

THE TRADE UNION CASE FOR POLITICAL REFORM

“Our trade union rights get ripped up every time the Tories get in. We urgently need this government to bring in proportional representation to enable us to secure newly won rights for unions and working people over the long term.”

**Mick Whelan, ASLEF General Secretary
and Chair of Labour Unions.**



INTRODUCTION

The trade union movement has always led demands for greater democracy, empowering working people and communities, and offering a different vision of society. Today, that demand for greater democracy is vital and urgent. Across the world, the powerful levers of government are being used to undo rights and freedoms, dismantle democratic safeguards, hollow out the state, and attack minorities.

We need to rewire our system to put wealth and power in the hands of the many, giving ordinary people collective control over the things that affect their lives and protect against unaccountable power.

But we cannot build a country that works for working people unless we take on our dysfunctional state. We need a political system that embodies the values of equality, fairness and representation, with a fair proportional representation (PR) electoral system and equality of access and participation at every level.

Empowerment is perhaps the most important thing the trade union movement can offer people.

Only by putting democracy at the heart of our agenda can we build an economy and society that works for all – a politics for the many.

**APR
2025**

“It’s clear to me that we need a new voting system. One where we can make our voices heard loud and clear; where six million working people can have a say, fight for a better future and know that in the next Parliament and the one after that, our voices will be there ensuring that every gain made for trade unions and working people is never lost.”

Ed Baldwin,
CWU member

“Voting tactically is a choice that no voter should have to make. And if we had proportional representation they wouldn’t have to. A system where every vote matters. A system where voters can, every time, choose the Party whose values they most closely share. A system aligned with lower levels of inequality, higher standards of living and better trade union rights.”

Jess Carrington,
Unison member

“The widespread feeling that ordinary people do not have a fair say over who speaks for them or how they are governed—is feeding the record low levels of trust in politics and faith in democracy, and that should worry all of us. Most people got neither the party they voted for into government nor the candidate they voted for as their local MP.”

Alex Sobel MP,
Chair of the APPG for Fair Elections

WHO SUPPORTS PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION?

Trade unions with policy supporting electoral reform: ASLEF, BFAWU, FBU, Musicians Union, PCS, Prospect, UCU, Unison, Unite, USDAW, TSSA.

Political parties with policy supporting electoral reform: Green Party, Labour Party, Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru, SNP plus the All Party Parliamentary Group for Fair Elections, already one of the largest APPGs in the parliament.

Other organisations supporting electoral reform: Compass, Electoral Reform Society, Equality Trust, Fair Vote, Friends of the Earth, Green New Deal Rising, Greenpeace, High Pay Centre, Involve, Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust, Make Votes Matter, Open Britain, Rapid Transition Alliance, Tax Justice UK, The 99% Organisation and Unlock Democracy.

Public support for electoral reform: Public support for PR is growing. In 2022, the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey showed a majority in favour of PR for the first time in forty years and that trend has continued. The most recent BSA survey showed 53% in favour of change and support for the existing system slipping to its lowest ever level (40%).¹ YouGov surveys that track support for PR show a consistent substantial support for PR over FPTP since they started tracking in 2019.²

YOU HAVE MADE A DIFFERENCE

Calls for change are growing louder in the labour movement. In 2022, the Labour Party Conference backed a motion in support of PR, supported by hundreds of Labour branches and 140 CLPs.³ Already in 2025 the Westminster parliament has debated electoral reform twice in the chamber and the House of Lords hereditary peers bill will soon see those who have a seat in our parliament simply by birthright finally removed.

HOW WESTMINSTER'S VOTING SYSTEM IS FAILING WORKERS

The Westminster system is failing working people. Increasingly disconnected and remote, the system is creating the conditions for government for the few, providing an open door to cronyism, ripping up trade union rights, exacerbating inequality and creating political chaos.

1. DISCONNECTION AND WARPED OUTCOMES

First Past the Post (the system used to elect MPs) is a 'majoritarian' electoral system. It is designed to create single-party governments and ensures that parties get a majority of seats – almost always without them getting a majority of votes. The system is designed for two main parties contesting elections, when only one party is likely to get a majority, or close to a majority, of the votes.

However, with more parties contesting elections and winning votes, a single-party government can be formed under FPTP on a small percentage of the overall vote share – even if that doesn't reflect the opinion across the country.

The UK has already shifted to multi-party voting. The 2024 election was the first time in British history where four parties received over 10% of the votes and five received over 5%. FPTP doesn't work for multi-party elections, instead it creates the conditions for disproportional and volatile results. Future elections could see more elections won on smaller pluralities of the popular vote, or wrong winner elections, where the party in power does not have the largest share of the vote.

In addition, the electoral system, by placing emphasis on geography over proportionality, turns the government's focus onto the group of voters and places which swing elections – instead of the needs of the country as a whole. These 'hero' voters have far more sway on government policy meaning the voices of the many aren't heard as

loudly. This can create a pull towards right-wing policies as the voters needed to be won over are not representative of the population as a whole.

The future of FPTP is governments that do not represent the country, and policies that do not reflect what working people need and want.

2. TRADE UNION RIGHTS RIPPED UP

The see-saw of FPTP single-party domination in Britain has allowed for sweeping legislation that has eroded our trade union rights. Trade union rights have been the target of extensive reforms by right-wing governments when they secure power – enabled by a centralised, elitist political system.

Over the last forty-five years, successive UK governments have played tug of war with the rights of trade unions. The list of statutory obligations on unions has grown exponentially as right-wing governments with single-party majorities have sought to restrict and heavily regulate trade union activity and further reduce our potential challenge to power.

Since 1980 there have been no less than sixteen employment and trade union acts restricting and then, to a degree, clawing back union rights. Many of these acts, in particular the Employment Acts of 1980, 1988, Trade Union Acts of 1984 and 2016, and the Trade Union Reform and Employment Rights Act 1993, have been introduced swiftly after General Elections. In nearly all cases, union and employment legislation has been introduced to parliament less than seven months after a general election.

Avoiding the see-saw, tit for tat of FPTP means policies that are fair and work for everyone are less likely to become political footballs.

All of the EU and OECD countries which have the highest union density and all but one of the countries with the highest levels of collective bargaining coverage, are democracies with PR electoral systems.⁴⁵⁶

3. ELECTORAL INCENTIVES AND ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

Westminster's rigged voting system creates an incentive for governments to funnel public funding to a handful of swing seats that they need to take power. This means there is an inbuilt incentive to distribute resources to certain areas and not necessarily those with greatest need.

The Conservative 'Town's Fund' in 2021 (a £3.6 billion fund to improve towns across England and 'level up' regions) was investigated by the Public Accounts Select Committee and a report published by the National Audit Office over concerns about the distribution of these funds. The 'Towns Fund' not only disproportionately favoured Conservative-held towns but specifically those in which the Conservative lead was marginal.⁷ Research found that "the success rate for Conservative-held towns in the low priority group was actually higher than the success rate for all other towns in the medium priority group" meaning the funding went to areas that were not the most deserving.⁸

We see this time and time again. An earlier study in 2020 showed that Labour councils bore the brunt of local government cuts over the past decade.⁹ And in 2019, the BBC found that Conservative-held constituencies were overwhelming beneficiaries of the government's increase in schools funding.¹⁰

4. DECLINING TRUST

Trust in government has reached new lows in the UK. The British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey found in 2024 that 45% of people would 'almost never' trust any government to put the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party. The same survey found that 58% of people would 'almost never' trust politicians to tell the truth when they are in a tight corner.¹¹

Voter turnout at the last General Election was the second lowest since universal suffrage and research shows that up to 8 million eligible voters are missing from the electoral register meaning many voters aren't even captured in that figure.

In addition, turnout gaps are increasing. A recent IPPR report found that turnout was 11% higher in constituencies with the most over 64-year-olds compared to those with the fewest and 13% higher in constituencies with the most homeowners compared to those with the fewest.¹² The gap between graduates and non-graduates stands at 11% and that turnout gap has also increased over time.¹³

Our political system is driving down trust, creating inequalities and in doing so silencing the voices of many.

5. CORPORATE CAPTURE

The structure of our political institutions and how they are composed makes a fundamental difference to who governs, and how: whether that system works in the interests of the many, or the few. From the unelected Lords to the warped voting system, these broken systems determine who has power, and who is shut out.

The single-party majority governments created by FPTP (nearly always on less than a majority of votes) and centralisation of the Westminster system means that there is a direct route to power for lobbyists, and the checks and balances provided by other parties are diminished. It makes the system more vulnerable to corporate capture – as we saw during the pandemic.

The unelected House of Lords is itself a space for unrestricted corporate lobbying access at the heart of parliament. Lords have second jobs and are often employed by big business. Ten of the thirteen members of the House of Lords financial services regulation committee have declared interests in the sector including Peers working for City firms.¹⁴ Many Peers have business links to foreign states and receive payments for consultancy advice¹⁵ including from Russian businesses which parliament's Intelligence and Security report warned "should be carefully scrutinised, given the potential for the Russian state to exploit them".¹⁶

Peers with a background in manual or skilled trades are few and far between. Outside of representative politics, the

majority of Peers come from the business, legal and financial sectors. Previous appointees include the former Prime Minister's brother and a Conservative donor appointed against the advice of the Lords Appointment Commission.¹⁷

6. CONCENTRATED POWER

The Westminster system is designed to concentrate power at the top and encourage centralised decision-making.

Other systems are built around power-sharing both centrally and with devolved levels of government. In this way, the Westminster system stands in opposition to the consensus model which 'tries to share, disperse and limit power in a variety of ways'.¹⁸

People feel much more politically connected to their local areas and engaged at the local level. But a Westminster-system that moves power upwards works against giving people real control.¹⁹

Over the years we have seen power stripped away from local government and communities, leaving people feeling powerless and turning against democratic norms. And at Westminster, the pull of an all-powerful executive reduces the voice of parliament and sees backbench MPs unable to fully represent their constituents interests on the issues that matter to them.

7. FPTP AND THE FAR RIGHT

FPTP does not keep extremists out of politics; rather than barring the far right from power, FPTP gives all the power to one party and those parties can elect leaders who sit on the extremes of their party, or move towards the extremes.

In a speech at the University of Glasgow in 2019, former Prime Minister John Major said: "The rationale for extremists joining mainstream parties is logical: from within them, they can influence policy; from without, they very rarely can." First Past the Post allows extremists to remain hidden until it's too late, whilst PR creates greater visibility and transparency of political viewpoints early on.

Far right political parties use people's feelings of unhappiness and powerlessness to gain support within

communities. When services are lost, affordable housing is in short supply and wages are kept low or jobs are lost, people get angry and distrustful. If people feel their elected politicians from mainstream parties are not representing them, they may turn to far right parties who use divisive language and blame to turn neighbour against neighbour. People need to be empowered through an electoral system with proportional representation which would make politicians more accountable and bring them closer to those they seek to represent.

FPTP does not prevent extreme politics, instead it creates the conditions to give minority opinion unmediated power.

8. RIGGED REPRESENTATION

The Westminster system is failing to represent the UK in the 21st Century.

The number of black and minority ethnic MPs has only reached 14% after the most recent election. Whilst the number of women MPs reached a historic 41% in 2024, this is largely due to the efforts of parties like Labour taking action. 23% of current MPs are also privately educated compared to 7% of the current UK school population.

The House of Lords is worse with only 6% of the House of Lords membership from black or ethnic minority backgrounds, and only 29% of peers are women. It really is a private member's club largely reserved for wealthy men.

If our political system excludes people's voices, its decisions will be poorer. Ensuring our political institutions properly represent the people they serve ensures that the issues that matter get heard and a diversity of experiences and knowledge help shape policy.

With the gender pay gap growing²⁰ and BME workers more likely to be in insecure work,²¹ it is vital that our political institutions reflect the people they serve to secure better policies for working people.

Countries with proportional electoral systems are generally more representative. The top ranked democracies

in the world for women's representation – such as the Nordic states – use forms of PR in their legislature. In addition, PR is an enabler of techniques for increasing women's representation such as 'zipping' in which party lists alternate genders. Instead, with just one seat up for grabs in each area, First Past the Post benefits the already-powerful.

9. CHAOS UNDER FIRST PAST THE POST

Defenders of First Past the Post often argue that the system delivers so-called 'strong government', meaning one party gets a winner's bonus (at the expense of voters' choices) enabling them to govern alone.

The built-in trade off within the First Past the Post system is that proportionality is sacrificed in order to artificially create the conditions for single party government.

But putting power in one place and devaluing consensus-building can have disastrous results as we saw when the former Prime Minister, Liz Truss introduced her 'mini budget' without an independent forecast from the Office for Budget Responsibility.

The previous administration also gave the UK three different Prime Ministers in the space of a year. FPTP has not created strong or stable government in recent years.

The increased volatility of elections with voters switching party and choosing later who to vote for, combined with more multi-party voting, is causing FPTP to throw up erratic and unpredictable results. It means that a small swing in either direction can have huge implications. In 2019, the Conservatives 'landslide' was won on a 1.3% increase in vote share on their 2017 result which had seen the PM lose her majority. In 2017, Labour had 3 million more votes than in 2024.

10. MEGA DONORS AND FOREIGN FUNDING

As in the US, under the UK's Westminster system there is a huge amount to be gained by spending big in marginal constituencies, but the UK is even more vulnerable to financial influence than the US because a lot can be gained by relatively small amounts.

This means that wealthy individual donors have an outsized influence on our politics. Transparency International found that in 2023 one in every eight pounds of political donations were made by just one individual.²²

The growth in online campaigning and the lack of regulation around funding entities means this is increasingly easy to do, leaving our elections vulnerable. In this environment, dark money has crept into UK politics leaving it wide open to the influence of foreign governments and wealthy individuals.

Previous governments have tightened UK-based campaigning activity for charities and Trade Unions, whilst doing nothing to close the loopholes that allow money to filter in from overseas – loopholes that the Electoral Commission and Committee on Standards have been warning about for years.²³

These loopholes allow funding from outside the UK to be funnelled into political parties via shell companies or unincorporated associations. Since 2010, 38.6 million has been given to political parties via unincorporated associations without being declared in the gifts register or reported to the Electoral Commission.²⁴ Gifts can be made to unincorporated associations with no transparency about the true source of the funds and companies can still donate vast sums to political parties without needing to prove the money has been made in the UK. The previous government also significantly raised the amount donors can give to political parties without reporting it – quietly increasing the reporting threshold by a third.²⁵

Our political funding rules need to be tightened to ensure that foreign funding cannot distort our politics by sneaking in the back door, closing loopholes for companies and unincorporated associations and requiring greater transparency from donors.

11. VESTED INTERESTS

Whilst trade unions are heavily regulated, Westminster has some of the weakest lobbying regulation in the world.

The current Westminster regulations miss out on an estimated 85% of lobbying activity.²⁶

The revolving door of politics has also seen numerous lobbying scandals including ex-Prime Minister David Cameron lobbying on behalf of Greensill capital – a financial services company – during the Covid pandemic.

The former Chair of the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments (ACOPA) which is supposed to prevent civil servants and ministers financially benefitting from their contacts and knowledge has described the system as ‘bust’ saying, “There can be no credibility in a system that continues to have no demonstrable consequences or tangible deterrent for non-compliance”.

Too often it is the interests of business that take priority in our political system.

WHAT POLITICS FOR THE MANY WANTS TO CHANGE

The overall goal of the Politics for the Many campaign is to secure a proportional voting system for Westminster elections and scrap First Past the Post. We want everyone’s vote to count equally.

POLITICS FOR THE MANY ALSO SUPPORTS THE FOLLOWING CAMPAIGN OBJECTIVES:

- **Restore preferential voting for Mayors of combined authorities**

Mayors now have significant powers and used to be elected by a preferential system. The Tories scrapped that when they thought they were going to lose the mayoral elections and replaced it with First Past the Post.

■ **House of Lords reform**

We want to see a smaller, elected second chamber that represents the entire country, not the privileged elite.

■ **Extending the right to vote at 16**

16 and 17 year olds in Scotland and Wales can vote for their members of the Scottish and Welsh Parliaments, as well as their local councillors. We want all 16 and 17 year olds to be allowed to vote in all elections.

■ **Scrapping the failed voter ID regime**

Demanding ID was unnecessary and damaging to our democracy. One voter turned away is one too many, yet the scheme saw 16,000 voters turned away at the 2024 General Election.

GET INVOLVED

If you would like to get involved in the campaign for political reform please visit our website at www.politicsforthemany.co.uk or using the QR code below.

You can join online for free and find more information, campaign tools and templates as well as a list of trade union events taking place throughout the year.

FURTHER READING

In a time when it can be hard to separate out facts from disinformation, we thought it would be helpful to offer a couple trusted sources of information about elections and electoral reform to get you started.

- **Electoral Reform Society** – Latest news and research section on their website
- **House of Commons Library** – produce reports with statistics about election results and briefings to support debates on electoral reform
- **APPG for Fair Elections** – *Free But Not Fair* report

This is not an exhaustive list and more good quality materials can be found on the websites of the organisations we listed as supporting electoral reform. If you need more or want to check anything, please get in touch.

ENDNOTES

- 1 <https://natcen.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2024-06/BSA41DamagedPolitics.pdf>
- 2 <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/trackers/should-we-change-our-current-british-voting-system>
- 3 <https://labourlist.org/2022/09/pr-conference-motions-most-popular-among-clps-for-second-year-running/>
- 4 <https://www.worker-participation.eu/National-Industrial-Relations/Across-Europe/Trade-Unions2>
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- 6 <https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/sub-issues/collective-bargaining-and-social-dialogue.html>
- 7 Public Accounts Committee (2020) 'Selecting towns for the Towns Fund' report, 11 November. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5801/cmselect/cmpubacc/651/65102.htm>
- 8 Hanretty, C. (2020) 'The pork barrel politics of the Towns Fund', LSE Blog, 02 October 2020. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/the-pork-barrel-politics-of-the-towns-fund/>
- 9 Lawrence, F., McIntyre, N., Butler, P. (2020) 'Labour councils in England hit harder by austerity than Tory areas', The Guardian, 21 June 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/jun/21/exclusive-labour-councils-in-england-hit-harder-by-austerity-than-tory-areas>
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- 11 <https://natcen.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2024-06/BSA41DamagedPolitics.pdf>
- 12 <https://www.ippr.org/articles/half-of-us>
- 13 <https://www.ippr.org/media-office/revealed-graduate-turnout-divide-doubled-in-2024-election-exposing-government-blind-spot-ippr-warns>
- 14 "Peers working for City firms dominate Lords panel scrutinising financial sector" Guardian, March 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2025/mar/12/peers-working-for-city-firms-dominate-lords-panel-scrutinising-financial-sector>
- 15 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2025/mar/10/foreign-states-repressive-regimes-pay-peers-over-3m-two-years>

- 16 The Intelligence and Security report into Russia in 2020 found that “It is notable that a number of Members of the House of Lords have business interests linked to Russia, or work directly for major Russian companies linked to the Russian state – these relationships should be carefully scrutinised, given the potential for the Russian state to exploit them.” p.16 HC 632 – Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament – Russia https://isc.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/CCS207_CCS0221966010-001_Russia-Report-v02-Web_Accessible.pdf
- 17 PM rejects official advice in awarding peerage to Peter Cruddas The Guardian <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/dec/22/pm-rejects-officialadvice-in-awarding-petercruddas-peerage>
- 18 Lijphart, A. (2012) Patterns of Democracy, second edition. Yale University Press.
- 19 <https://politicsforthemany.co.uk/the-new-foundations-a-future-built-on-democracy/#ib-toc-anchor-6>
- 20 <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/equal-pay-day-2024>
- 21 <https://www.tuc.org.uk/news/number-bme-workers-insecure-work-has-boomed-over-past-decade-tuc-warns#:~:text=%E2%80%99CBut%20too%20many%20Black%20and,is%20structural%20racism%20in%20action.>
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Politics for the Many is supported by leading trade unionists across all Labour-linked unions and beyond, and we want to step our campaigning up a gear.

Get involved here: politicsforthemany.co.uk

Can you pass a motion in your union backing proportional representation?

Get in touch: admin@politicsforthemany.co.uk

X & Bluesky: politics4many

Facebook: PoliticsfortheMany

Want to find out more?

Visit our website, or scan the QR code below, to watch Professor Rob Ford's presentation on why trade unions should make electoral reform a priority.

