

Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform

All About PR



WHAT'S WRONG WITH FIRST PAST THE POST?

➤ Seats in Parliament don't match votes cast

The UK is nearly always governed by a party with a large overall majority - and almost never governed by a party that most people voted for.

- Since 1970, the winning party in a UK general election has never gained more than 45% of the vote (the exception being the Con/Dem coalition of 2010).
- Under Boris Johnson, the Conservatives won an overall majority of 80 seats in 2019, on only 43.6% of the vote. This huge majority has allowed them to push through a disastrous no-deal Brexit; a corrupt and incompetent response to COVID; and rapacious attacks on the NHS.
- Under a system where seats matched votes, the UK would have had a Labour-led government for most of the past century.

➤ Millions of votes are wasted

EVERYBODY GETS A VOTE - WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

- If you are a Labour voter living in a safe Tory seat, your vote is wasted from the start - the Tory will always get in, no matter what you do.
- A large proportion of Labour votes in safe Labour seats are also wasted, because they are "surplus to requirements".
- People who support a party that is not a serious contender in their constituency face a horrible choice on polling day: to vote for the party they support, in the belief that their vote will count for nothing, or to vote for a party they don't really support, but that might have a chance of winning that seat.
- Under FPTP, elections are decided by voters in a small number of marginal constituencies. This can't possibly be fair - after all, the outcome of the election affects everyone!

In the UK, estimates suggest that as many as 12-15% of people aren't registered to vote. Of those who are registered, about 30% don't turn out on polling day. It's no surprise that levels of apathy are so high in a system where so many votes count for nothing. Research shows that turnout is higher under PR systems.

Of the people who do go out to vote, about 20% vote tactically for a party they don't support, and about 30% vote for a losing candidate in a safe seat (some of these are the same people).

Surely it's not too much to ask that people should be able to go to vote on polling day and vote for the party they prefer, knowing that their vote will make a difference.

➤ The playing field isn't level

Ever wondered why the Conservative party is so keen on FPTP?

When an election is called, we like to think that all parties have a fair crack at the whip. However, FPTP does not treat all parties equally.

- In Britain, the biggest beneficiary of FPTP is the Conservative party - it consistently wins a far higher share of seats than votes, and over the past century has been in government about two thirds of the time.
- Under FPTP, the number of seats a party wins depends not just on how many votes it receives, but on where they are cast. Votes that don't result in winning a constituency count for nothing.
- Regionally-based parties like the SNP can also do well out of FPTP, because they are effectively large parties in the areas where they campaign.
- Smaller national parties do worst of all - the Lib Dems have to work very hard for their seats and the Greens even harder.

In 2015 the Lib Dems got 13 times more votes than the DUP (2.4 million to 184,000). But each party won 8 seats in parliament. And there are even more shocking examples...

In the 2015 election, the SNP got 1.5 million votes, and 56 MPs. UKIP got nearly 4 million votes, and only one MP.

We disagree with everything UKIP (and its later incarnations) stands for - but this result is simply not fair.

Some people have suggested that FPTP is a good system because it keeps extreme parties, such as UKIP/the Brexit Party, out of Parliament. But despite being almost entirely unrepresented in Parliament, these far-right parties have driven the Tory party agenda, culminating in a no-deal Brexit that very few people ever wanted.

Good politics needs a fair voting system that doesn't leave large swathes of people feeling that they don't have a voice.

➤ FPTP favours a right-wing agenda

FPTP favours the Conservative Party in elections, because so many Labour votes are wasted in safe Labour seats.

In addition, FPTP breeds apathy, which leads to lower levels of voter registration and turnout. People who aren't registered to vote, or who don't vote, tend to be young, to live in rented accommodation, and to be less affluent... and these are groups that historically favour the Labour party.

FPTP also favours a right-wing agenda in other, more subtle, ways. Research shows that PR systems tend to produce societies with lower levels of inequality, higher levels of public spending, and a fairer distribution of public goods.

It's not hard to see how this comes about. Although PR systems do produce right-of-centre governments, these governments tend to be broadly-based and to operate with a degree of consensus. Because of this, they find it difficult to launch attacks on the welfare state such as we regularly see from Conservative governments in the UK.

Some people support FPTP because they look forward to the day when the Labour Party wins an overall majority in Parliament on a minority of the vote, and introduces a socialist programme.

The problem here is that with an FPTP system, the Tories will eventually win again - and they can win an enormous majority on well under half the popular vote. Time after time in Britain, Tory governments have systematically dismantled the progressive policies that Labour governments put in place. They have sold off council houses built under Labour; they are dismantling the NHS; and their attacks on the welfare state have reversed Labour's reductions in child poverty and seen thousands of families relying on food banks.

A broad-based Labour-led government elected under proportional representation could introduce a programme of progressive reforms, which we know would be popular with the electorate. And Tory governments, when they eventually came along, would find it difficult to dismantle them.

➤ FPTP breeds a toxic political culture

FPTP is a winner-takes-all system. It breeds a politics where there is more to be gained from hurling jibes and insults at people of different political persuasions, than from genuine attempts to find common ground and build constructive solutions.

This is reflected in the “yah-boo” culture of the House of Commons – behaviour which has nothing to do with meaningful political debate, which would not be tolerated in any other workplace, and which [lowers respect for politicians among the public](#).

At election time, the winner-takes-all system gives politicians little incentive to run civilised campaigns by promoting their own policies, and far too much incentive to base campaigns on discrediting their opponents' reputations.

Anyone who wants to see a constructive grown-up politics, anyone who agrees with the immortal words of Jo Cox, that there is more that unites us than divides us, should have no time for an electoral system which prioritises divisions rather than cooperation.

WHAT IF WE HAD PR?

➤ EVERYONE COULD VOTE FOR THE PARTY THEY SUPPORT

One of the worst things about FPTP is that it encourages tactical voting - people vote not for the party they support, but for the party they think is most likely to beat the party they hate the most.

- In a PR voting system, everyone would have the incentive to make a positive choice for the party whose policies they support. No more voting for a candidate that you know is going to lose anyway, and no more voting for a party you don't support because you have no other realistic choice.
- It's not hard to understand why turnout tends to be higher in countries that use PR, than in countries that use FPTP.

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The incentives vary slightly between the different PR systems.

- *Under a list system, everyone has a clear incentive to vote for the party they support.*
- *Under AMS, people might vote tactically at constituency level, but everyone would have a chance to vote honestly at regional level.*
- *Under STV, people are free to vote according to their preferences: if they vote for a candidate that doesn't get elected, their second choice vote will count.*

➤ EVERYONE'S VOTE WOULD COUNT

Under FPTP, your vote is effectively wasted if you:

- voted for a candidate who didn't win
- voted for a candidate who won by a large majority (ie, a candidate who won, but didn't really need your vote in order to win)
- didn't bother voting because you knew in advance that your vote wouldn't count
- and arguably, your vote is also wasted if you voted tactically for a candidate you didn't fully support.

Under FPTP, the only votes that really count are votes cast in a small number of marginal seats. The political parties know this, and focus their policies and their campaigning efforts on voters in these marginal seats.

In a democracy, it's a no-brainer that every vote should count. This isn't some outlandish concept - it should be every citizen's most basic and fundamental right.

No voting system in the world can ensure that absolutely everyone's vote counts. Wherever you live, if you vote for a party that only gets about 10 votes, your vote is will be wasted. But a good PR system ensures that virtually all votes count.

Imagine waking up on the morning of polling day and knowing your vote would count as much as everyone else's vote, no matter where you live.

- Everyone would have an incentive to get out and vote
- Parties would have to campaign in all parts of the country, not just marginal constituencies.
- Local parties would be energised - there would be no "dead zones" where campaigning is condemned to be fruitless.

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Different PR voting systems have different mechanisms for making votes count.

- *List systems do best at ensuring that everyone's vote counts equally - though they don't have the constituency link that many British people like.*
- *AMS systems with a large number of top-up MPs do very well at ensuring that all votes count equally. AMS systems with fewer top-up MPs do less well. But any AMS system does better than FPTP.*
- *STV may be less proportional than some other systems, if it is used in small electoral areas and if proportionality is measured on the basis of first-preference votes. But STV really comes into its own by ensuring that even if a person's first-choice candidate or party didn't win, their second or subsequent preference will be taken into account.*

➤ FEWER RIGHTWING GOVERNMENTS

Over the past 100 years, FPTP has given the UK about twice as many Tory as Labour governments. At some of those elections, more people voted for left-of-centre parties than for right-of-centre parties; on those occasions, a PR voting system would have given us left-of-centre coalition governments.

Research shows that on average, PR systems produce fewer rightwing governments than FPTP systems.

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We can't say for certain what the outcome of a particular election would have been under a PR voting system, because many people would probably have cast their votes differently. For example, many more people would have voted for the Greens under PR, than actually voted Green under FPTP. But the experts' best guess is that the UK would have had more leftwing governments under PR, and fewer rightwing ones.

➤ GOVERNMENTS THAT A MAJORITY OF PEOPLE VOTED FOR

As Labour supporters, we know what it feels like to wake up on the morning after a Conservative election victory, knowing we have to put up with the Tories for another five years. There's only one thing worse, and that is waking up to a Tory government *when most people in the country voted for a left-of-centre party.*

If we switched to PR, rightwing governments would still sometimes be elected. But these would be governments that had gained the support of a majority of voters on election day. They would have won fairly. As Labour voters that may not be the outcome we'd want, but it's one we'd be able to live with.

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In the UK, our Conservative governments tend to be very extreme, and make it a priority to axe public spending and cut taxes for the rich. Right-of-centre coalitions in countries which have PR tend to be more moderate; many European countries have been governed by rightwing coalitions which have honoured the "social contract".

➤ PARTIES WOULD CAMPAIGN FAIRLY AND HONESTLY

Are you sick of seeing leaflets and posters proclaiming "Lib Dems winning here", or "Only the Lib Dems can beat the Tories here"? These captions, (often entirely untrue) are attempts to get people to vote tactically. Under PR systems, they would all but disappear.

Are you sick of Labour Party campaigns attacking parties like the Green Party and the Lib Dems, whose policies are in many ways pretty close to Labour's own policies, rather than attacking the Tories and UKIP? This is particularly common in local campaigns, and it happens because each party has the best chance of winning if it attacks its most dangerous rival - which could be a party with a similar programme.

And are you sick of safe seats being all but ignored at election time, while all the parties' resources are poured into key marginals? In a PR system where all votes counted equally, parties would have to make their campaigns relevant to people in all parts of the country and to all demographic groups.

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In STV or AV systems, the parties know that it's not only first preferences that matter; second preferences matter too. As well as winning first preferences, each party tries to gain second preference votes from parties with similar programmes. Vicious attacks on other parties' programmes will alienate voters and lose second preference votes.

In all PR systems, parties campaign in the knowledge that they may be seeking to form a coalition after the election. Of course there will be robust exchanges during an election campaign; but a party that has behaved honourably and respectfully towards other parties is more likely to be able to successfully broker a coalition.

VOTING SYSTEMS EXPLAINED

➤ FIRST PAST THE POST

'First Past the Post' (FPTP) is the colloquial name for the way we elect our MPs in the UK, and local councillors in England and Wales. The country is divided into areas called 'constituencies' (geographical areas containing roughly similar numbers of voters) and the candidate who gets most votes in each constituency wins, even if their vote falls far short of a majority.

FPTP is now used only in a handful of countries across the world, almost all with a British colonial legacy; these include the USA (with an electoral college), Canada and India.

Several countries have rejected FPTP: New Zealand introduced a Mixed Member System in 1996, and South Africa moved to a proportional list system at the end of the Apartheid era.

Advantages of FPTP include the fact that it is simple, and embodies a "constituency link", where people are represented by a local MP who really knows the area. However, the allocation of parliamentary seats under FPTP bears little mathematical relationship to the votes cast in an election. Because of this, FPTP often produces governments that the majority of people did not vote for (most recently, in the UK, Boris Johnson's 80-seat majority achieved on under 44% of the vote). And it sometimes leads to very anomalous outcomes. In 1951, for example, the Conservative Party won an overall majority in Parliament despite getting fewer votes than the Labour Party and in 1974, Labour became the biggest party in Parliament, despite getting fewer votes than the Conservatives.

➤ LIST SYSTEMS

Under list systems, political parties produce lists of nominated candidates. These lists may be produced at the national level, or more usually at the regional level. Voting takes place in one of two ways:

Under a **closed list** system, voters simply cast their vote for a party. A formula is used to convert parties' shares of the votes into seats. If a party wins, say, three seats, then the top three candidates on its list are elected.

Under an **open list** system, the parties still publish lists of candidates, but voters are able to vote for the candidates they prefer, rather than simply voting for their party of choice. Under an open list system, if a party has enough support to win three seats, it is the three candidates of that party with most personal votes who are elected.

List systems of different kinds are used in most European countries for the European Parliamentary Elections. List systems are often used with large electoral regions, thereby getting close to full proportionality. Larger electoral regions, however, result in a lower degree of local representation, while smaller electoral regions provide less proportionality but more local representation.

➤ ADDITIONAL MEMBER SYSTEM (AMS)

The Additional Member System (AMS) combines a high degree of proportionality with local constituency representation.

AMS involves two "layers" of MP - the first being elected to represent a constituency, in the same way as First Past the Post, and the second elected to represent a wider area, such as a region. It is this regional tier of MPs that gives AMS its proportionality. Constituency MPs are nominated by their local parties, as under FPTP, and regional MPs are chosen from ranked lists submitted by regional parties. Voters typically have two votes – the first for a **constituency MP**, and the second for their **party of choice**. Alternatively, voters could have one vote, with the regional MPs elected as the highest-scoring runners-up for their Party.

The constituency votes are counted first, and seats allocated just as they are under FPTP; 'regional MPs' are awarded as 'additional' or 'top-up' seats to compensate for the disproportionality of the FPTP election.

AMS is used in New Zealand (where it is known as Mixed Member Proportional, or MMP), in Germany, and in a number of other countries. Three of the UK's devolved assemblies (London, Wales and the Scottish Parliament) are elected using the Additional Member system.

AMS systems are extremely flexible. In New Zealand and Germany, half the seats in parliament are awarded on a regional basis, and this produces a very proportional system. The systems used for the UK's devolved assemblies were designed with a smaller proportion of seats allocated on a regional basis; this gives these systems a more limited degree of proportionality, although they perform far better than FPTP.

To avoid extremist parties having regional MPs elected, it is possible to impose a threshold, so that parties need to win a certain percentage of the popular vote, or at least one constituency seat, in order to get any regional seats.

See below for more information on the Additional Member System, including an explanation of how the regional votes are counted.

- [AMS: Issues in implementation and worked examples \(Prof Maria Iacovou\)](#)
- [ERS website](#)

➤ **SECOND BALLOT / SUPPLEMENTARY VOTE**

The Second Ballot system works similarly to the First Past the Post system, with single-member constituencies. However, if no candidate wins more than 50 per cent in the first round, a run-off is held one or two weeks later between the top two candidates in the first round.

This system is used for presidential elections in several countries (notably in France); it is also used in France for all elections which return a single member.

The SB system is not any more proportional than FPTP and can give rise to problems with tactical voting; it is also expensive to run and can cause "voter fatigue". While SB is a good deal better than FPTP for electing a single candidate (e.g., for presidential elections), the lack of proportionality means it is not the most suitable system for parliamentary elections.

The Supplementary Vote system is similar to the Second Ballot system except that people vote for their first and second choices on the same day. The first choices are counted, the top two candidates remain in the race, and the second preferences of people who voted for eliminated candidates are then distributed between the top two remaining candidates.

Following the recommendations of the Plant Commission, this system was introduced in the UK under Labour for elected mayors and police and crime commissioners (the Tories' 2022 Election Act reverted to FPTP).

The aim of the SV system is to maximise the support for the winning candidate. However, with more than three candidates in the field, voters face the problem that they don't know for sure who the two candidates in the run-off round will be. Voters who cast both their first and second votes for candidates who are eliminated after the first round will effectively have no vote at all.

As with the Second Ballot system, SV is much better than FPTP for electing a single candidate. However, for parliamentary elections it is not a proportional system.

➤ **ALTERNATIVE VOTE (AV)**

Like First Past the Post, the Alternative Vote system is based on single-member constituencies; but instead of voting for a single candidate with an 'X', voters rank candidates in order of preference, 1, 2, 3 ...etc. If no candidate has more than 50 per cent of the votes, the candidate with fewest votes is eliminated and their votes are redistributed among the other candidates according to voters' second preferences. The process continues until one candidate achieves a majority (50 per cent of the vote plus 1).

Labour Party members will be familiar with AV, as it is the system used to elect the leader of the Labour Party. We believe that AV is an excellent system for electing an individual to a single position - a party leader, a president, etc. It gives people the opportunity to vote according to their genuine preference, in the knowledge that if their preferred candidate is eliminated, their second or subsequent preference will still count.

However, AV is not a suitable system for parliamentary elections. AV does remove the need for tactical voting, but it is not a proportional system, and under some circumstances could lead to results that are less proportional than First Past the Post.

AV is used in Australia in elections for the Lower House. It was also the system put to the British people in a referendum in 2011. If anyone tells you we've already had a referendum on PR, they're wrong - we had a referendum on AV.

➤ AV-PLUS

The Report of the [Jenkins Commission \(1998\)](#), set up by the Blair government to examine the case for electoral reform, recommended a voting system termed "AV+".

AV+ is essentially a version of the Additional Member System (AMS), but with AV instead of FPTP used in the constituency contests.

Jenkins recommended a system in which 80-85% of parliamentary seats would be elected by AV, with the remainder elected from party lists; the party lists would be 'semi-open', giving voters additional choice.

The AV+ system as proposed by the Jenkins Commission has been criticised on the grounds that this would not provide a sufficient degree of proportionality. However, AV+ could equally well be used with any other ratio of constituency to regional seats and would have equivalent proportionality to AMS.

➤ SINGLE TRANSFERABLE VOTE (STV)

Single Transferable Vote (STV) is a voting system based on multi-member constituencies. In Ireland, which uses STV, constituencies each have between 3 and 5 MPs. Each party nominates a list of candidates, and voters rank the candidates in order of preference - it is possible for voters to "mix and match" candidates from different parties.

At the count, candidates who reach the necessary "quota" (the number of voters divided by the number of seats +1) are automatically elected; where candidates have more votes than they need to secure election, their surplus votes are transferred to other candidates, according to second and subsequent preferences of the people who voted for the winning candidate.

When this procedure produces no more winning candidates, the lowest-scoring candidate is eliminated (as in the Alternative Vote system) and their votes transferred to other candidates according to second and subsequent preferences. The allocation of seats, transfer of seats and elimination of losing candidates continues until all available seats have been allocated.

This reallocation of votes means that STV does very well at minimizing "wasted" votes, both votes cast for losing candidates and surplus votes cast for candidates who win easily. However, as STV is generally used in smaller electoral districts it does not always guarantee the same proportionality as systems which use larger districts, and in a democracy where many political parties are active, smaller parties may be at a disadvantage similar to their experience under First Past the Post.

STV is used in the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland (except for Westminster elections), Malta and for the Senate elections in Australia. It has been used for Scottish local elections from 2007 and was recommended by the Sutherland Commission for local elections in Wales.

QUESTIONS ABOUT PR

➤ **FPTP produces strong, stable governments. Isn't that better than the endless unstable coalitions that PR would give us?**

It isn't just PR that produces coalition governments: two of the last four elections in the UK have resulted in coalitions.

The 2017 election gave us a “confidence and supply” arrangement between two right-wing parties (the Tories and the DUP) which between them scraped together 43.3 per cent of the vote. Adding in UKIP's votes brings the total up to 45 per cent.

Under a system where all votes counted, we would most likely have been governed by a Labour-led left-of-centre grouping. Wouldn't that have been infinitely preferable?

The 2019 election, by contrast, has produced an enormous majority for the Conservatives, on a vote share only slightly higher than they obtained in 2017. This "strong and stable" government has lied and bungled its way through the COVID pandemic, is presiding over the worst cost-of-living crisis in living memory, and is treating working people with utter contempt; but the size of its majority means that it cannot properly be held to account for its actions.

Across the world, most developed countries use PR, and most enjoy peaceful and stable government. It's true that many countries are governed by coalitions – but is anything inherently wrong with that?

- Left-of-centre coalitions and minority-led governments have been elected and have successfully implemented progressive programmes of government: recent examples include leftist coalitions elected in Portugal (2015), Spain (2016) and New Zealand (2017).
- In the UK, a Labour-led coalition in the Scottish Parliament (1999-2007) delivered a programme at least as progressive as the programme delivered by a Labour government in Westminster (1997-2010) which had a huge majority.

Finally, let's remember that because FPTP benefits large parties, both the Labour and Conservative parties straddle an enormous section of the left/right political spectrum. Both parties can best be thought of as internal coalitions – often quite strained and unfriendly. Historically, then, many of the single-party governments that have come to power in the UK have arguably been coalitions, in all but name.

➤ **Isn't voting reform a distraction from real-life issues? Would a commitment to a more proportional voting system really win us an election?**

Some people see voting reform as a distraction from the “real” issues: NHS funding, social care, education, the worldwide environmental crisis, low wages, and the lack of opportunities for young people.

But Labour can only tackle these issues if it forms a government. Research shows that FPTP favours right-wing governments; FPTP has been shutting Labour out of power for far too long at all levels of governance.

Under a fair voting system, the UK could have been governed by a Labour-led left-of-centre coalition for much or all of the last decade. We might not be suffering the effects of austerity, with homelessness at record levels and working people relying on food banks.

Many of the biggest problems we face (health and social care, climate change, our relationship with the EU) require long-term consensus-based solutions. The winner-takes-all nature of FPTP forms a huge barrier to finding these solutions.

A broadly proportional voting system would also do a lot to address voter disengagement: “Politics has nothing to do with me; voting doesn’t make a difference; you politicians are all the same”.

Many people who typically don't vote (because it doesn't change anything) voted in recent referendums where every vote counted; and many could be persuaded to vote for a Labour Party which pledged that the current election would be the last held under FPTP.

We're seeing a huge thirst for change, not just among political activists but also from ordinary voters who are not members of any party. After the 2015 election, which produced the most disproportionate result in decades, over half a million people signed petitions calling for PR. Most opinion polls since then have found overwhelming support for PR among the public.

We believe that a clear manifesto commitment to introduce a fair voting system would be hugely attractive to voters.

➤ **My priority is the socialist transformation of society. How can that happen under PR?**

As Labour supporters, it could be tempting to look forward to the day when FPTP gives Labour an overall majority in parliament on 30-40 per cent of votes cast, and allows us to introduce a radical socialist programme. But there are several problems with this.

The first is that the electoral arithmetic of First Past the Post does not favour Labour. FPTP hands the Conservative party a majority much more often than it gives a majority to Labour. This is the case across the world: research shows that countries which use non-proportional voting systems have more conservative governments than countries which use PR.

Second, there are ethical and practical problems in trying to implement a radical socialist programme with the support of fewer than half of all voters. The real mandate for change comes from winning the support of well over half of all voters, most likely under a broad, left-leaning coalition.

Third is the issue of sustainability. Labour has won elections under FPTP, but the progressive achievements of Labour governments have all too often been unravelled by the Tory governments which follow them. Mrs Thatcher sold off public utilities and council housing; recent Tory governments have reversed Labour's achievements on child poverty and are dismantling the NHS. Under PR, right-of-centre governments are more consensus-based and find it more difficult to dismantle progressive policies. Research shows that proportional voting systems are associated with greater levels of social expenditure and more egalitarian societies.

Finally, it is entirely possible under PR for a left-wing party to fight an election on a left-wing manifesto! Many policies which might be considered "fringe" or "hard left" in Britain, are mainstream ideas in European countries with consensus-based systems.

➤ **Aren't PR systems incredibly complicated?**

It's certainly true that First Past the Post is simple – the system was designed when many voters could not read or write, and what could be simpler than marking a single X in a box?

PR systems are a little more demanding – STV requires voters to rank candidates, while most AMS systems require voters to mark two ballot papers, one for a constituency MP and one at regional level. However, proportional systems are in wide use across the world (as well as in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and London), and voters manage them competently. There is no reason why voters at a UK general election should struggle – it's rather patronising to suggest they might!

And, of course, there is one sense in which FPTP is incredibly complicated. FPTP forces many people to vote tactically – not for the party they like the most, but for the party they believe is most likely to defeat the party they dislike the most. This involves a good deal of prediction and guesswork. Under most PR systems, the need for tactical voting would be reduced or could disappear altogether.

➤ Haven't we already had a referendum on PR, in 2011?

There was a referendum in 2011, but it certainly wasn't on PR - it was on a system known as Alternative Vote (AV).

Here's how AV works. Constituency boundaries are set up just as they are under FPTP, and each party can put forward one candidate in each constituency. Rather than marking an "X" for a single candidate, voters rank their choices ("1" for their first choice, "2" for their second choice, and so on). Candidates with the fewest votes are eliminated from the count, and their votes are "recycled" (redistributed) according to second and subsequent preferences. The system is similar to the one we use to elect the Labour Party leader. A general election under AV would see a separate contest run in each constituency.

AV can work well in some situations – it is a good system for electing a president, party leader or members of a committee.

However, it is a poor choice for national elections. It is not proportional, and can produce an even bigger mismatch between votes and seats than we see under FPTP! It's not hard to see that the big winner under AV would be a centrist party that scored highly on second preferences, most probably the Lib Dems – under AV they could win an enormous number of seats, far larger than their share of first-preference votes.

For national elections, AV is such a flawed voting system that even many people who were committed to voting reform did not fight very hard for it - or even *vote* for it - in 2011. LCER is campaigning for a system that really makes votes count - certainly not AV.

➤ Wouldn't PR break the link between MPs and their constituencies?

First Past the Post provides a link between MPs and their constituencies. It's what we're used to in the UK, and many people (particularly MPs, for understandable reasons) value that link.

However, many people don't feel particularly well "represented" by their MP, or indeed any neighbouring MPs. In 2015, 57% of voters in Cornwall did not vote for the Conservatives, but every single seat in the county was taken by the Conservatives. Labour has never won a parliamentary seat in Surrey, despite gaining millions of votes there - over 1 in 5 votes at the 2017 general election.

Some PR systems don't have a constituency link, but many do – and any system which replaced FPTP for the UK would have to maintain that link. Two proportional systems which keep the constituency link are:

- The Additional Member System (AMS), used in elections for the Scottish, Welsh and London assemblies, as well as other countries (eg Germany and New Zealand). All constituencies return an MP, as they do under FPTP, but parties who get more votes than seats at the constituency level win additional seats for MPs who serve at a regional or sub-regional level.
- Single Transferable Vote (STV), used in elections for the Northern Ireland assembly, and for parliamentary elections in Ireland. STV is based on constituencies with between 3 and 5 MPs. The constituency link is still there, and everyone has a good chance of being represented by an MP who reflects their political views.

Which of the two systems is better? Both have worked well in the UK, and both have their supporters. A membership survey conducted by LCER found that most of our members prefer a top-up based system like AMS; however, our members also expressed a strong view that either AMS or STV would be substantially better than First Past the Post.

➤ **Are MPs elected under party lists as accountable as constituency MPs?**

Under FPTP, local parties have the option of de-selecting a sitting MP if they feel the MP's performance is not up to scratch, although in practice this is very difficult to do.

Individual voters currently have very little opportunity to hold a sitting MP to account. They can vote against the MP at the next election, but for many people this would mean *also* having to vote against their preferred party. In a safe seat it is extremely rare for a sitting MP to lose, even when their behaviour has been demonstrably unacceptable.

Under more proportional systems, accountability would work differently depending on the system used.

STV is an "open-list" system, in which local parties draw up lists of candidates, and voters can *choose between candidates* as well as between parties, giving them a great deal of choice. Importantly, voters can reject a candidate they believe is unfit for office, without necessarily having to vote against their preferred party.

Under AMS, most MPs would be elected under a system similar to FPTP. The additional MPs could be elected via an open list (see above) or via a "closed list", where the ranking of candidates is decided by regional parties, and voters cannot vote for individual candidates in that list. The Jenkins Commission recommended top-up by open list; AMS elections in Scotland and Wales use closed lists.

The important thing is the way the lists are drawn up. In some countries with closed list systems, such as Germany and Norway, party bosses are prevented by law from intervening in candidate selection, which must be done democratically. This should be a feature of any new AMS system introduced for the UK.

➤ **Won't moaning about an "unfair" voting system make us look like sore losers?**

We sometimes hear the argument that Labour should not blame an unfair electoral system for a series of election defeats, but should instead work on winning future elections. The argument goes that Labour would look like a party of sore losers if we were to attempt to change the voting system.

We make three responses to this. The first is that *FPTP really is not fair*, to parties or to voters.

- It can't be right that your vote makes a difference if you live in a marginal seat, but not in a safe Labour or Tory constituency.
- It can't be right that political parties devote much more time and money to campaigning in marginal seats, and formulate their manifestos to appeal to "floating" voters in marginal seats.
- It can't be right that in 2015, nearly 4 million people voted for UKIP and got only one MP – while under 1.5 million voted for the SNP, and got 56 MPs. However much we dislike UKIP and all it stands for, this cannot be right.
- It can't be right that the results of FPTP elections depend on boundary changes which can be influenced in favour of the government of the day. This is being done *right now*, on the basis of inaccurate counts of voters in urban areas.

The second answer to this question is that when campaigning for PR, it doesn't all have to be about unfairness. *We can bring so many positive messages to the debate.*

- We can talk about the possibility of a more honest, constructive and consensus-based politics.
- We can talk about voter engagement, about re-building trust, about re-energising political debate.
- We can talk about a politics where everyone is equal, where every vote counts, where everyone has the power to contribute to change.
- We can talk about a system where everyone can vote for their preferred party, knowing their vote can make a difference, no matter where they live.

And finally, when the Labour Party is riding high in the opinion polls, as it is now, and is set to form the next government, there is absolutely no chance that the argument for PR could be interpreted as the griping of a loser. That's why we're urging the Labour Party to make the commitment to PR right now, from a position of strength.

➤ **Shouldn't we be persuading people who want a progressive, socialist government to vote for us (Labour), not campaigning for a system that would let them vote for another left-of-centre party?**

Of course we would prefer all left-of-centre voters to vote for Labour – and at election time, we work towards persuading as many of them as possible to do so.

But sometimes it's difficult to persuade Labour sympathisers to vote for us under FPTP.

- People living in constituencies where the result is a foregone conclusion may not bother voting if they know it won't make any difference.
- Many Labour supporters living in marginal seats will vote tactically, mainly to stop a Conservative candidate getting in. A proportional voting system could put a stop to this.

And we have to accept that some left-of-centre voters will prefer a party other than Labour – a party which prioritises regional considerations or environmental issues, or a more radical or a more centrist brand of left-wing politics. Surely we want people to vote for Labour enthusiastically, because they agree with our vision, not because they have no other realistic choice.

At the moment, huge numbers of votes for smaller left-of-centre parties are wasted (not to mention the huge numbers of Labour votes that are wasted). Why shouldn't everyone be entitled to vote according to their preference and for their votes to count as much as anyone else's?

➤ **We've always had First Past the Post. Why should we change?**

Here are some other things we've 'always' had – until we got rid of them.

When our parliamentary system was set up following the Great Reform Act of 1832:

- Only men were allowed to vote
- Only people who owned land or property could vote
- Only those aged 21 or over could vote
- Some constituencies had more than one MP
- Some constituencies were “pocket boroughs”, controlled by a single individual or family.
- Other constituencies were “rotten boroughs”, with no voters living there at all.
- Rotten and pocket boroughs could be bought and sold

Over the past 150 years, people have fought, and some have died, to widen the franchise and to achieve fairer representation. As a result of their struggles, everything on the above list has been abolished.

Only ONE feature of Britain's original voting system remains in place. That is First Past the Post. It's time to consign FPTP to the dustbin of history, and replace it with a fair modern voting system which reflects our values of equality and democracy.

[As a postscript, it's not strictly true that we've 'always' had FPTP in the UK. We have had three different electoral systems in the past: the Limited Vote System (2nd half of the 19th century); STV (for the five university seats at Westminster until 1950); and a number of two-member constituencies until 1950].

➤ **Doesn't PR give disproportionate power to small parties?**

FPTP treats political parties very unequally. Under FPTP, the following parties all get a larger share of seats than votes:

- Large parties in general
- The Conservative Party in particular
- Parties which are geographically based, such as the SNP, Plaid Cymru, the DUP and Sinn Fein

Other parties suffer a massive disadvantage under FPTP, getting far fewer seats than they should, given their vote share

- Small parties, particularly those without a geographical base
- New parties
- Left-of-centre parties in general

PR systems are often criticised for a different reason – that they give too much power to small parties. The criticism is not that small parties get more seats than they should, but that they may exercise undue influence by holding the balance of power in a coalition, threatening to walk out if their demands are not met.

- This can be a problem in some list-based PR systems, such as the Israeli national list system, where tiny religious parties have historically held the balance of power. The systems proposed for the UK would not give this degree of representation to tiny parties.
- In Germany, the Free Democratic Party (FDP) held the balance of power in coalitions for many years. The FDP was widely thought to have abused its position; it was punished by the electorate for doing so and has only occasionally been part of Germany's ruling coalition since the 1990s.
- There are few other examples of small parties exercising disproportionate power in coalition governments under PR.
- In general, coalition governments under PR perform a “grown-up” consensus-based politics where smaller parties play a role, but acknowledge their junior position.

➤ Doesn't PR give power to extremists?

First of all, First Past the Post does not guarantee that extremists will be kept out of government. Donald Trump was elected under an electoral college similar to FPTP (and would not have been elected under a system in which all votes counted).

In the UK, the BNP won their first council seat in Burnley in 2009, with only 30 per cent of the vote. FPTP makes it possible for candidates who have extreme views, and who are deeply unpopular with a majority of the electorate, to win seats.

Keeping an extreme party out of parliament does not mean that its ideas will simply disappear, or that it will have no influence. In the UK, UKIP (later the Brexit Party) gained hardly any seats in Parliament, but had a colossal influence on the UK's political landscape, culminating in a disastrous no-deal Brexit.

The best way of taking on extremists is to defeat them by honest debate and hard work. When BNP councillors were elected in the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham, the Labour Party worked hard in areas that it had previously neglected as safe seats. Next time round, the BNP was beaten.

Finally, we should note that adopting PR isn't a failsafe insurance against right-wing governments. Hungary and Poland have both elected right-wing, illiberal governments under PR-type systems. However:

- In Poland (2015), the *Law and Justice* party gained 61% of the seats on 38 per cent of the vote. This result arose because of a *lack* of proportionality in the system.
- In Hungary in 2018, Orban's *Fidesz* party won a large majority on just under half of the vote (its nearest rival won only 19 per cent of the vote). Under a FPTP system, *Fidesz* could have won almost all the seats in parliament, not just a majority.

Opponents of voting reform sometimes point to the Nazis in Germany, who rose to power under a proportional voting system. In fact, the PR system slowed down the Nazis' rise to power. In [Germany's 1932 election](#), the Nazis won 37% of the vote, and were the largest party in most electoral districts. This would have secured them a parliamentary majority under FPTP, but it did not give them power under PR. It was not until the following year, when the Nazis stormed the Reichstag, and suppressed and then banned opposition parties, that they became the party of government in Germany.