

THE ALTERNATIVE

When seats match votes, it's much harder to impose policies that benefit a few against the interests of the majority – interests for which trade unions have always fought.

There are several different versions of reform. We support the Single Transferable Vote system used in Scottish local elections, Northern Ireland, Ireland and in many countries across the world. It is also used by many unions, including the RMT.

Voters rank candidates in order of preference, and a number of representatives are elected in a local area – meaning there is real competition, and votes aren't thrown on the scrapheap if someone's first preference doesn't have enough support.

Momentum is growing for change. After the general election last year, half a million people signed petitions calling for proportional representation, and representatives from five major parties handed these signatures into 10 Downing Street. Support within Labour, other parties and unions is growing all the time.

We're pleased to be contributing to this discussion, and hope unions, like our Chartist forbears, get behind the moves to build a better democracy.

THE CASE FOR ELECTORAL REFORM

At the Electoral Reform Society, we believe that every voice should be heard, that every vote should be treated equally, and that everyone should feel empowered to take part in our democracy. But the system used for counting votes in general elections and local elections in England and Wales actively prevents this vision from becoming a reality. People's votes are being wasted, some votes count for more than others, and many feel they have no role in our democratic life.

The trade union case for electoral reform has never been stronger.

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TRADE UNIONS AND ELECTORAL REFORM

Making democracy work for working people

Trade unions and workers' movements have a proud history championing democratic reform.

From the Chartists pushing for universal suffrage to the Scottish TUC's role in the campaign for the Scottish Parliament, unions have been at the forefront of demands for a better democracy that puts people at the centre.

Today, there is a new democratic frontier for trade unions in Britain: electoral reform.

SEATS DON'T MATCH VOTES

Under First Past the Post – the system used for General Elections and local elections in England and Wales – the number of votes a party receives bears little relation to the number of seats that party wins in Parliament. And that means people's political wishes are not being translated into political power.

The 2015 election was the most disproportionate election in British history,

giving the Conservatives a majority of seats on 37% of the vote. Put simply, people's votes did not translate into representation. 50% of votes in the election (15 million) were 'wasted' – they didn't contribute to electing an MP, another 24% went to candidates who had already won. And 2.8m voters were likely to have voted 'tactically', holding their nose to back a 'lesser evil'.

37% of the vote should never equal 100% of power. Yet the current government secured an overall majority with the backing of just 24% of the electorate.

At the same time, Labour's vote-share

actually increased at the general election – yet their number of seats fell. And it took more than a million votes to elect just one Green MP, but 23,000 for a Democratic Unionist (DUP) MP.

It's no wonder that many working people become disillusioned with a political system that seems to side-line their interests – and they may disengage altogether. It's a dangerous cocktail.

THE SYSTEM CREATES 'SAFE SEATS'

Proportional representation is a question of equality. A month before the 2015 General Election, we were able to predict the outcome of 368 Parliamentary seats – and we only got five wrong. When parties know they barely have to bother campaigning in nearly 400 seats, they focus on a handful of 'marginals'. That

means the millions of people who live in those safe seats can be effectively ignored by the political parties. As a result, investment and attention is not given equally to areas on the basis of need. You can see that in the lack of post-industrial strategy and investment which has left some northern areas totally neglected after traditional industries declined.

The lack of political competition in these safe seats has left the interests of many working people unfairly unrepresented. Trade unionists and the communities, workplaces and industries they are in should

have a political voice wherever they are.

The result is that we end up with a narrow political debate, based on the priorities of those in the handful of marginals, while large swathes of the country are left to wither on the vine. And in turn it gives a false mandate to governments to railroad through policies without consensus: when so many voters can be safely written off, it's carte blanche for a majority government that only has minority support.