

CLASH OF COMMENTS: Should the UK change its electoral system to proportional representation?

By [Oscar Bentley](#) and [Jan de Boer](#)
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Image: Adam Scotti

YES – Oscar Bentley

Proportional representation is an electoral system where seats in Parliament are allocated proportionally to votes cast, in contrast to the current first past the post system, where the winning candidate only needs to achieve the most votes in their constituency to gain a seat in Parliament.

First past the post is an outdated system by which to still elect our MPs. It distorts the true voting pattern of the wider electorate and entrenches a two-party system that, as a society,

have largely moved past. At the 2015 General Election, 24 per cent of votes were cast for the Green Party, the Lib Dems, and UKIP, which only achieved 10 seats in the Commons – 1.5 per cent of seats. Compare this to the SNP, who received just 4.7 per cent of the vote and gained 56 seats. This level of voting disparity is contrary to the democracy we and Westminster hold so dear.

Resultantly, our Parliament does not accurately represent the views of British society as a whole. The 1 157 630 people that voted Green in 2015 were represented by just one MP, while the 1 454 436 people who voted SNP enjoyed 56 representatives – 55 more votes for just 296 806 more people.

First past the post prevents the majority from having any real effect on the vote. In 2015, David Cameron said that the result would be decided by just 23 constituencies, with the Electoral Reform Society

calculating that 74 per cent of votes cast were wasted: for losing candidates or for winning candidates beyond the amount needed. These voters had no impact on the final result of the 2015 General Election, politically disenfranchising them. Is it any surprise that turnout in 2015 was so low, with one third of eligible voters not bothering to vote? Or that, with a Parliament that doesn't truly represent the public, over the subsequent two years British politics was plunged into chaos?

With a proportional electoral system (using the d'Hondt method), UKIP would have gained 83 seats rather than just one. This would have been a force to be reckoned with and, with a likely outcome being a Conservative-UKIP coalition, the EU referendum would still have taken place. However, the decision to Leave is seen by many as a strike against the political class by disenfranchised communities. If a proportional system were in place, would these communities have felt so isolated by Westminster? Would they have felt the need to strike back, and still voted Leave? Under proportional representation, even with a UKIP bloc in the commons, there is a real possibility the UK would have voted Remain.

Moreover, proportional systems have been shown to work. Scotland uses the Additional Member System for its Parliamentary elections. This system alleviates concerns about losing the local representative while still allowing proportionality through the additional member. Denmark uses the d'Hondt method with multi member constituencies and allocation of seats, meaning that its politics must run on consensus, rather than entrenching party politics.

Proportional systems aren't perfect. Each has its flaws, but UK politics has evolved since the Westminster system was designed: let its elections evolve with it.

NO – Jan de Boer

British politics in the most recent past has been a story of pure dissatisfaction. With no side gaining a majority under the current system of voting, even the people who lost felt like they won and the people who won felt like they lost. We have now gone so far down the rabbit hole that I'm seeing fossils. With the lack of solid government at present, calls are being raised for reforms to the voting system to produce a "better" result, an argument I believe to be unfounded.

The first past the post system has been a stalwart part of our democracy for many an election, and has the benefit of producing strong majority governments in the past. This has led to governments with the political capital to enact real change without the constraints that the inevitable coalitions in proportional democracies provide. Imagine how much would get done under a Conservative-Plaid Cymru-Green coalition. The level of progress that the government would make would be measured in inches with the amount of internal debate and squabbling within the government.

Proportional democracies are effective when dramatic change isn't required, and unfortunately today it is. What's more is that a first past the post system allows for a cohesive government effort toward one policy or another. In times such as these, what is necessary is a strong and stable government to enact serious largescale reform, if and when necessary.

If you see the government of Theresa May as weak and fragile, think of the clout the British government would have with UKIP MPs undermining the authority of the Prime Minister at every turn. Proportionally represented governments allow for a plurality of views to be expressed, but what use is plurality when the cohesion of government is absent? In times when dynamic leadership is required, the prospect of minority governments or multiple party coalitions makes me shiver.

In order for proportional representation to work in this country, radical changes in political parties would have to occur. Political partisanship would have to end between party lines if anything like an amicable coalition could be formed. If we were to apply the rules of this system to the 2017 General Election, the Conservative Party would have to find allies in 77 more seats, Labour would need 92 more seats and so on.

The only parties that would benefit from the change would be the non-regional third parties of the Lib Dems, UKIP and the Green Party. If you think that a Conservative-DUP coalition is a coalition of chaos, say hello to the Conservative-Lib Dem-UKIPGreen-DUP-UUP coalition. Or (for the sake of fairness) the Labour-Lib Dem-UKIP-Green-SNPPlaid Cymru coalition. In short, a democratic nightmare.

The only way that I could see myself being for electoral reform is if I know that each political party would be willing to work together for the betterment of the UK. In this climate however, no such guarantee exists. We live in a nation where the political parties are at each others' throats. Until this animosity can be remedied, I will be sticking with a system that has been with us since the beginning.



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