

## Written evidence submitted by Make Votes Matter

**Introduction**

Our politics is facing a crisis of trust and engagement. A lack of trust in politics is driving apathy, disaffection and dissatisfaction, culminating in a drop in turnout by 7.6% points between the 2019 and 2024 general elections. Without significant action to modernise our institutions to make them more reactive, inclusive and representative of the public that it serves, we risk precipitating a full blown crisis in democracy.

Make Votes Matter is a grassroots community of more than 100,000 activists and local groups, all over the country. Our supporters campaign for fairer elections, in which all voices are heard and all votes matter. In support of this submission, more than 2000 supporters shared their thoughts with us on why our electoral system must be a key part of any modernisation of our democracy.

The 2024 general election was the most disproportional one in the UK on record, resulting in this Parliament being more out of step than ever before with the public's voting preferences. A shocking 57.8% of voters did not get a representative of their choosing, highlighting a significant democratic deficit in our political system. Britain is a nation of innovators, of dynamism and the pursuit of 'fair play'. Our institutions should reflect this spirit, so why doesn't our electoral system? This submission summarises the ways in which our current voting system contributes to distrust and alienation in politics, reviews the levels of trust in politics in peer nations, and examines the impact that electoral reform had in New Zealand after electoral reform.

It is Make Votes Matter's view that to modernise our Parliament and democracy, the House of Commons should follow in the footsteps of its sister institutions in the UK and abroad, in scrapping the First Past the Post system and replacing it with a system of Proportional Representation. We believe that institutions should safeguard and facilitate our democratic culture, bolstering trust through engagement and agency, rather than frustrating them. We need to reset our politics around a fundamental principle: that all voices should count equally and that all votes should matter.

**The 2024 election at a glance**

In their review of the 2024 election, the Electoral Commission found that turnout was impacted by low levels of trust in politicians as well as a perceived absence of choice.

- 57.8% of voters were unrepresented, a total of 16.6 million people
- Turnout was 59.9%, down 7.6% from 2019
- Lowest ever Two-Party share of the vote (57.8%) of the vote.
- First time four parties have received more than a 10% vote share (with a 5th on 9%)

This election confirmed that the United Kingdom truly is a multi-party democracy. Voters are increasingly rejecting the two-party system that First Past the Post incentivises. The rigidity of our system means that geography determines the value of your vote.

## **Our Broken System**

The core failing of FPTP is that it distorts our politics, our democracy and with it, our political, social and economic outcomes. Under the current system, each constituency elects a single MP. The candidate with the most votes is elected, regardless of whether they won a majority of votes. For example, it is possible to win in a constituency with only 26.7% of the vote, as the Labour Party did in Norfolk South West in 2024. All other votes, for losing candidates, are effectively disregarded. Nationwide, Parliament does not reflect political parties' overall support, making geography more important than voters, and creating an inherent democratic deficit. We have seen stark examples of this in recent years. In 2015, the Scottish National Party won 1.5 million votes and 56 MPs. On the same day, UKIP, the Green Party and the Liberal Democrats won 7.5 million votes between them, but only 10 MPs. At the 2019 election, the Conservative Party won a landslide majority despite 56% of voters supporting other parties. In 2024, we saw the most egregious example of our system's disproportionality, with our most distorted election result ever, and only the second most disproportional result in Western European history. The Labour Party won their second biggest majority ever, on a historic low for a single governing party, with just 34% of the vote in return for 63% of the seats.

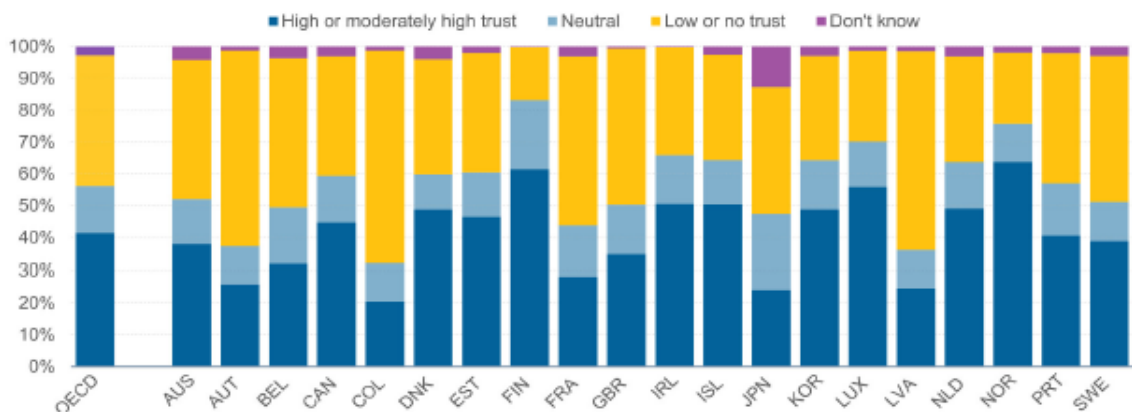
Not only are votes for losing candidates effectively wasted, but so are votes for winning candidates above what is needed to win. Between votes for losing candidates and surplus votes for winners, 73.7% of votes at the 2024 General Election did not count towards the final outcome. In many constituencies, the same party always wins with a huge majority of the vote meaning thousands of their voters could have stayed home without changing the result. This leaves voters feeling that they cannot influence politics, while politicians scramble to convince the small minority of voters who could swing the next election, rather than representing the country as a whole.

This leads to vastly unequal levels of attention given to "safe" and "marginal" seats. Marginal seats are those which are closely fought by two or more parties. Politicians and activists flock to these constituencies to campaign, policy decisions are explicitly made with reference to them, while journalists often consider how political events might be received in so-called 'key marginals'. In safe - or 'stale' - seats, by contrast, one party is so popular that the constituency is unlikely to be won by anyone else. These areas languish, with scarce campaigning, little influence and a voice which can be safely ignored by politicians.

Parties know that they can be elected on a small minority of the vote if they manage to reach the "correct" voters. In fact, only one government since the Second World War was formed of parties which won a majority of the vote between them. This ability to wield absolute power on a minority of the vote leads to unstable, short-sighted governments that are able to rush through legislation without proper, representative scrutiny in Parliament.

The First Past the Post voting system has also been proven to correlate with increased political instability. Our report, *Strong and Stable*<sup>1</sup>, found that when measured across 10 indices of political stability, the most stable democracies in our sample were those using Proportional Representation. When it came to ministerial and Prime Ministerial turnover and inter-parliamentary volatility, PR systems on average performed far better than their majoritarian counterparts. The public expect politics to deliver for them, but how can it if it is unstable and unrepresentative of their views? The bedrock of any progress over the long term in any programme of modernisation is stability. Based on the evidence, it is clear that in this area, along with many others, First-Past-the-Post is not fit for purpose.

### Trust in Politics Across the OECD



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Keir Starmer has made rebuilding trust in politics, and creating institutions that serve delivery of key outcomes, a significant priority in his programme for government. When analysing OECD data, we found that there is a correlation between the electoral system used by a country and the degree of trust in the national government. On average, nations using majoritarian voting systems suffered from 45.9% distrust in government, whilst those using proportional systems had an average of 39.9%. When considering the highest levels of trust, the best scores could also be found in nations using PR systems, with all 5 nations scoring higher than 50% on trust using some form of Proportional Representation. The highest score for any nations using majoritarian systems is Canada with 44.7%.

Clearly, the more accurately a country's political system reflects its public opinion, the more confidence people have in their representatives. Should we really be surprised? The more people have the political representation they voted for, the stronger the feeling of agency that citizens have in determining the direction of the country. This is likely to foster a greater sense of connectedness and stake in the political system, its processes and institutions.

### New Zealand

<sup>1</sup> Strong and Stable

<sup>2</sup> OECD

All of our most recently formed chambers through the Devolution of the late 90s, were formed under Proportional Systems. With Holyrood and the Senedd initially using versions of the Alternative Member System (AMS), though the Senedd is due to use a Party List system at the next election. Northern Ireland also elects its assembly using the Single Transferable Vote (STV). In designing these institutions, there was an implicit acknowledgement that modern institutions must be rooted in inclusion, engagement and equal agency for all citizens.

However, though these are significant institutions with important scope over legislation, Westminster retains a great degree of policy supremacy. A recent example of shifting a primary legislature from FPTP to PR can be found in New Zealand.

New Zealand is the most recent OECD nation to transition from First Past the Post to a more proportional voting system, having held elections under the Mixed Member System since 1996. After a series of disproportional election results in the 1970's and 1980s, political actors across the spectrum were united in seeking to address the democratic deficit through debate over the future of the voting system.

In analysing measures of trust in politics before and after New Zealand's electoral reform, academics<sup>3</sup> found that trust had improved on several measures. Significant improvements were found across almost all indices of trust that were studied, with a stark change in the way that both voters and non-voters viewed the political system after reform. Fewer people felt that MPs were out of touch with the public, with more crediting Politicians with caring for the people they serve. More strikingly, non-voters saw a huge change in the way they perceived the value of both voting as an act as well as the worth that their vote had when participating in an election.

This highlights that, whilst many may choose to not participate in the election for their own reasons, they were far less to view the exercise of voting negatively due to systemic reasons, still retaining trust in the system as a whole. New Zealand's experience of electoral reform is a clear indicator that our voting system is a critical institution in bolstering trust in our politics. Their democratic modernisation process triggered a significant and rapid change in people's sentiment around the value of participation in democracy, and with it, their trust in the political processes and actors within them.

## **Recommendation**

### National Commission on Electoral Reform

Along with the APPG for Fair Elections<sup>4</sup>, Make Votes Matter is calling on the government to establish a National Commission for Electoral Reform. This would build on the recognition that our electoral system is contributing to distrust and alienation, and would seek to recommend a fair and democratic alternative to modernise our politics around one key principle: that every vote counts equally.

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<sup>3</sup> Banducci, S.A., Donovan, T. and Karp, J.A., 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Free But Not Fair 2024

The Commission should be independent, authoritative and highly representative, allowing citizens, alongside experts, to evaluate the options, draw insights from the UK's devolved bodies and other democracies, and recommend a new system for modern Britain that would bolster public trust and confidence.

It should be established in 2025 in order to report to Parliament in good time for its recommendations to be progressed within the current parliamentary term.

## **Conclusion**

Modernisation should be about reassessing our current institutions to understand if they are fit for purpose. It is clear that our voting system isn't delivering and is now a liability in fostering distrust in our democracy. We need strong institutions that bolster our democracy through real inclusion and representation. Our voting system underpins the process of engagement that many have with politics. When the agency of voters is distorted through the prism of wasted votes, it leads to misrepresentative politics, in which the full breadth of diversity of ideas, experiences and priorities amongst the public are not visible in our politics. This creates a disconnect between those who govern, and those they serve.

It's clear that many of our peer nations that use Proportional Representation don't suffer from a lack of trust in politics in the same way, and that lessons can be learned about the role that our voting system has in frustrating meaningful agency in our politics. Our newest institutions were built around a recognition that, in order to reflect the people they serve, they need to ensure that all votes count equally. If the Mother of all Parliaments is to truly modernise, it too must reform around this principle. It's time to conduct a National Commission, combining citizen and expert input into a process of finding a voting system that delivers a real voice, choice and representation to all.

## **Appendix:**

Stability Report: [Strong-and-Stable-Report\\_Final.pdfv](#)

Free but not Fair: [Free But Not Fair – APPG for Fair Elections](#)

OECD Data: [Trust in government, UK - Office for National Statistics](#)

Trust in Politics New Zealand 1993-1996: Banducci, S.A., Donovan, T. and Karp, J.A., 1999.

Proportional representation and attitudes about politics: Results from New Zealand.

*Electoral Studies*, 18(4), pp.533-555.

December 2024