a citizen-led, deliberative process to select one. The agreement was signed by parties from across the political spectrum as well as the Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform and Labour, Conservative and Independent MPs.

To find out more, visit

www.makevotesmatter.org.uk/good-systems-agreement

4 | Who benefits from inequality?

One of the most striking features of industrialized majoritarian democracies in the postwar period has been their tendency to produce governments that are, in the long run, well to the right of what we might expect, given the parties' vote shares.

– Jonathan Rodden, 2019

As has been established, First Past the Post (FPTP) results in wide variation in the value of peoples' votes. The other side of this coin is that it results in parliaments that do not accurately reflect the votes cast.

For example, in the 2017 general election the Conservatives and the Democratic Unionist Party won a combined majority of seats, despite receiving just over 43 per cent of the votes, with 57 per cent voting against them. This is a reflection of the greater value of the votes cast for these two parties compared to votes for most other parties. Similarly, in 2015, three parties (the Green Party, the Liberal Democrats and UKIP) shared almost a quarter of the votes cast, but won only 1.5 per cent of seats between them. This reflects the incredibly low value that this quarter of the electorate's votes had.

In 2015, the Conservatives won a majority of seats with less than 37 per cent of the votes and, in 2005, Labour won 55 per cent of the seats with just 35 per cent of the votes. In each case, this reflects the higher value of these people's votes. In fact, most of the time since the passing of the Representation of the People Act 1918 Britain has had single-party majority governments that had the support of a minority of voters. While this may be the norm for Britain it rarely occurs in most democracies.

Some people view election results like these as a series of swings and roundabouts: that although the result may be unfair across individual constituencies or elections, the end result broadly evens out. However, this is not the case.

Right-wing bias

As set out by a group of eminent academics in the introduction to this report, "it is widely accepted by experts that First Past the Post has a

pronounced conservative bias. Countries with majoritarian systems have generally seen significantly more right-wing governments than those with systems of Proportional Representation." Political scientists established this by studying the outcomes of different electoral systems operating around the world over the decades.

A straightforward approach is to quantify the number years of left- and right-wing government experienced by countries using proportional and majoritarian electoral systems.¹ A study from 2006 by political scientists Torben Iversen and David Soskice showed that in 17 developed countries over 53 years, proportional systems produced left-wing governments 74 per cent of the time, and majoritarian systems (such as FPTP) produced right-wing governments 75 per cent of the time.² This suggests that democracies with high levels of voter inequality are much more likely to produce right-wing governments than those with low levels of voter inequality.

However, it is difficult to tell from this approach alone the effect that electoral systems have on the translation of votes into seats. It is possible that voters in proportional democracies voted more left-wing, while those in majoritarian democracies voted more right-wing.

An approach that provides a further insight, taken by Jonathan Rodden, is to measure the degree to which the parliaments and governments are to the left or the right of the actual votes cast. Rather than merely establishing what kind of governments countries with a particular system happen to have had in *absolute* terms, this method allows us to determine whether those governments were left or right *relative* to the voters: in other words, whether they are the result of a bias in the system.

He finds that:

*"...the European experience suggests that proportional representation creates no systematic bias in favor of either the right or the left. This may seem unremarkable on its own, but the contrast with majoritarian democracies is striking. **In every industrialized parliamentary democracy with majoritarian electoral institutions, averaging over the postwar period, the legislature has been well***

to the right of the voters, and in most cases, the cabinet has been even further to the right. ³

In other words, every developed country with high voter inequality has parliaments and governments that are on average significantly more right wing than its voters. In contrast, countries with low voter inequality exhibit no bias one way or the other. Those with low voter inequality have more left-wing governments, but this is because they lack the right-wing bias of countries with high voter inequality.

It is worth underlining the extent of the bias created by voter inequality. As Rodden finds, "while PR systems have been evenly split, two-thirds of governments formed during the postwar period in majoritarian democracies were parties of the right or center-right." Yet this is despite the fact that "left-of-center parties received slightly more votes than right parties in all of the majoritarian democracies but Japan and New Zealand [before the latter's transition to PR in 1996]."

Looking at the United Kingdom in particular, he finds, "If we add up the popular vote for every British parliamentary election held between 1950 and 2017, the Conservative Party has received around 41 per cent of the votes cast, and Labour is only slightly behind with 40 per cent." In 18 of the 19 general elections during this time, most votes went to parties to the left of the Conservatives. Yet, "the Conservatives have been in power for 63 per cent of that period."⁴

Strikingly, both France and New Zealand went through periods of both majoritarian elections with high voter inequality, and proportional elections with low voter inequality. France used PR until 1958 and then briefly again in 1986, while New Zealand abolished FPTP in the 1990s. In both countries, periods of high voter inequality produced, "a substantial bias in favour of the right, but this bias disappeared during periods of proportional representation". In New Zealand in particular, Rodden notes that "from World War II to 1993, even though the Labour Party received more votes overall, the National Party formed twelve governments, while Labour formed only five." However, since introducing PR, "New Zealand has resembled a [continental] European democracy in that the strength of Labour and other left parties in the legislature has matched their strength in the electorate."

Voter inequality creates a systematic right-wing bias in the electoral system. It is important to understand why this is the case. There are two complementary explanations.

Under-representation of urban progressives

Rodden points out that progressive parties around the world tend to pile up huge majorities in urban-industrial areas while losing by less substantial margins almost everywhere else. In proportional systems, in which votes are equal in value, this does not present any problems for progressive parties. To win more representation they simply need to win more votes, wherever they happen to be cast.

But under majoritarian systems this can be disastrous. Winning safe inner city seats by enormous margins does not mean a party can send more MPs to Parliament. In fact, as their majorities grow, so too does a party's average number of votes per MP: one of our key indicators of voter inequality.

This pattern can be acutely observed in the current UK Parliament. In the 2017 general election, the Labour Party won 34 of the 35 safest parliamentary seats, beating their nearest rival in each case by a margin of at least 50 per cent of the votes cast. All of these constituencies are primarily urban and most are inner city seats in places like Manchester, London or Merseyside. On the other hand, the safest Conservative seat is only the 37th safest.

In these 34 seats, Labour candidates received an additional 1,094,999 votes on top of the votes needed to beat their nearest rivals; a million votes that had no further impact on the makeup of Parliament. The average MP was elected with 27,670 votes, meaning that there were enough excess votes in Labour's 34 safest seats to win almost 40 additional average seats outright. Labour generally lost by a smaller but nonetheless clear margin across rural and suburban areas of the UK.

The same phenomenon made Donald Trump President in 2016, despite receiving nearly three million votes fewer than Hillary Clinton. The Democrats piled up huge majorities in urban centres, while the Republicans won the electoral college by winning narrow majorities

in suburban and rural areas. Nor was it the first time voter inequality had handed a right-wing candidate the Presidency despite losing the popular vote.

The value of progressive votes, in comparison to conservative votes, is on average significantly reduced by their inefficient distribution. That is why, in 2017, a 2.4 per cent lead in the popular vote for the Conservatives turned into an 8.5 per cent lead in seats. Not only does this indicate substantial voter inequality; it explains why that inequality builds in a right-wing bias.

The left has at times overcome this barrier by courting suburban voters, as New Labour successfully did. However, these are the exceptions. As Rodden shows, voter inequality has usually advantaged the right in the UK and all developed countries with majoritarian electoral systems. Ironically, the more radical the policies Labour adopts, the larger the proportion of its votes comes from the progressive hotbeds of its safe seats, the smaller the proportion that comes from less radical suburban marginals, and the more pronounced the bias against it becomes.

Class coalitions

Iversen and Soskice provide a complementary explanation for the right-wing bias of FPTP. They construct a model society with three equally sized social groups - low income, middle income and high income - in which everyone votes for a corresponding party: a low income, middle income or high income party.

Under a proportional system in which all votes count equally, the three parties win equal representation. The low and middle-income parties will usually be incentivised to cooperate and form governments to redistribute wealth from the high-income group.

However, under FPTP there is only space for two genuinely competitive parties. In this system, a left-of-centre government must draw together the support of both low- and middle-income voters behind a single cohesive policy platform. This is much more difficult. Pitch too far to the right and low-income votes will be lost to insurgent left-wing parties. This splits the left vote and hands victory to the right.

Move too far to the left, on the other hand, and some middle-income voters - including many democratically privileged voters in sub-urban marginal constituencies - begin to fear the tax rises that a low-income party might impose on them more than the public spending cuts put forward by the high-income party. Michael Becher expands on this, arguing that to convince middle-income voters that they will not raise taxes, left-wing parties select centrist candidates.⁵ Typically, enough of the middle-income voters feel that they have more to fear from tax rises than from reduced public spending for the high-income party to dominate the parliament.

Across the world, majoritarian democracies with high levels of voter inequality have uniformly exhibited a right-wing bias. As the academics said at the beginning of this report, "the available evidence suggests that countries which retain majoritarian systems should expect to see a greater frequency of right-wing governments in the future."

This because of the concentration of progressive voters in a smaller number of urban constituencies, where the value of their votes are diminished under FPTP, and due to the system requiring a functional electoral coalition spanning all the way from the left to the centre in order to win a progressive majority. We now turn to the impact of democratic inequality and the resulting right-wing bias on wider society.

– fig.4.1



– fig.4.2



Manchester then-and-now

In 1819, Manchester did not have a single MP. 200 years later, the City of Manchester area is represented in Parliament by MPs from five constituencies: Blackley and Broughton, Central, Gorton, Withington, and Wythenshawe and Sale East. However, Mancunian voters are still disadvantaged by democratic inequality.

These five seats are some of the safest seats in the country. In four of the five, Labour won more than 70 per cent of the vote. In the 5th, it won over 60 per cent. The average Labour majority in these five seats is over 25,000.

Local Labour activists may be pleased to win these seats by such margins, but under FPTP every vote above what is needed to win the seat is wasted. The 127,595 excess Labour votes across these five seats would be enough to comfortably win four average UK constituencies. Including votes for losing candidates, over 82 per cent of votes in inner Manchester had no impact on the final results of the election. The result of this concentration of progressive votes in urban centres like Manchester is a reduction in their average value, leading to a right-wing bias overall.

5| The consequences of equality and inequality

The Labour Party's position on electoral reform is unsustainable - I would go as far as to say contemptible. We need Proportional Representation. It is remarkable to have a progressive movement that is supporting First Past the Post.

– Yanis Varoufakis, 2018¹

The protestors at Peterloo understood that democratic equality is the key to economic and social equality. However, the UK continues to suffer from high levels of voter inequality. As established in the previous section, voter inequality skews politics consistently and substantially to the right, while voter equality creates a level playing field.

This section will review the evidence from political science showing that countries with low democratic inequality produce far less economic and social inequality. Countries with high democratic inequality, on the other hand, produce significantly more economic and social inequality. Furthermore, we present the results of original research showing the link between proportional electoral systems and 'economic democracy'.

There is much at stake. The negative impact of economic inequality is well-documented. Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett's seminal work, *The Spirit Level*, showed how a larger disparity between the richest and poorest has a toxicity that seems greater than the sum of its parts, spanning greater economic instability, lower life expectancy, higher crime rates and lower levels of interpersonal trust.² Income inequality undermines society and makes life worse for everyone, including those who supposedly benefit. However, inequality starts at the ballot box.

The key to policy making in the interests of the many, not the few, is representation. When the working-class men and women gained access to political representation, policy making gradually changed to accommodate them. With PR, underrepresented groups have greater access to political representation and politics is conducted in the interests of a broader section of society. By eliminating the voter

inequality which is inherent in FPTP, we can help build a more equal and prosperous society.

Income inequality, poverty gap, and social spending

There is a broad consensus amongst academics that PR countries tend to have lower income inequality. Numerous studies have found a "highly significant" relationship, finding that "being under proportional systems improves income equality relative to majoritarian or mixed systems"³; that "as the disproportionality of the electoral system increases, so does income inequality"⁴ and that "when the degree of proportionality of a system increases, inequality decreases"⁵. PR legislatures also tend to spend 2-3 per cent of GDP more on social security and welfare programmes, which reduce overall economic inequality, compared to majoritarian systems.⁶

Looking at actual levels of income equality across the 36 OECD nations, the 13 most equal all use systems of PR⁷. The three that use First Past the Post (FPTP) come 20th (Canada), 31st (UK) and 33rd (USA). In his comprehensive study of different democratic systems, Arend Lijphart finds that the average 'consensus' democracy, of which PR is a key feature, has a Gini index (a measure of income inequality) 9 points lower than the average majoritarian democracy.⁸

Economist Vincenzo Verardi finds similar results, as well as showing a lower percentage of people in poverty in countries with PR systems.⁹ Looking at the OECD data for poverty gap (a standard measure of relative poverty), the three FPTP countries come 19th (Canada), 32nd (UK) and 34th (USA) out of 36.¹⁰

Not only does FPTP perform badly in terms of creating economically equal societies, but in important respects it has a 100 per cent failure rate. Not a single developed country with our voting system has achieved even average levels of income equality or poverty gap. Voter inequality is a clear driver of economic inequality. This makes logical sense; when all votes count equally, voters elect politicians who make economic decisions that better represent the whole of society.

In *The path to democracy*, above, we identified that when ordinary people gain access to political institutions, they shape the policies that affect their lives in at least two ways:

- They can influence the politicians who are already in Parliament, who need their votes if they want to remain in office.
- They can elect new politicians who share their identity, concerns and priorities.

However, voter inequality can prevent ordinary people from influencing the policies they live under through either of these means.

In the first case, as Persson and Tabellini argue, FPTP “pulls in the direction of narrowly targeted programmes benefiting small geographic constituencies”.¹¹ Voter inequality means that parties simply do not need to garner support from particular sections of the population, which in turn means that these voters have very little ability to influence policy decisions. As a result, high levels of economic inequality are allowed to build up.

In the second case, the right-wing bias in high-voter-inequality countries makes it difficult for progressive voters to elect a proportional number of progressive MPs who share their desire to improve economic equality. Furthermore, the tendency of such countries to form two-party systems means that supporters of smaller progressive parties are less able to elect politicians who share their specific identity, concerns and priorities. Persson and Tabellini find that PR sees more coalition governments composed of parties representing different interests within the electorate, leading to higher levels of public spending overall precisely to address the needs of represented social groups, and consequently reducing inequality between them.

This view is supported by Vicki Birchfield and Markus Crepaz, who argue that as well as promoting policies that benefit broader sections of society, PR systems are specifically better suited to designing policies to tackle income inequality.¹² They argue that PR represents a ‘collective veto point’; reducing partisanship and increasing responsiveness and long-term decision making.

Economic democracy

The effect of proportional electoral systems on economic and political outcomes runs even deeper than inequality and poverty. Eliminating democratic inequality allows voters to take greater control of the economic decisions that affect them.

The Labour Party has placed great emphasis on “democratising the economy” in recent years. The Constitutional Convention pledged in the 2017 manifesto was intended to review where power lies in the economy as well as in politics. In 2018, the Shadow Chancellor pledged “the greatest extension of economic democratic rights that this country has ever seen”. And in 2019, the National Policy Forum ran a consultation on “Democratic Public Ownership”.

Economic democracy has been put forward by the left as a solution to many of the challenges facing the world, from the climate crisis to the rise of the far-right. It is also a left-wing approach to ‘taking back control’, by introducing democratic elements wherever possible in the economy.

In some of the most obvious respects, the level of economic democracy is already known to be significantly higher in countries with low voter inequality: trade unions are, “far more influential in countries with proportional electoral systems. Laws are more favorable to labor unions, larger shares of workers are unionized, and the process through which collective bargaining takes place is far more centralized.”¹³

A 2018 report by Politics For The Many illustrated how FPTP created a one-sided tug-of-war on workers’ rights in the UK, with majority governments introducing increasingly restrictive statutory obligations for trade unions. Laws to restrict trade unions in 1980, 1984, 1988, 1993 and 2016 were introduced immediately after elections that delivered majority governments, elected on a minority of the vote, and were vehemently opposed by the unions themselves. This stands in contrast to many proportional democracies, where trade unions are not only less restricted, but are relied upon to play an active and collaborative role in policy making, whoever is in office.

This has consequences, with all the EU countries that have a combination of embedded trade union rights, high union density and collective bargaining coverage, achieving what they have through proportional electoral systems. The UK, on the other hand, has the 3rd lowest coverage of collective bargaining, around average levels of union density, and trade unions law that is “frequently described as the most restrictive in the western world”.¹⁴

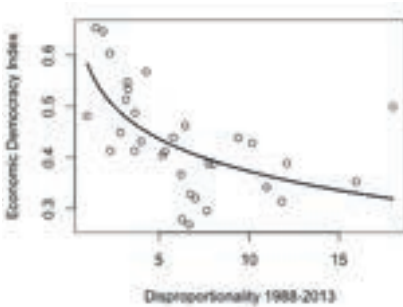
However, we can reveal that the amount of economic democracy enjoyed by a given society is powerfully correlated with the level of democratic inequality in its political system. Progressive parties face an uphill struggle when they try to introduce or retain economic democracy under majoritarian electoral systems, just as they do when trying to increase economic equality.

Researchers at the University of Glasgow and Nottingham Trent University have constructed an international Economic Democracy Index (EDI) to explore the relationship between economic democracy and key public policy goals.¹⁵ This section of the report presents the results of original research which shows the link between the proportionality of electoral systems and EDI.

So far, EDI scores are available for 32 OECD nations based on data up to 2013. The country with the highest EDI score, meaning the country with most economic democracy, is Denmark (0.653) and the lowest is Slovakia (0.269).

Rank	Country	Economic Democracy Index
1	Denmark	0.653
2	Sweden	0.646
3	Austria	0.603
4	Luxembourg	0.567
5	Norway	0.547
6	Finland	0.533
7	Switzerland	0.513
8	France	0.499
9	Slovenia	0.487
10	Netherlands	0.481
11	New Zealand	0.462
12	Iceland	0.449
13	Ireland	0.439
14	South Korea	0.438
15	Germany	0.431
16	Australia	0.428
17	Belgium	0.413
18	Israel	0.413
19	Portugal	0.412
20	Estonia	0.404
21	Canada	0.388
22	Italy	0.388
23	Poland	0.387
24	Spain	0.367
25	UK	0.353
26	Hungary	0.342
27	Chile	0.328
28	Czech Rep	0.320
29	Japan	0.314
30	Greece	0.296
31	US	0.279
32	Slovakia	0.269

– fig 5.1  = First Past the Post  = other majoritarian or deeply flawed PR.¹⁶



–fig.5.2

Our analysis shows that more proportional electoral systems tend to have higher levels of economic democracy. By looking simply at the relationship between PR and EDI, we find that between the least proportional systems and the most proportional systems, one can expect EDI to increase by 0.197. To put this in context, if Britain's EDI score increased by that amount, we would go from 25th highest to 6th highest.

A simple linear regression model like this is something of a blunt instrument, but it shows that the correlation we are talking about is a strong one. Using a more sophisticated model,¹⁷ we show that when development and population size are held constant, there remains a statistically significant relationship between PR and EDI. The probability of this relationship occurring by coincidence is less than 1 per cent. If the UK had a system as proportional as Germany's, for example, but its development and population size stayed the same, our EDI score would be predicted to improve to 0.443, the 14th highest out of 32. Again, this would be a big improvement from 25th.

Once again, the explanation is that voter inequality subverts the ability of sections of the population – and working people in particular – to influence politics through either of these means we identified.

First, FPTP limits the extent to which voters can influence the politicians who are already in Parliament. While PR incentivises politicians to make policies that benefit a broader section of society, including workers and the unions that in many cases represent them, FPTP encourages politicians to focus intensely on the small number of privileged voters in marginal seats. The traditional bastions of the urban-industrial working class are generally ultra-safe left-wing seats. Right-wing parties cannot hope to win these, so they have no incentive to moderate their policies in a way that appeals to the overwhelmingly left-of-centre voters who live there. On the other hand, the major progressive party in any such country often play

down their support for trade unions rights and radical ideas about democratising the economy, in the hope of winning over centrist voters in the suburban marginals.

Second, FPTP at least partially prevents working people from electing new politicians who share their concerns and priorities because of the system's right-wing bias (as described in *Who benefits from inequality?* above). PR leads to greater levels of economic democracy because it allows parties that support cooperative economic principles to elect representatives corresponding to their level of public support. Furthermore, as Salomon Orellana argues,¹⁸ proportional systems result in a greater diversity of parties in Parliament, bringing a greater diversity of perspectives into the policy-making process, and leading to a more sophisticated political debate and consideration of innovative new policies.¹⁹

PR countries are better placed to introduce elements of economic democracy: through a combination of greater representation of left-of-centre parties in government; collective decision making, leading to reduced partisanship; and diversity of political representation, leading to greater sophistication and consideration of new ideas. By introducing an electoral system that eliminates voter inequality, we can begin to build a political and economic system that works in the interests of the many, not the few.

Proportional Representation can be transformative

By reducing democratic inequality, levelling the playing field of general elections and making parties and parliaments more responsive to the needs of the whole electorate, Proportional Representation can be transformative. As well as those set out above, political science has identified the beneficial role Proportional Representation plays in bringing about the following progressive outcomes.

Top trumps: voting systems vs outcomes

United States²⁰



Legislature	Congress
Electoral system	First Past the Post

Income inequality	High (0.391)
Poverty gap	High (0.398)
Economic democracy	Low (0.279)
Trade union density	Low (11.3 per cent)
Collective bargaining coverage	Low (7 per cent)
Level of collective bargaining	Company

Finland



Legislature	Eduskunta
Electoral system	Proportional Representation

Income inequality	Low (0.259)
Poverty gap	Low (0.210)
Economic democracy	High (0.533)
Trade union density	High (74 per cent)
Collective bargaining coverage	High (91 per cent)
Level of collective bargaining	National

United Kingdom



Legislature	Houses of Parliament
Electoral system	First Past the Post

Income inequality	High (0.351)
Poverty gap	High (0.355)
Economic democracy	Low (0.353)
Trade union density	Low (26 per cent)
Collective bargaining coverage	Low (29 per cent)
Level of collective bargaining	Company

Denmark



Legislature	Folketing
Electoral system	Proportional Representation

Income inequality	Low (0.263)
Poverty gap	Moderate (0.310)
Economic democracy	High (0.653)
Trade union density	High (67 per cent)
Collective bargaining coverage	High (80 per cent)
Level of collective bargaining	Industry

Long-term planning

While single-party majority government may lead to 'fast' decision making, this does not necessarily lead to 'wise' policies.²¹ Without proper debate and scrutiny, countries with single-party majority governments have a tendency to implement poorly thought-through policies which lack broad public support. The Thatcher government, for example, pushed through hugely unpopular policies such as the poll tax, safe in the knowledge that they could be re-elected without the support of most voters.

Patrick Dunleavy argues that FPTP produces politicians who are incentivised to score points against each other and who can dominate the legislature to silence criticisms, rather than engage constructively with policy making.²² Markus Crepaz also finds that single-party majorities are more likely to work for short-term partisan gain – for example, cutting taxes before a general election – which is not possible when working as a coalition with multiple parties.

Coalitions can also make policy making more consistent between different governments. In two-party systems, the alternation of governments leads to frequent policy reversals. With PR, coalition governments represent a larger proportion of voters. Crepaz has shown that a result of this is that the average of each party's interests tend to converge with the general interest of the country.²³ This consensus-building process makes policies more likely to be retained where they are performing well, because a greater coalition of support – amongst politicians and voters – has been built behind them.

The result is that policy-making under multi-party PR systems takes a more long-term approach, with governments free to view issues across multiple election cycles, rather than from a short-term perspective. Housing and social care, for example, would have been less likely to reach their current crisis points had British parties been able to build consensus around long-term responses to these crucial issues.

Environmental policies

Taking a long-term view is crucial for climate policy because the effects of climate change may not be fully felt until it is too late to tackle them. If politicians under PR are able to take a view longer than one election cycle, and policies are more likely to be embedded in the long-term, initiatives to tackle the climate crisis are far more likely to be successful.

Salomon Orellana compared proportionality with countries' percentage change in CO₂ emissions per capita between 1990 and 2007, as well as their Environmental Performance Index (EPI) score.²⁴ He found that countries with a pure PR system could expect an 11 per cent improvement in their CO₂ emissions reduction, compared to countries with majoritarian systems. They could also expect a 4.5 per cent higher EPI score.²⁵ Economist Vincenzo Verardi found that countries that use PR are significantly more likely to be members of intergovernmental environmental organisations, agreements and treaties, even when controlling for other factors.²⁶

Furthermore climate action, like welfare spending, has traditionally been backed by 'diffuse interests', with supporters dispersed evenly across the UK. Whereas in proportional democracies people who are concerned about the climate can rely on being represented in parliament, their diffuse distribution actively works against them under FPTP. Many MPs represent constituencies that include major employers in environmentally harmful industries. From an electoral perspective, these MPs are highly incentivised to support policies that protect or subsidise these industries.

The greater representation of environmental issues in proportional democracies can even influence public attitudes. Research has shown that having a more diverse range of parties standing for election, getting elected and taking part in debates, feeds new information into a country's political debate and influences public attitudes.²⁷ This in turn can improve voters' ability to consume new information and act rationally in response.²⁸ As a result, countries

with purely proportional systems can expect to have 9 per cent higher public support for environmental protections than those with FPTP.

Global conflict

We now come to one of the most surprising findings by political scientists, that countries that use PR are less likely to go to war. Steve Chan and David Leblang go as far as to say that “a country’s electoral system turns out to be the most important institutional factor that dampens war involvement”, when considering why established democracies start, join or remain involved in foreign conflicts.²⁹

In countries with majoritarian systems, the decision to go to war can be made unilaterally by a single party that received a minority of the vote. On the other hand, countries with PR tend to have governments based on the support of a majority of voters, made up of multiple parties. This creates “multiple veto points”, meaning there are a larger number of parties, representing a larger number of voters, who need to be in agreement before such a serious decision is taken.

As Chan and Leblang make clear, this area requires further study, but their findings are illustrative of an important point: in proportional democracies, decisions with potentially grave consequences require the consent of the majority of voters. With FPTP they do not.

Equal opportunities

The indicators of democratic inequality considered so far deal with the amount of power each voter has. The use of FPTP gives rise to a separate form of democratic inequality: the opportunity different people and groups have to enter Parliament as MPs.

Underlying this is the incentive political parties have to select the one candidate they deem most likely to be elected in their single-member constituency. Central party officials, local party members, and the electorate themselves can all have preconceptions and

prejudices - subconscious or otherwise - about the characteristics of a "safe pair of hands". Typically, parties are more likely to select well-off, university-educated, white men.

Perversely, this effect is compounded in both safe and marginal seats. Safe seats are overwhelmingly held by male incumbents who will often remain in place until retirement, preventing new female politicians from entering Parliament.³⁰ In marginal seats, in which a tiny number of votes can change the outcome, parties are under enormous pressure to choose a perceived safe pair of hands.

The consequence is a curb in the diversity of Parliament across the board, including ethnicity, gender, age and wealth. In contrast, PR with multi-member constituencies incentivises parties to put forward the broadest range of candidates to appeal to all sections of the electorate.

For example, the Labour Party was criticised in early 2019 for selecting just six BAME candidates for its top 99 target seats. This is in the context of just 8 per cent of current MPs coming from an ethnic minority background, compared with 14 per cent of the UK population.³¹ It is inconceivable that Labour would select such homogenous candidates in a proportional election with multi-member constituencies. In fact, in the 2019 European Parliamentary elections (under PR) 26 per cent of Labour's candidates, and 20 per cent of those elected, came from a BAME background.

Similarly, numerous studies have confirmed that proportional democracies are more likely to elect women MPs than those with FPTP. The Inter-Parliamentary Union found that worldwide in 2018, women won 26.5 per cent of the seats in elections that used PR or mixed systems compared with 20 per cent of the seats in chambers elected through majoritarian systems.³² In 2016, the figures were even more stark, with women winning 24.4 per cent in PR or mixed systems compared with 15 per cent in majoritarian ones.³³

In keeping with this, 47 per cent of UK MEPs are women, compared to 32 per cent of MPs in the House of Commons. Just 29 per cent of the MPs Scotland sends to Westminster are women, while 35 per cent of the proportionally elected Scottish Parliament is female. Similarly, 33 per cent of Welsh MPs are women, compared to 47 per cent of the proportional Welsh Assembly. The proportional Northern Ireland Assembly is less diverse, with just 30 per cent of its members being female, but this is still an improvement on the 28 per cent of Northern Irish Westminster constituencies held by women. Similarly, countries with systems of PR elect around twice as many young MPs (defined as below the age of 30) as those with mixed systems, and a staggering 15–20 times as many as those with majoritarian systems.³⁴

FPTP creates a perverse incentive to select candidates that are seen as a safe pair of hands, rather than candidates who reflect the diversity and experiences of society. The result is a systematic restriction on the ability of marginalised groups to enter Parliament.

6 | Understanding democratic socialism

Democracy is at the heart of our socialism – and extending it should always be our goal.

– John McDonnell, 2018¹

The findings of this report reveal a fundamental misunderstanding at the heart of the Labour Party. Democratic socialists believe that democracy itself gives rise to an equal society: one in which wealth, power and opportunity are in the hands of the many, not the few.

It is this that makes democracy, as Tony Benn said, “the most revolutionary thing in the world”. When there are many people who have less, and few people who have much, democracy allows the many to use their votes to take political power, and use it to reshape society in the interests of their communities.

But this only follows when everyone has a vote that counts equally. When different people’s votes have different values, there is every chance that the few can outvote the many.

Instead of empowering the many, majoritarian voting systems like First Past the Post (FPTP) have consistently produced parliaments and governments that are well to the right of the majority of voters. This is not only the case in the UK, but in every developed country that uses such systems. Across the board, democratic inequality has led to (and entrenched) economic and social inequality.

It seems likely that few in the Labour Party genuinely believe that FPTP performs well on purely democratic grounds. A common position held privately by some senior Labour politicians, and advocated publicly by some party activists, pressure groups and trade unions, goes as follows:

First Past the Post may be less democratic, but because it allows us to win majorities and govern without compromising, it is a better way to create a society ‘for the many’ - so a bit less democracy is a price worth paying.

What this report has shown is that this trade-off is a grave mistake. It is true that FPTP is much less democratic than proportional systems,

but there are no benefits to compensate for this. Rather than making an egalitarian society more likely, our voting system has precisely the opposite effect. Instead of trading a measure of democracy for a measure of social and economic equality, advocates of this position have calamitously undermined both.

In *Why Cities Lose*, Jonathan Rodden addresses the question of why progressive parties have not used their "occasional moments in the sun" to introduce Proportional Representation in all developed countries, given that it so clearly benefits the people they exist to represent.² He speculates that, "leaders of urban parties of the left are often longstanding incumbents with safe seats. It is easy to understand why they might not want to exchange their power and influence for the uncertainty associated with major reform..."

Here, Rodden's assessment is too harsh. One of the remarkable things about the political debate over electoral reform is that it has long taken place in almost total isolation from the evidence of the socioeconomic outcomes different systems produce. *The Many Not The Few*, published in 2017, appears to have been the first systematic attempt to bridge the gap between the two previously separate discussions. Even Labour supporters of electoral reform were surprised to discover the true benefits of the change they had long argued for on purely democratic grounds. It is likely that senior Labour politicians have simply not been aware of the systematic harm that FPTP inflicts upon the communities they fight for.

But now they are. Since 2017, over 10 per cent of Constituency Labour Parties have passed resolutions in favour of Proportional Representation, joining the third of Labour MPs who have publicly stated their support. At the GMB Union's 2019 annual conference, debate of a motion in favour of Proportional Representation was dominated (on both sides) by arguments about the societal outcomes that different systems deliver. Pressure groups such as Open Labour have adopted policy in favour of PR, citing the conservative bias of FPTP and egalitarian societies built elsewhere on the back of equal votes. It is no longer possible to ignore the fact that FPTP has had exactly the opposite effect to the one ascribed to it by its longstanding Labour advocates.

In every other area of public policy, the Labour Party fiercely advocates the principle of equality: in education, health, wealth, identity and social justice. It does so because it understands that equality produces better outcomes for everyone. It is time that Labour extended this principle to the ballot box, acknowledged the democratic inequality imposed by FPTP, and recognised that a democratic system based on inequality will never, in the long run, create an equal society. It is time for Labour to embrace Proportional Representation.



A poster from Switzerland's campaign for Proportional Representation, which succeeded in 1918. Democratic equality is shown as an issue of social and economic justice.
– fig.6.1

7 | Myths about Proportional Representation

Politics should not be about scoring points. It should be about getting things done, making politicians listen and making votes count.

– Mo Mowlam

Given the shortfalls of First Past the Post (FPTP) and the success of many Proportional Representation (PR) systems around the world, the question must be asked: why does the UK not already have PR?

The electoral system has been a subject of debate since the first pushes for democracy, with amendments advocating primitive forms of PR being proposed for each of the great Reform Acts between 1832 and 1918. In Europe, PR was adopted by Belgium (1899), Finland (1906), Sweden (1907), Denmark (1915), Switzerland (1918), Austria (1918), Italy (1919) and Germany (1919).¹ However, unlike most of our European neighbours, Britain failed to adopt PR when the franchise was expanded.

There are a number of myths that are frequently used to oppose electoral reform.

Myth #1 - the AV referendum

Opponents of PR often point to the 2011 referendum on the Alternative Vote (AV) as evidence that the public has rejected electoral reform.

However, AV is not a proportional system and does nothing to address voter inequality. Although MPs must win majority support within their constituencies, the system keeps the single-member seats that cause huge disproportionality. The similar two-round system used in France, for example, recently delivered 61 per cent of seats to Macron's En Marche party, for just 32 per cent of first-preference votes. *For more information on electoral systems, see Appendix B.*

A cross-party amendment to include proportional systems as options in the Referendum was voted down by sitting MPs. The results of the referendum were precisely what you'd expect when people know they're being offered a rigged choice between two bad options: most people stayed at home. Turnout was just 42 per cent. Less than 29 per cent of the electorate came out to defend FPTP.

Myth #2 - the constituency link

Another common myth presented by opponents of PR is that FPTP is the best way of representing local constituencies. This assumes that each local constituency should be represented by one individual, despite the fact that one individual can never represent all of the views of their constituents at once.

Under FPTP, MPs can be elected with a small minority of votes and be expected to speak for all of their constituents. In Ceredigion, for example, 71 per cent of voters supported someone other than the winning MP in 2017. In 2015, the MP for Belfast South was elected with just 24.5 per cent of the votes.

All of the PR systems proposed for use in our general elections retain or strengthen the constituency link. Multi-member districts mean a group of MPs can better reflect the range of views in a constituency. Using the Scottish Additional Member System, for example, each voter has one local constituency MSP plus seven regional MSPs who are accountable to them. Under the Single Transferable Vote (STV), which is used in Northern Ireland Assembly and the Republic of Ireland's Dáil Éireann, constituencies return a small, representative group of local MPs for each area. *For more information on electoral systems, see Appendix B.*

Myth #3 - 'unaccountable' MPs

Opponents of PR also claim that proportional systems lead to lists of candidates dictated by party bosses, removing their accountability to voters who support one party but dislike a certain candidate. However, they fail to recognise that Britain already has a list system. Most political parties choose a candidate in each constituency, with little input from voters, who represents that party at the election. In safe seats, the incumbent candidates are almost certain to win. In marginal seats, voters are forced to vote for candidates who they dislike or else risk losing the seat for their preferred party.

With FPTP, some parties select their candidates through highly democratic processes, while others do not. The same would be true under even the most basic form of PR. In fact, in some countries that incorporate lists (such as Germany and Norway) party bosses are

prevented by law from intervening in candidate selection, which must be done democratically.

However, there are forms of PR that give voters far more power to choose specific candidates and hold their MPs to account than FPTP ever can. Where STV or open lists are used, voters directly choose between candidates as well as between parties. PR systems can also give voters opportunities to choose more than one candidate. Under the Additional Member System (AMS), for example, voters may vote for an individual candidate in their constituency who does not belong to the same party that they support with their regional vote. *For more information on electoral systems, see Appendix B.*

Myth #4 - 'unaccountable' governments

Some FPTP supporters argue that the current system increases the accountability of governments, with regular rotation between single-party majorities. However, this is a deeply undemocratic conception of accountability.

Firstly, it ignores the fact that FPTP divorces political power from public support. In most of our general elections since WWII, at least one of the major parties has either gained votes but lost seats, or lost votes but gained seats. FPTP sometimes even allow the party that lost in terms of votes to win the most seats. For example, in 1951, after six years of government, Clement Attlee's Labour Party won its highest ever share of the votes - 48.8 per cent. However, Winston Churchill's Conservatives, who lost the popular vote by over 200,000 votes, won 26 more MPs and went on to form the government. The reverse situation occurred in 1974. When a party that gains votes can lose seats, and a party that loses votes can gain seats, voters have no way of holding them to account.

Secondly, some FPTP supporters argue that single-party governments should be able to carry out their manifestos without compromise. However, it is deeply undemocratic to force your manifesto on a population that voted against it. The last time a single political party won a majority of votes in the UK was in 1931. In recent general elections, parties have won majorities with as little as 35-37 per cent of the votes, meaning over 60 per cent of people did not support their manifestos. When no single party gets a majority of the votes

we can either hand power to a minority, or we can compromise and find an arrangement that most people are happy with.

Under PR, there is no reason why government formation cannot be transparent. In many countries, voters are made aware of which parties could form a government together, and so vote in the knowledge of potential coalitions. There is no reason why we could not also do this in the UK.

Myth #5 - stability

Paradoxically, while arguing that FPTP makes it easier to kick out governments, opponents of PR often also claim that FPTP leads to a more stable political system. The reality is that the majority of the most stable democracies around the world use PR. Of the five most stable countries in the world according to the Fragile States Index, the top four (Finland, Norway, Switzerland, Denmark) use some form of PR.²

It is increasingly difficult to describe the British or American political systems as stable. By shoehorning hugely diverging views into two larger political parties, FPTP has created instability and a fracturing party system.

Studies have actually found that countries with FPTP on average have unplanned elections slightly more often than countries with PR, belying the myth that proportional democracies are forever returning to the polls as weak coalition governments collapse.³ People often focus on extreme examples like Italy, forgetting that 85 per cent of developed countries use some form of PR, the vast majority of which are very stable.

Under PR systems, a consensus is built around decisions, making it more likely that policies implemented will remain in place for the long term. Markus Crepaz supports this view, finding that governments with broader popular support tend to act more 'responsibly', having better records on both unemployment and inflation.⁴ Patrick Dunleavy points to the electoral system as one of the reasons why Britain stands out as a country "unusually prone to make large-scale, avoidable policy mistakes".⁵

Myth #6 - the far right

The argument about stability is often also linked to the rise of extreme parties, particularly the far right. FPTP tends to shut out smaller parties, for example UKIP, who won only 1 MP for 13 per cent of the votes in 2015. This means the concerns of these voters can be safely ignored by the political establishment even as they fester and grow... at least until an important referendum comes along, or someone with extreme views seizes the leadership of an established party.

Depriving right-wing voters of any participation in political life is a surefire way to increase resentment. The low turnout and lack of political activity in Labour heartlands has provided open terrain for the far right.

Under PR, far-right parties receive the same scrutiny as other politicians and can be challenged in a structured way. This is why a paper from the Centre for Economic Studies found that a one-seat increase in representation for the right-wing Sweden Democrats actually turns out to substantially decrease negative attitudes towards immigration in that local area.⁶ As the paper concludes, "Political representation can cause an attitudinal backlash as fringe parties and their ideas are placed under closer scrutiny." As some say, sunlight is the best disinfectant.

Besides, even when far-right parties are elected under PR, they are unlikely to form the government. Because all governments require majority support, far-right parties are usually locked out of government because other parties are unwilling to work with them. This stands in stark contrast to non-proportional systems, such as in the USA where Donald Trump came to power despite losing the popular vote by 3 million votes, in Hungary where Viktor Orbán's Fidesz won 67 per cent of the seats with just 44 per cent of the votes in 2014, or in Poland where the Law and Justice Party won an outright majority at the last election on just 37.6 per cent of the vote.

8 | The Time is Now

It is now the job of all of us who want to see better democracy in our country... to start thinking about how we can begin to build that and actually see it come to fruition so that we can have Proportional Representation at the heart of the next [Labour] manifesto

– Clive Lewis MP, 2016¹

This year is the 200th anniversary of the Peterloo Massacre, an event which marked the beginning of a century of democratic reform. From 1819, through the Chartist and suffrage campaigns, to the rise of the Labour Party, working people have always understood that political equality is the only way of wresting economic power from the wealthy. We must now draw on these experiences to build a movement for democratic equality in the 21st century.

Since 2015, there has been a surge in support for Proportional Representation (PR). The 2015 general election was the most disproportionate in British history and millions of voters did not see their views reflected in Parliament. To many people it was clearer than ever that their votes were not equal. In the aftermath of the election, almost half a million people signed petitions for PR, and politicians from across the political spectrum came together to push for reform.

This fits with the predictions of Patrick Dunleavy, who argues that the growth of multi-party politics makes electoral reform far more likely. As he put it:²

"British voters have changed their electoral behaviour in some very striking ways, supporting a wider range of parties than ever before... The coexistence of voting systems already achieved, reflects our existing degree of progress in a transition towards full multi-party politics, with the advent of either full PR elections for Westminster or some other fundamental rebalancing of the national constitution."

The traditional British party system has already broken down, with far more parties competing for votes across a broader ideological spectrum. It is only a matter of time before politicians will be forced to accept the argument for PR, or face potentially dire consequences.

As Dunleavy predicted in 2005, “the self-interest of governing elites and their unwillingness to listen effectively to what voters are saying will continue to pose major problems. In particular, the chaotic and unresponsive nature of plurality elections for Westminster will continue to fuel the spectre of arbitrary governance styles and attendant policy disasters.”³ The events of recent years suggest his prediction is coming true.



Make Votes Matter

Following the 2015 election and surge in support for PR, a group of activists came together to form Make Votes Matter (MVM). MVM is a perfect example of grassroots organising in a digital age, with online petitions and Facebook groups giving way to a democratically organised core activist team, supported by local groups across the country.

With thousands of people taking action to win real democracy, there is a path to PR in the next few years. To secure PR, a grassroots movement must have the strength across the country to campaign and persuade people to back PR; the Labour Party must abandon its indifference on the electoral system, as it has done in the past; and an alliance of politicians and organisations must form that spans the breadth of British politics and society, eventually making up a majority of MPs and introducing PR.

Progress towards these goals is well underway, but it will require sustained action by supporters and volunteers to ensure success, and avoid losing the progress that has already been made.

The Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform

As one of the two biggest parties, and the only British opposition party that does not back PR, Labour is key to this campaign's success. As can be seen by Labour's support for PR in Scotland, Wales and London, and in European elections, there is a strong case for optimism that Labour could back PR for Westminster. In recent years, support within the party has bloomed. Over 80 Labour MPs have come out in support of PR, with a much smaller number saying they are opposed. By far the largest group of Labour MPs is those who are undecided or undeclared.

MVM is working with the Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform to change party policy from the bottom up, visiting Constituency Labour Parties (CLPs) to make the case for PR. At the time of writing, 69 CLPs have passed pro-PR motions since 2017, with dozens more having debates scheduled.



Support for PR amongst activists is unprecedented, with Labour members queuing around the block for an event on PR at party conference in 2016.⁴ The vast majority of CLPs that debate motions on PR pass them, often unanimously or with very few members

opposed. This enthusiasm from members is making its way through Labour's tortuous internal policy-making process, piling the pressure on Labour's leadership to back reform

Get involved

As we have established in this report, electoral systems have a significant impact on political and economic outcomes. From gender representation to turnout, income inequality to action on the climate crisis, if we want to put political power in the hands of the many, not the few, we need to push for PR. 200 years on from Peterloo, we should draw on the experience of past campaigners to demand democratic equality in the 21st century.

Appendix A | Data

Country	Economic Democracy Index 2013	Population ¹ in thousands	Human Development Index ² 2013	Disproportionality Gallagher Index
	I		I	
Australia	0.428	24,450	0.93	10.17
Austria	0.603	8,735	0.88	2.25
Belgium	0.413	11,429	0.88	3.64
Canada	0.388	36,624	0.90	12.09
Chile	0.328	18,054	0.82	6.74
Czech Rep	0.32	10,618	0.86	7.02
Denmark	0.653	5,733	0.90	1.47
Estonia	0.404	1,309	0.84	5.19
Finland	0.533	5,523	0.88	3.27
France	0.499	64,979	0.88	18.00
Germany	0.431	82,114	0.91	4.00
Greece	0.296	11,159	0.85	7.66
Hungary	0.342	9,721	0.82	10.97
Iceland	0.449	335	0.90	2.85
Ireland	0.439	4,761	0.90	5.78
Israel	0.413	8,321	0.89	2.29
Italy	0.388	59,359	0.87	7.73
Japan	0.314	127,484	0.89	11.81
Luxembourg	0.567	583	0.88	4.28
Netherlands	0.481	17,035	0.92	1.00
New Zealand	0.462	4,705	0.91	6.44
Norway	0.547	5,305	0.94	3.23
Poland	0.387	38,170	0.83	8.00
Portugal	0.412	10,329	0.82	5.33
Slovakia	0.269	5,447	0.83	6.66
Slovenia	0.487	2,079	0.87	3.67
South Korea	0.438	50,982	0.89	9.39
Spain	0.367	46,354	0.87	6.22
Sweden	0.646	9,910	0.90	1.89
Switzerland	0.513	8,476	0.92	3.16
UK	0.353	66,181	0.89	15.94
US	0.279	324,459	0.91	6.28

¹ www.idea.int/data-tools/

² www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/hdr/2014-human-development-report.html

Appendix B | Electoral systems

First Past the Post (FPTP)

UK, Canada, India, USA

MPs are elected to represent single-member constituencies. Each voter has one vote and the candidate with the most votes in each constituency wins, irrespective of whether a majority of voters supported them.

Alternative Vote (AV)

Australia

MPs are elected to represent single-member constituencies. Voters rank the candidates in their constituency and once a candidate has reached 50 per cent of the votes they are elected. If no candidate has enough support, the candidate in last place is eliminated and their votes are reallocated according to their voters' next preferences. This process is repeated until the seat is filled.

This is not a system of Proportional Representation.

Single Transferable Vote (STV)

Northern Ireland, Ireland, Malta

MPs are elected to represent multi-member constituencies. Voters rank the candidates in their constituency and once a candidate has reached a certain share of the vote they are elected. If a candidate has more support than required, their surplus votes are reallocated according to their voters' next preferences. If seats remain unfilled, the candidate in last place is eliminated and their votes are reallocated according to their voters' next preferences. This process is repeated until all seats are filled.

Additional Member System (AMS)

Scotland, Wales, London, New Zealand, Germany

Approximately half of MPs are elected in single-member constituencies, like under FPTP. The other MPs represent larger regions and are elected from lists to ensure that the overall result is proportional.

Open-list

Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Sweden

MPs are elected to multi-member constituencies. Voters choose which party to support and which candidate is their favourite. Seats are allocated so that each party receives a proportional share and the most popular candidates are elected.

Closed-list

Israel, Turkey

MPs are elected to multi-member constituencies. Voters choose which party to support and seats are allocated so that each party receives a proportional share, with individual MPs decided by a list provided by the party.

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fig. 2.1. Source: commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:ChartistRiot.jpg [\[view online\]](#)

fig. 2.2. Source: www.flickr.com/photos/lselibrary/22757839386 [\[view online\]](#)

Democratic inequality in 21st century Britain

1. Though it was not until 1950 that all MPs were elected in this way
2. It is worth noting that countries like Germany still have votes that do not count at each election. Germany applies a threshold of 5 per cent of the vote, which parties must

exceed in order to win non-constituency seats, but even in countries with no artificial threshold there will always be a natural threshold: namely, the minimum number of votes needed to win a single seat. But crucially, in countries with high voter equality, a party can expect votes to be of equal value once it passes the threshold. In the UK, however, parties can win hundreds of thousands of votes but not a single MP, and a party that does win seats can have no rational expectation that further votes will translate to further seats.

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Trade union members

- Find out your union's position on PR
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From the Peterloo massacre in 1819, through the Chartist and suffrage campaigns, to the rise of the Labour Party, working people have always understood that political equality is the only way of wresting economic power from the wealthy. Now, in 2019, we should adopt a system of Proportional Representation so that we can remake society in the interests of the many, not the few.

This report draws on evidence from academics to make the case that the democratic inequality caused by First Past the Post has created in the UK one of the most unequal societies anywhere in the developed world. It is increasingly clear that Proportional Representation is not only more democratic, but it is essential for creating a progressive, egalitarian society that can rise to the challenges of the 21st century.



Publication by
Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform
Make Votes Matter