

From Representative Democracy to Party Politics



*out of*  
**POLITICS**

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HOW IT'S SUPPOSED TO WORK  
- WHY IT ISN'T WORKING -  
AND HOW TO FIX IT.

## Hello and Welcome to *Taking the Party out of Politics!*

This is a podcast about understanding how politics is supposed to work, ...  
... why it isn't working as well as it should be working, ...  
... and what we might be able to do about it.

Because:

by understanding a little bit more clearly *how* things are supposed to work,  
and *why* they are a bit messed up,  
we *might* be able to get things to work a *bit better*. Perhaps even a *lot better*.

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This is a podcast about the systems and functioning of Politics which we should all understand, because those systems affect all of our lives, all of the time.

Left-wing or right-wing.

International Intergovernmental, or Parish Council.

And this podcast is about how we might be able to make those systems work a bit better.

By understanding: what is supposed to happen.

By understanding: why it isn't always happening in the way it is supposed to.

And by understanding: what sort of things we might do to make things better.

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This is Season 1, in which we are taking a look at how government is supposed to work, from the perspective of us – the voters. In Season 2, we will be looking at how government is supposed to work, from the perspective of someone trying to get elected, and then trying to do a good job. Finally, in Season 3, we will be looking at what we might be able to do, to make things work a bit better.

In the introduction, we had an overview of what the issues are, and a general idea of the route we are going to take through this – and why this is important.

In Episode 2, we started to think about why we have a government at all, and the tacit – perhaps unspoken – agreement which exists between:

- those who do the governing, and
- those who agree to be governed

(what we call the *Social Contract*).

Last time, in Episode 3, we discussed what we mean by the word 'Democracy', along with other ideas, such as consideration for others and respect for minorities. Then moved from there to start to explore the particular form of '*Representative* Democracy' which we use.

And so, on to today.

Today we are going to explore how the very general idea of *Representative Democracy* actually pans out in practice, by looking at how we select our representatives, both locally and nationally.

### Summary so far

So, as we said at the end of Episode 3, we can't actually get everyone together to discuss and agree on every little issue. To get most things done, we elect representatives to take the decisions on our behalf.

In a Representative Democracy, we choose someone locally to ...

- Represent our interests and views.
- To read all of the details
- To think about all of the implications

All the representatives get together to talk through all the issues. They get together in a place which is actually named after the process of talking - Parliament.



[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/42/London\\_Parliament\\_2007-1.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/42/London_Parliament_2007-1.jpg)

The representatives then become a member of the group of people who talk through all the issues - a Member of Parliament (MP).

MPs are usually elected all at the same time, in a General Election<sup>1</sup>.

The group of people in the area which an MP represents is called their *constituency* or their *seat*.

Because the number of MPs who are then in Parliament for each party is important, you can hear people talking about *the party which has the most seats in Parliament*, which makes it sound as though the *seat* is actually in *Parliament*. But it's not. An MP's seat is the constituency which they represent.



[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/3d/Official\\_portrait\\_of\\_Nadia\\_Whittome\\_MP\\_crop\\_2.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/3d/Official_portrait_of_Nadia_Whittome_MP_crop_2.jpg)

In fact, confusingly enough, the House of Commons debating chamber is actually too small for all the MPs to sit down, if they are all in there at one time. So, there aren't enough *seats* to *seat* all the representatives of the different *seats*.

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<sup>1</sup> There can be *by elections*, for example where an MP dies and there has to be an election just in their constituency to select a replacement

So, today we are going to start to look at the process of selecting our representatives, both at a local level (selecting our local representative) and at a national level (selecting the group of representatives who will form our government).

Before we do that, let's just remind ourselves of what we said in the introductory episode (Episode 1). With our system of Representative Democracy, we are trying to achieve several things all at once. We are selecting, with one vote every 5 years, a good local representative, from a party we like, with a manifesto we approve of. About a third of us don't even bother to vote anyway, so perhaps more accurately, some of us are voting. And with that vote, we are somehow pretending that we are achieving all those things, all at once, in anything approaching a satisfactory arrangement.

In fact, as we will see shortly, perhaps only 30% of the electorate actually votes for whichever party wins the election. Sometimes even less than that. That party then goes on to form the government, and has a significant impact on what happens in the country – a significant impact on all of our lives – for the next 5 years.

Even before we get into the challenges of the mechanics of all of that, let's just think about the implications of that. Let's imagine that, instead of a political party, we all had to select *one* supermarket which EVERYONE would have to use for the next 5 years. That might be more relatable, because we probably all have to go shopping more than once every 5 years. But, in this imaginary scenario where we are all agreeing where we are all going to shop, whichever supermarket won, we can be pretty sure that pretty much everyone would be annoyed with the restrictions on our choices, on the ranges of choices available to us, on where we all had to walk or drive to go shopping, very quickly. Well, that is just part of the range of compromises which we are sort of meekly accepting, when we accept our electoral process without question.

Once again, we are pretending to ourselves that we are selecting, with one vote every 5 years, a good local representative, from a party we like, with a manifesto we approve of. And that that is good enough.

Well, that's the starting point. And more on that in later episodes.

But on to the topic for today.

1. Today we are going to touch briefly on the challenges of adequately representing the interests of not only majorities, but also the interests of minorities, too.
2. We are also going to look at what it means to get a majority of the vote – to get elected.
3. We are then going to look at whether a political party, which goes on to form a government, which affects all of us pretty significantly for up to 5 years at a time, ever actually does get a majority of the votes cast. (Spoiler alert – not often ... at all!)
4. Finally, we will also touch on the issue of all those people who don't vote. What does that say about electoral mandates? – the legitimacy to make changes? – perhaps even big changes?

### 1.1.1. Selecting a Representative

First of all, though, let's look at the mechanics of the way we select our representatives.



For someone who represents part of a country, we call the area which they represent their '*constituency*' (or '*seat*') - and the people in that part of the country are called their '*constituents*'.

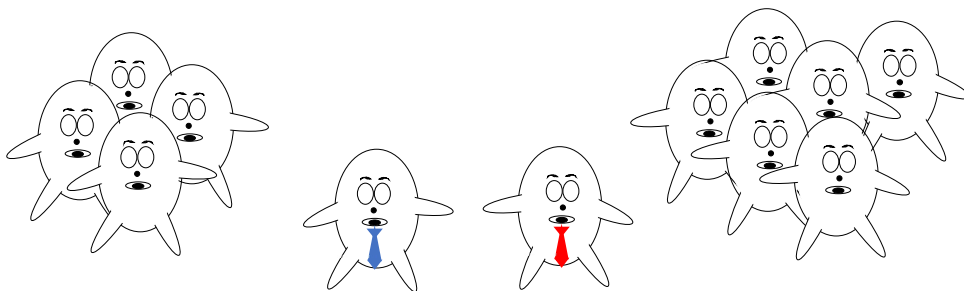
For a single leader, such as a directly elected president, their constituency is the whole country.



If there are two people between whom we have to choose our representative - two '*candidates*' - then it's possible (for the sake of simplicity, let's assume that a constituency has 100,000 people living there) that all the 99,998 other people might vote for one candidate, and no one would vote for the other.



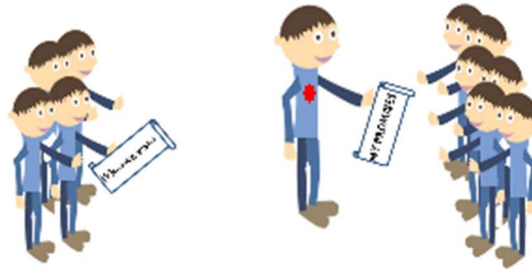
It's more likely, however, that opinion would be divided.  
Perhaps 60% might vote for one candidate, and 40% for the other.  
So, the candidate with 60% of the vote would be elected  
- and would be expected to try to represent the wishes of ALL the 99,998 other people in the constituency, *not just the ones who voted for him or her*.



We can immediately see that – even with the very best of intentions – it might be hard for the elected representative to be completely fair, and to *represent everyone equally*.

For example, imagine that you were elected on the basis of promises to deliver on a specific set of policies, but a lot of people (a minority, but still a lot) didn't want that.

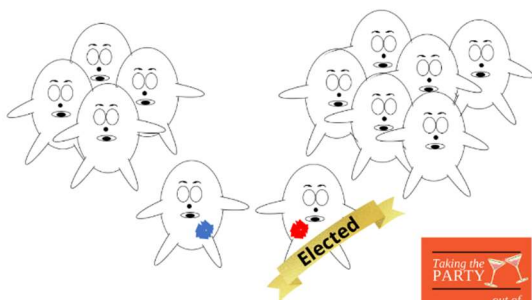
Or, if you wanted the 60% who voted for you last time to re-elect you at the following election, and so felt that you should do what those 60% want, and not necessarily what everyone wants, to make sure that you are re-elected.



Well, that's a problem, of course. We want our democratic system to respect the needs of minorities, as well as to represent the wishes of the majority. We want our system to value and respect minorities – even if we are in the majority – because, well, we might be in the minority next time, or on another issue.

There isn't an easy solution to this problem. As long as the majority keep electing the same representative, there isn't much that the minority can do to influence the representative to change what he or she does. In fact, the only way that the minority can change things is to try to persuade the majority to modify their wishes a bit, to include at least some of the things which the minority wants or needs.

That happens. At least some of the time.  
But not all of the time.  
There are no guarantees.



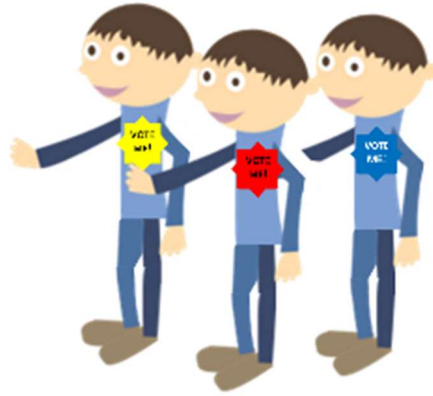
**How does an  
elected representative  
represent the people  
who DIDN'T vote for them?**





So far so good.  
Well, not necessarily good.  
But at least relatively simple to understand.  
60% of the vote, and you get elected.

But ... what if there are 3 or more candidates?



Continue to [First Past the Post: Constituencies](#) or [Return to Overview](#)

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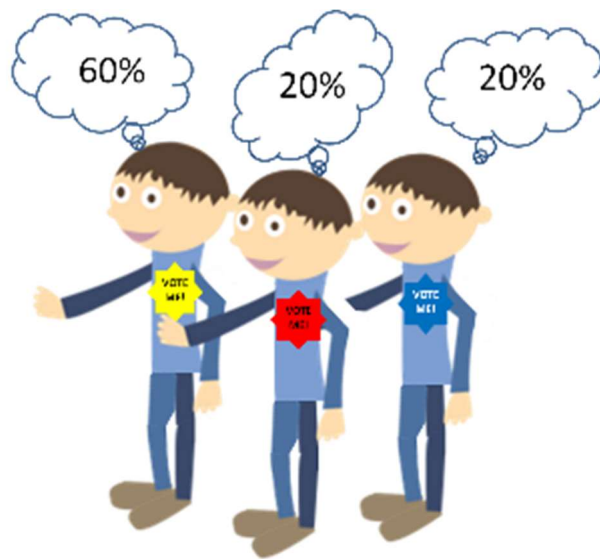
### 1.1.2. First Past the Post: Constituencies

Well, if there are three or more candidates, it gets a bit more complicated.

The problem here is what we call **First Past the Post**, at the **Constituency** level

It would be nice and simple if one of the candidates got more than 50% of the vote.  
Then he or she is elected.

Not really a problem.



And, some of the time, that does happen.

Let's imagine that there are three candidates.

One candidate got 20% of the vote.

So did one of the other candidates. Another 20%.

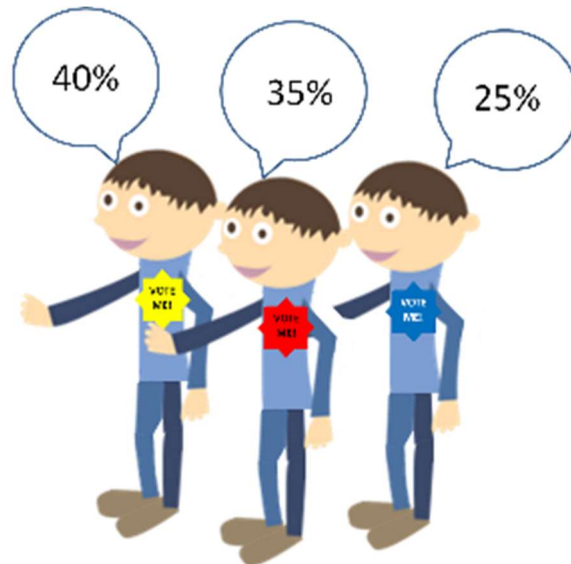
But one of the candidates got all the rest of the votes – 60%.

Some of the time, that happens.

So, although there are still the issues we have already mentioned (about whether the elected representative can manage to represent the 40% who didn't vote for them), at least the elected representative got a clear majority of the votes which were cast.

But with three candidates, or 4 candidates, or more candidates, it is likely that opinion will be divided across various preferences, political perspectives, and so on.

For example, one candidate might get 40% of the vote, one might get 35%, and a third might get 25% of the vote.



The candidate with more votes than anyone else, is the one with 40% of the votes.

This is where language can be misleading, if we aren't paying attention.

The candidate with 40% of the votes has more votes than any of the other candidates. That means that that candidate has *the most votes*.

But it **doesn't** mean that that candidate has *most of the votes*.

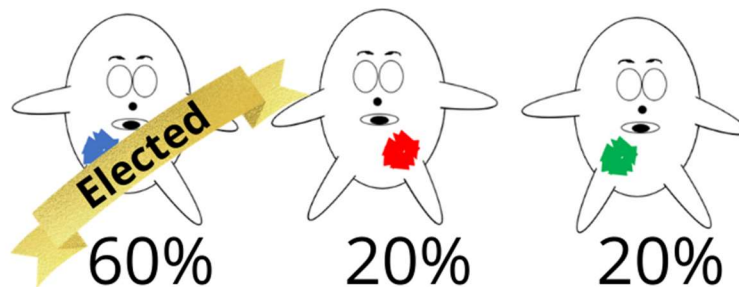
Because although the candidate who has *the most votes* (40%) has more than any of the other candidates, *most of the votes* were actually cast for the other two candidates ( $25\% + 35\% = 60\%$ ).

*the most votes* is not the same as *most of the votes*.

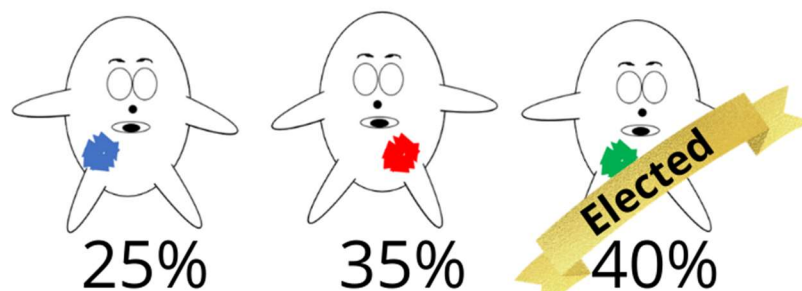
And, at least sometimes, it can *seem* as though the candidate who 'won' in a particular constituency didn't just get **more** votes than any other candidate, but got **most** of the votes. And that's **not** the case.

# First Past the Post

Constituencies



Sometimes it's a majority of the votes



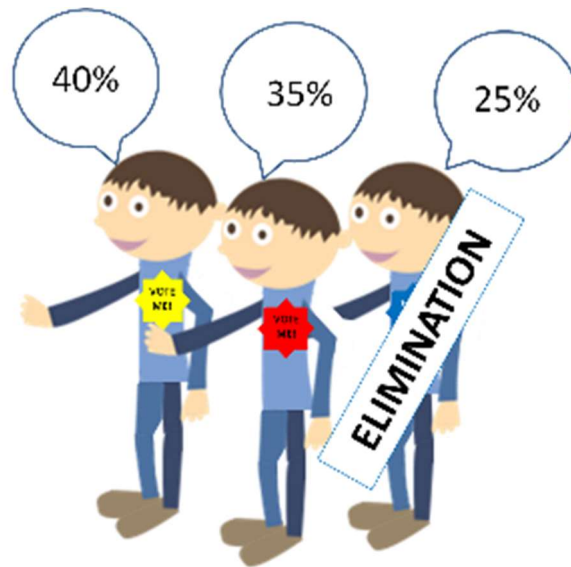
Sometimes it's more than the others, but **not** a majority

In a system such as the French presidential election, the leading two candidates get through to a second round.

So, in our imagined scenario, with three candidates with 40%, 35% and 25% of the vote, the candidate in third place, with just 25% of the vote, is eliminated.

Then, in the second round, one or the other is going to get more than 50% of the votes cast (unless there is an absolutely perfect dead heat – but that doesn't happen).

Sometimes, the candidate who came second in the first round can come through to win in the second round - for example, as we saw in the Argentinean presidential election in November 2015.



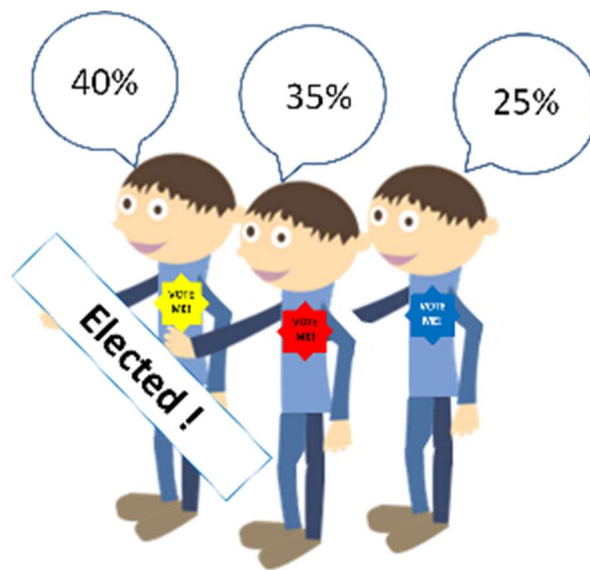
There's also another way in which a winner can be decided by eliminating the candidate in last place, and that's by having a system of second preference votes. We'll talk a little more about that in a moment.

But in the U.K., we don't go in for two lots of voting. Or for second preferences.

In local constituencies, the one who got the most votes – not a majority, just more than any of the others – is elected as the local representative: the MP.

That means that, in the example of three candidates getting 40%, 35% and 25% of the vote, the one who got 40% is elected, even though most people who voted actually voted for someone else ( $35\% + 25\% = 60\%$ ).

Sometimes, this might not be too bad.

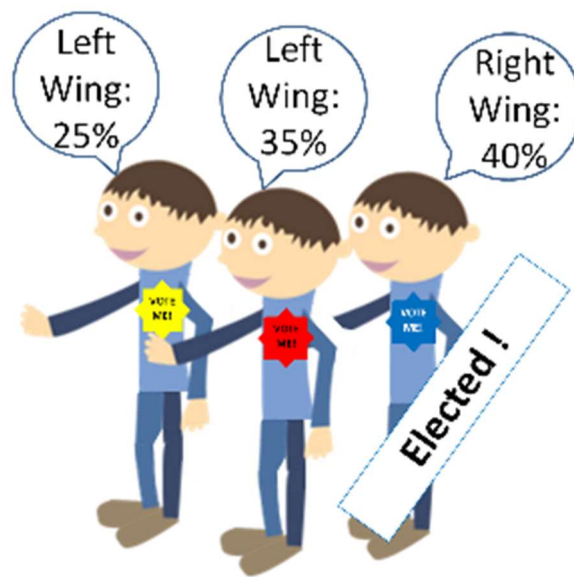


But on other occasions, it might be that the 'wrong' person is elected.

Or, at least, it might be that the candidate who is elected might not be the person whom the majority of the voters think would best represent them.

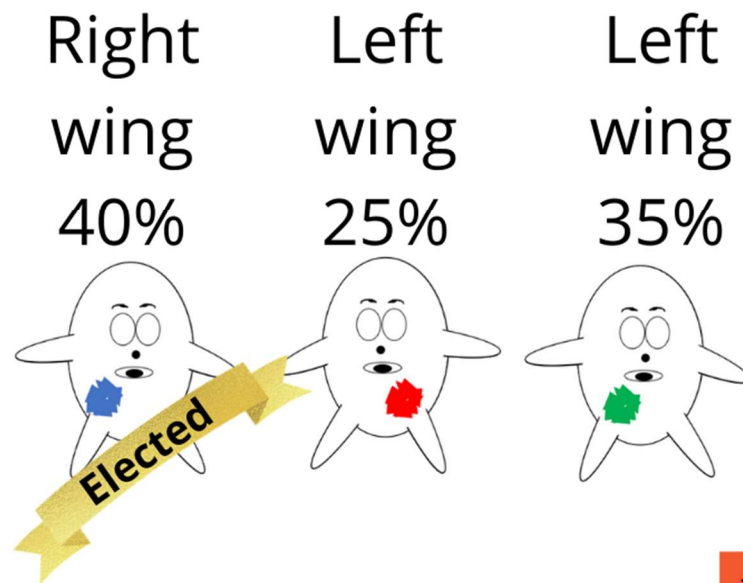
Say, for example, that the two candidates who got 35% and 25% were both left wing candidates.

Although the people who voted for the least popular candidate would have preferred their candidate to win, at least some of the time it might be that they would still prefer to be represented by the other left-wing candidate, rather than by the right-wing candidate (who only got 40% of the votes cast, even though 60% of the people wanted a left-wing candidate).





# Electing the 'WRONG' person?

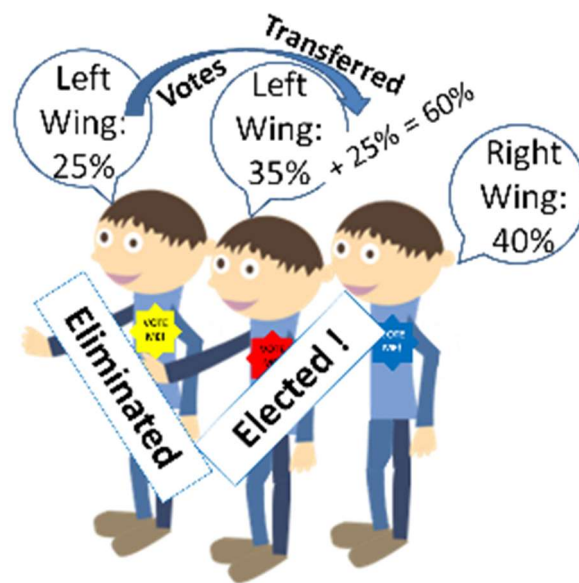


There are possible voting systems which would make allowances for this, even in a single round of voting.

For example, there is Transferable Voting. In our example, the candidate with 25% of the vote is eliminated, and those votes are transferred to the candidates whom each voter indicated would be their second choice – in this case, the other left-wing candidate.

That candidate then has an initial 35% share of the vote, plus a transferred 25% of second choices, adding up to 60% of the votes.

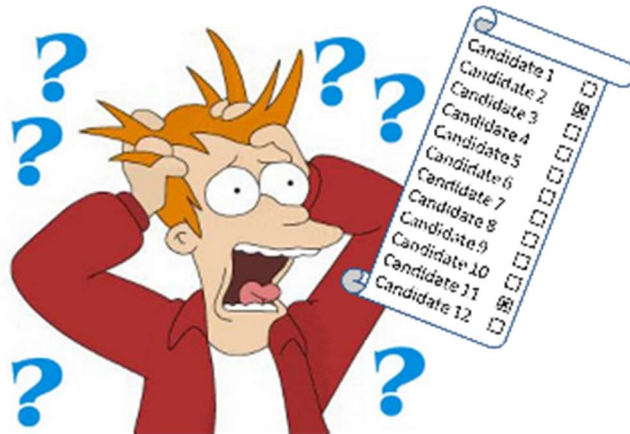
That sort of system would mean that it is the left-wing candidate who is elected, not the right-wing candidate.



Of course, this gets more complicated with more candidates, and can make the process of voting quite challenging for the voters – sometimes having to indicate not just their second-choice candidate, but perhaps their 10th or even 20th preferences.

You might think that the complications and the challenges are worth it.

In the example we have been discussing, at least we can say that if a majority of the voters prefer a left-wing candidate to represent them, then the Transferable Vote would mean that at least they get a left-wing representative.



But ... We don't want to give you that ...

Because that's not the case in the U.K.

We call our system *First Past the Post*.

And often, the representative which is selected does not actually represent the majority of the votes cast in that constituency. For example, let's take the constituency of Lincoln, in the East Midlands. Before 2017, it was a Conservative seat. Then in 2017, Labour won the seat, and Karen Lee was elected. There was an increase in the Labour vote of an extra 8.3%, and Karen Lee got 23,333 votes, which was more than the Conservative candidate (Karl McCartney) who only got 21,795. So Karen Lee (Labour) won.

However, Karen Lee only got 47.9% of the votes. More votes than anyone else. But not most of the votes.<sup>2</sup>

Then, in 2019, the seat went back to the Conservatives, and the same thing went the other way. Karl McCartney won, with an extra 3.2% of the vote, taking his total number of votes to 24,267, which was more than Karen Lee's 20,753 votes. But Karl McCartney still only got 47.9% of the votes. More than Karen Lee. More than any of the other candidates. But still not most of the votes.<sup>3</sup>

But, in fact, the majorities here are still measured in thousands of votes.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://electionresults.parliament.uk/election/2019-12-12/Results/Location/Constituency/Lincoln>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/politics/constituencies/E14000792>

Now, I realise that this is almost a side track from what we are talking about, but whilst we are talking about majorities, have you ever thought about how SMALL some of the majorities actually are?

In the 2019, Across the UK, 141 seats out of 650 were won by a margin of less than 10 percentage points.<sup>4</sup> That's nearly 22% of all of the MPs who were elected. And nearly twice the size of the Conservative government's majority in the House of Commons.

For example, in the constituency of Bury North, the Conservative candidate won with 21,660 votes, but the Labour candidate got 21,555 votes<sup>5</sup> – only 104 votes less! The Conservative candidate won with 46.2% of the vote, and the Labour candidate lost with 46.02% of the vote.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/general-election-2019-marginality/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.bury.gov.uk/index.aspx?articleid=15065>

Anyway, if you think that is bad, then let's go back to what we were talking about – about some of the candidates not having a majority of the votes.

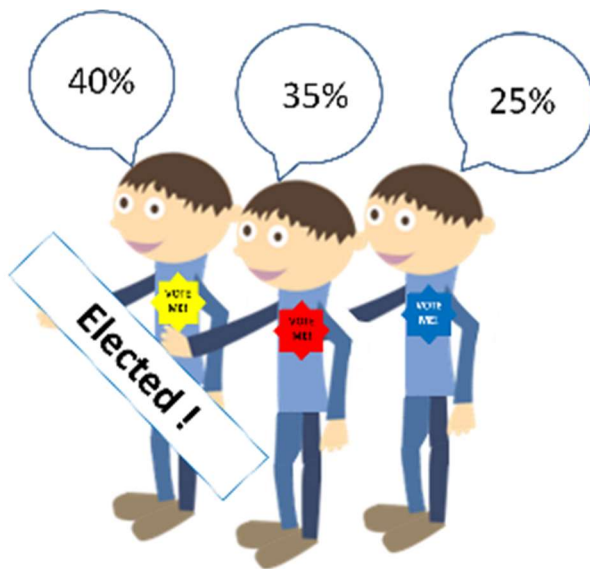
Nationally, in the 2019 general election, 211 MPs were elected with less than 50% of the votes cast in their constituency. Remember, that's only of the votes cast – it would be a much lower percentage of the people who *could* have voted! That's nearly a third of all the MPs, who were elected with less than half of the votes cast in their constituencies.

And of those 211 who got less than 50% of the votes cast in their constituencies, 19 of them got less than 40% of the votes cast.

In the constituency of South Down (in Northern Ireland) the winning candidate got only 32.4% of the votes cast in that constituency.<sup>6</sup>

So, apart from the challenge of a winning candidate trying to represent all the people in a constituency – including all the ones who didn't vote for him or her – there is the added complication that many of the winning candidates didn't even get most of the people in their constituency to vote for them in the first place. For many of our elected representatives, more people voted against them than voted for them. Now, just how representative does that sound?

And it gets worse.



Continue to [First Past the Post 2: Parties](#) or [Return to Overview](#)

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/2019-General-Election-Briefing.pdf>

### 1.1.1. First Past the Post: Parties

OK. So, moving on.

#### Summary so far

So, in a Representative Democracy, we choose someone locally to ...

- Represent our interests and views.
- To read all of the details
- To think about all of the implications

As we have saw earlier, it's hard for an elected representative to fairly and accurately represent the needs and interests of all their constituents<sup>7</sup>.

Added to that, as we have just seen, the First Past the Post electoral system means that we may or may not get the most *representative* representative, anyway, because we may well have a representative who didn't get more than half of the votes.

But that's the way it is. At least, that's how it is at the moment. We are looking forward to hearing your ideas about how things might be organised differently.

Anyway, that's in the future.

For now, let's just get on with clarifying how things are supposed to be working – even if they often aren't working!

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<sup>7</sup> For example, the elected representative might feel that they have to concentrate on doing what the majority wants, to ensure that they get re-elected, rather than to also ensure that the minorities get what they need or want.

Having been elected, all the representatives get together to talk through all the issues. They get together in a place which is actually named after the process of talking - Parliament.

The representatives then become a member of the group of people who talk through all the issues - a Member of Parliament (MP).

That's good for thinking about stuff someone else is suggesting, or perhaps for reacting to situations. But how do all these local representatives (MPs) get together to make a plan for what our country wants (planning for the future, not just reacting to stuff that happens)?

The MPs who think in a similar way get together (as a political party) as a smaller group within the overall group of MPs, and put together their plan (their policies, their manifesto).

And so, we end up electing not just any local representative, but a representative of a particular national party, whose policies and manifesto we like.

Let's have a look at the first, and clearest warping of the situation by political parties.

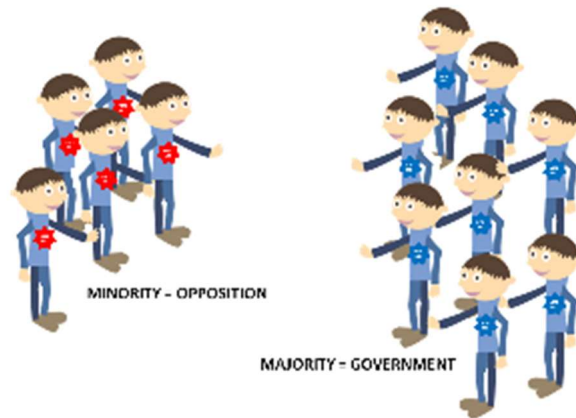
[Spoiler: there are plenty more examples to come where political parties are twisting things]



As unrepresentative as it might be at the local level of individual constituencies, it gets worse at the national level.

On the surface, it might seem that the party which gets the most candidates elected will represent the views of the majority of the country. But that's not the case.

Added to the First Past the Post system at the constituency level, it is also the case that the party with the greatest number of candidates elected gets to form the government.



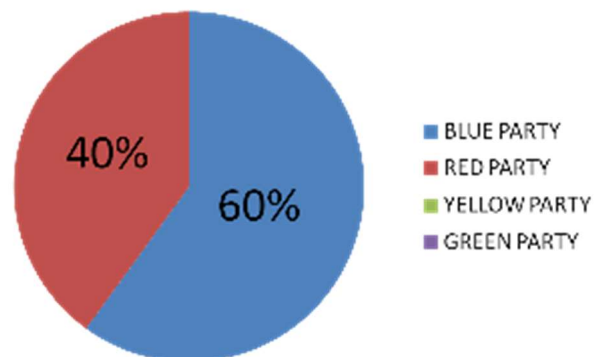
But having a majority of elected candidates across the country doesn't mean that you had a majority of the national vote.

Say we have 100 constituencies, each electing one representative, so a total of 100 representatives.

Even in a simple system, with only 2 parties nationally and only 2 candidates in each constituency, imagine this:

- In 60 constituencies, candidates for party A get 60% of the votes cast.
- So ... across those 60 constituencies, candidates for Party A have a majority of the votes cast.
- So ... Party A has 60 of the 100 representatives elected, which is a majority of the representatives elected.
- So ... Party A forms the government.

Votes in 60 out of 100 Constituencies

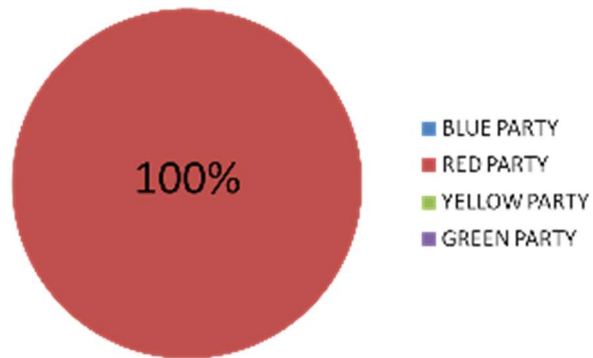


**But**, perhaps in the other 40 constituencies, the candidates for Party B actually got 100% of the votes cast.

Added to the 40% of the votes cast in the constituencies where candidates from Party A were elected, Party B actually has a majority of the votes cast nationally :

$$[40\% \times 60\%] + [100\% \times 40\%] = 64\%$$

Votes in 40 out of 100 Constituencies

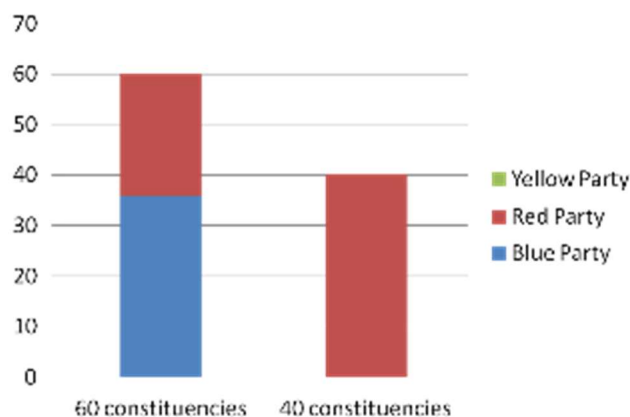


This is just an example.

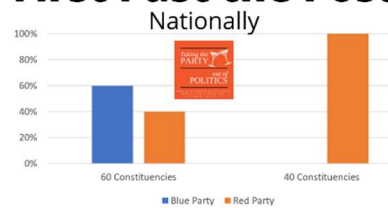
~~(You can see visually that the size of the two red blocks combined is greater than the size of the one blue block)~~

In reality, there are more than two candidates in each constituency, and more than two parties nationally.

The maths can get more complicated, but it can certainly happen that the party which gets more candidates elected than any other party – or even a majority of all elected candidates – doesn't necessarily also have a majority of the votes cast.



### First Past the Post



A political party just needs to win a majority of constituencies (not a majority of the votes) to win the election.

Now, you could argue “Well, hey! That’s the system! Tough luck! The party which won in 60 constituencies just ran a better campaign!”

And that would be correct.

The party which won in 60 constituencies certainly played the game better.

But this is not a game. This is a system which is supposed to be providing us with representatives who will represent what we want and believe should happen.

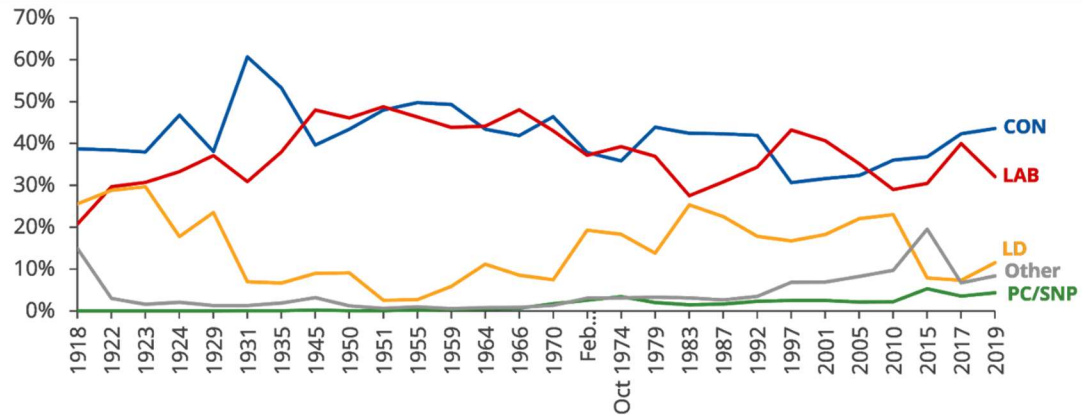
Just because one party played ‘the game better’, does that mean that the rules of the game are good enough?

Or, rather, is the system good enough, if it leads to situations like this?

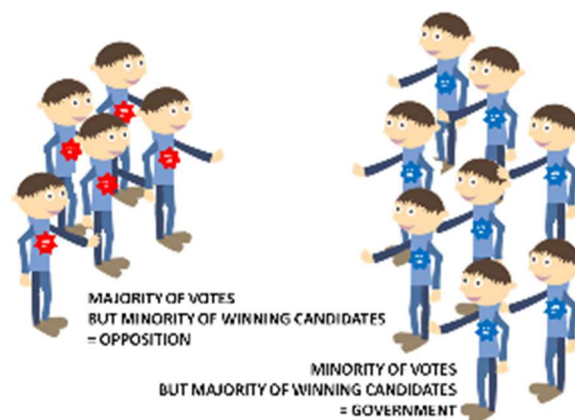
Isn’t the system supposed to create a group of elected representatives who actually represent what we want them to represent? Not just a group of elected people who ran the best campaign!

In fact, it is **NORMALLY** the case that the party which forms the government does **NOT** have a majority of the votes cast (see here for [UK Election Statistics: 1918-2019](#), showing that The government may have a majority of their candidates elected - referred to as 'Seats' - but also showing that no government since 1935 has had a majority of the votes cast - although some have got very close).

### Share of the vote by party: UK General Elections



For example, although the Conservative party famously got a majority of candidates elected in the General Election in 2019 (365 MPs out of 650, so 56% of the seats), they actually only got 43.6% of the vote nationally (see [here](#) for a detailed breakdown of the results).



The example here is a simplification, and the remaining 56.4% of the votes cast nationally didn't all go to one party.

But it is true that a large majority of people didn't vote Conservative in 2019.

And, if you want an even more extreme example, across all the constituencies in Northern Ireland, in the 2019 election, 83.3 percent of the seats went to just two parties, despite the fact that those two parties only one 53.4 percent of the votes<sup>8</sup>.

83.3% of the seats, with only 53.4% of the votes.

Well, it makes you think, doesn't it?

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/2019-General-Election-Briefing.pdf>

Oh, and there's another thing, too...

Continue to the next section: [2.3 Votes Cast](#) or [Return to Overview](#)

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### 1.1.2. Votes Cast



Yes, added to ...

- the First Past the Post system at the constituency level  
(the candidate with the largest number of votes is the one which wins,  
not the candidate with a majority of votes),  
  
... and ...
- the First Past the Post system at the national level  
(the government is formed by the party winning in a majority of constituencies,  
not by winning a majority of the votes cast),

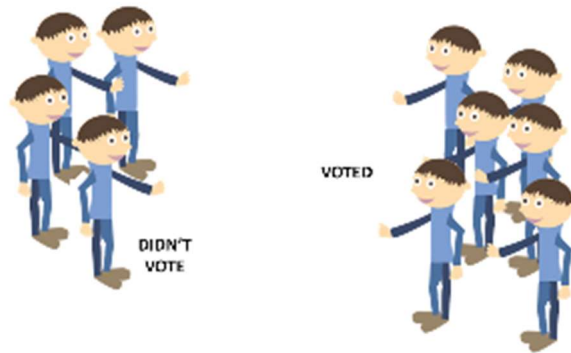
... there is another big wrinkle in the system ...

... people who don't vote.

## UK General Election 2015

We might say that people don't vote because they are disillusioned with party politics, or because they are lazy, or whatever, but the fact remains that a large segment of the people who are eligible to vote and registered to vote don't actually vote.

In May 2015, only 66.2 % of voters actually voted.



Sadly, that's actually pretty normal these days.

Turnout in UK General elections in the last quarter of a century.

1997	71.4%
2001	59.4%
2005	61.4%
2010	65.1%
2015	66.2%
2017	68.8%
2019	67.3%

In fact, to get a turnout over 80%, you have to go back to the early 1950s!

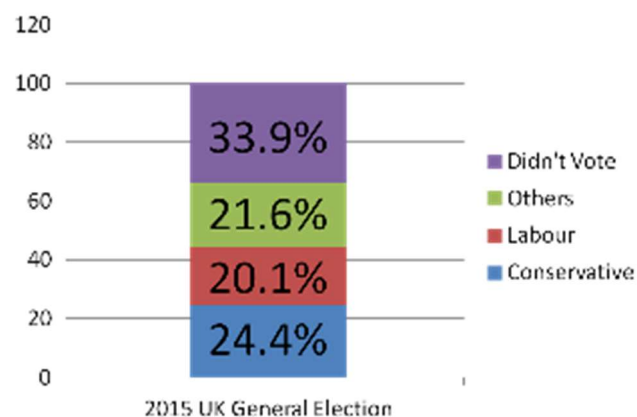


## UK General Election 2015

So, in May 2015, only 66.2 % of voters actually voted. That means that, not only did the Conservative party only get 36.9 % of the votes cast in 2015, but that only 66.2 % of voters actually voted.

And that means that only  $(66.2 \% \times 36.9 \% = 24.4 \%)$  24.4 % of the eligible voters actually voted for the government.

Now, perhaps a similar proportion of those who didn't vote would have voted Conservative, but neither 24.4% nor 36.9% is particularly impressive.



# (Misleading)

## Election Results 2015

Conservative Party Wins!  
Majority of MPs



but ... share of votes cast



and ... share of all possible votes



## UK General Election 2017

Then there is the UK General Election of 2017.

Famously, a disaster for the Conservative Party. Majority lost, rather than strengthened. Right?

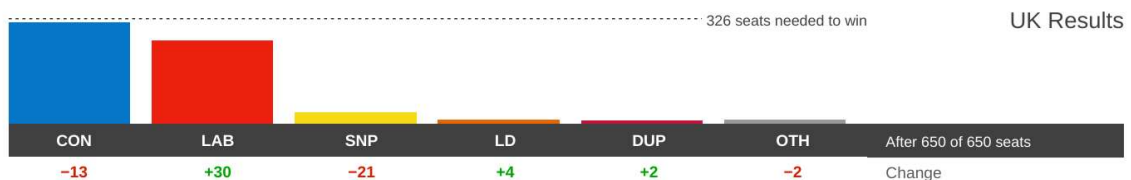
Well, actually ... no.

Or, at least, yes ... and no.

You see, the number of Conservative MPs in the House of Commons certainly went down. They had 13 fewer MPs after the election than they had before the election.

They lost their majority in the House of Commons. Disaster! Right?

 ELECTION 2017



## (Misleading)

## Election Results 2017

Conservative Party Disaster ... right ?



Majority of MPs: LOST

*well ... yes*

13 FEWER MPs

Conservative



Share of votes cast: INCREASED

*but also ... no*

5.5% more votes

Conservative



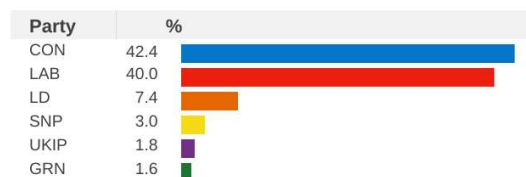
## UK General Election 2017

Except, not exactly.

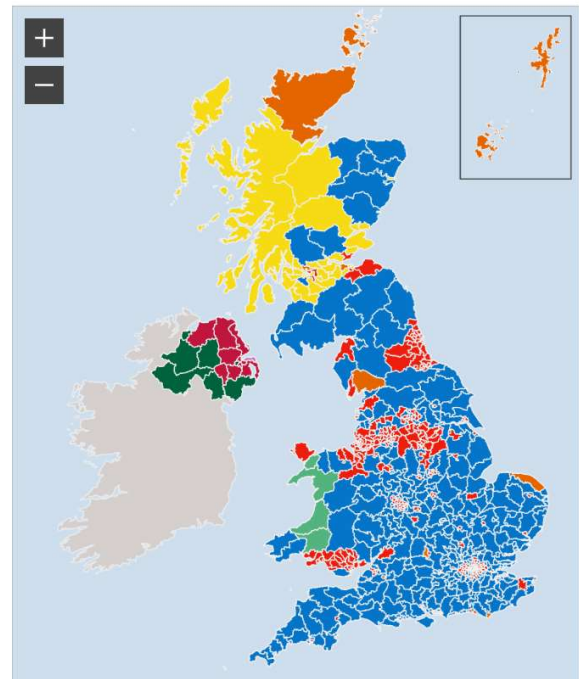
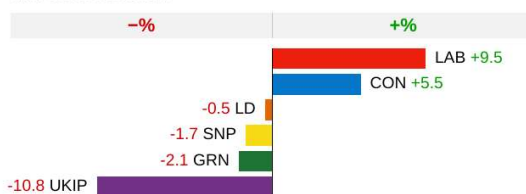
The Conservative Party share of the vote, actually went UP! By 5.5%.

And yet, our *first past the post* voting system meant that the Conservative Party share of MPs in the House of Commons went DOWN!

UK vote share  
after 650 of 650 seats



UK vote share change since 2015  
after 650 of 650 seats



And, that was on an increased turnout - up by about 2.6% since the 2015 election.

Turnout  68.7%

Electorate 46,843,896

That actually seems a bit unfair on the Conservative Party.

You get more votes, you get a higher percentage of the votes, on a larger turnout. Whichever way you look at it, more people voted for the Conservative Party in 2017 than in 2015. But the Conservative Party lost its majority in the House of Commons, and the result is regarded as an embarrassing defeat for the leader of the Conservative Party at the time - Theresa May.

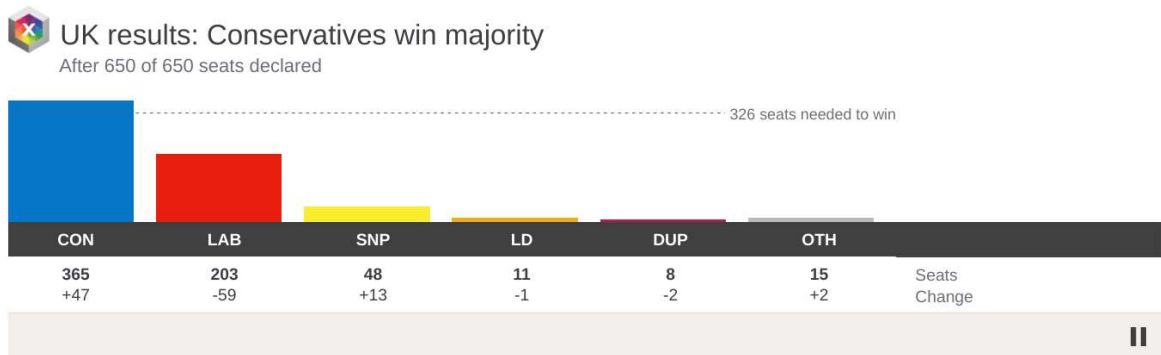
## UK General Election 2019

A similar effect can be seen in the 2019 UK Election.

The headline which we all probably remember is that it was a spectacular result for the Conservative Party, which moved from not having a majority (318 seats) to having one of the strongest majorities which any party has enjoyed for decades (365 seats).

This is an increase of 47 seats, which is over 7% of the 650 seats.

In all the headlines, justifiably a spectacular result for the Conservative Party.



## (Misleading) Election Results 2019

Conservative Party Triumph ... right ?

Majority of MPs: HUGE

*in Parliament yes*

47 MORE MPs  
= 7% MORE MPs

Conservative

Share of votes cast: INCREASED

*but nationally*

only  
1.2% more votes

Conservative



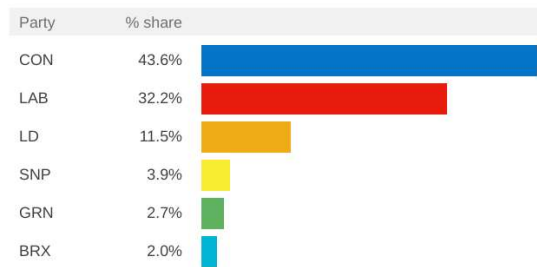
## UK General Election 2019

Or was it?

If we examine the additional share of the vote which the Conservative Party won (compared to the previous election in 2017) the Conservative Party share of the vote only increased by 1.2% (compared with the additional 7% of MPs)

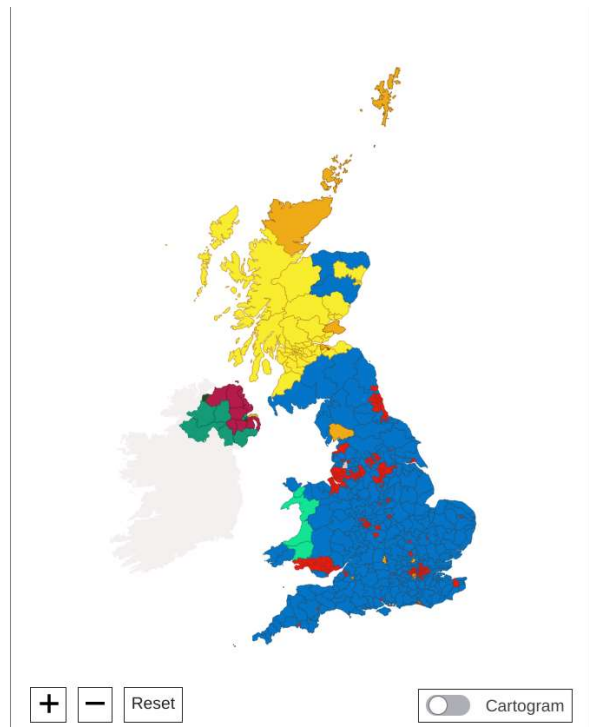
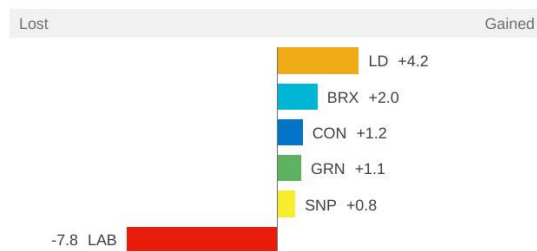
### UK vote share

After 650 of 650 seats



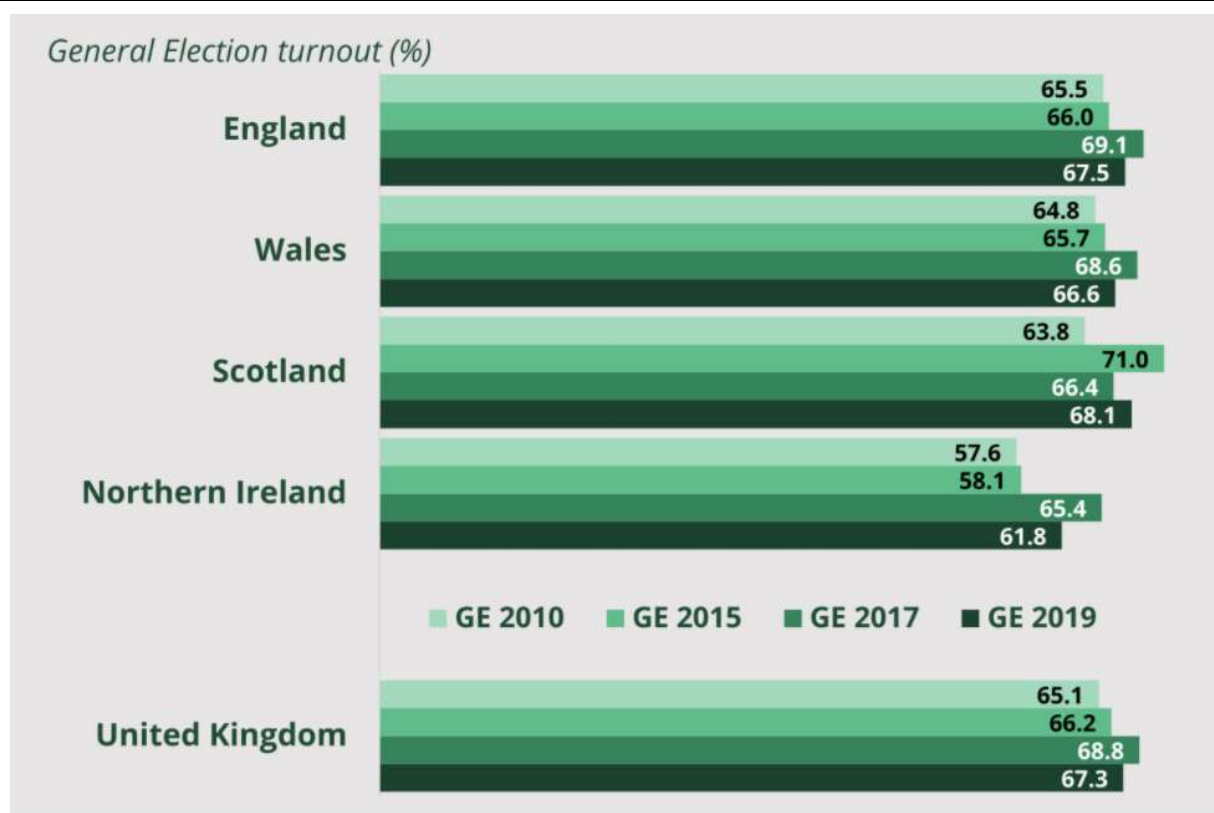
### UK vote share change since 2017

After 650 of 650 seats



## UK General Election 2019

And, in fact, the turnout went down by 1.5% compared with 2017.



Yes, the Conservative Party won the majority of seats.

And, yes, the Conservative Party share of the vote increased (by 1.2%).

But the Conservative Party share of the vote was actually only 43.6% of the votes cast (even though the Conservative Party won 56% of the available seats).

Over 56% of people voted for other parties (coincidentally the same percentage as the percentage of MPs who were elected who were Conservative).

And that 43.6% of the votes cast for the Conservative Party was only of the 67.3% of people who turned out to vote.

In fact, only just over 29% of people who *could* have voted, voted for the Conservative Party.

## What about Proportional Representation?

Would Proportional Representation be any better?

Well, perhaps.

If we had a system of Proportional Representation, then the number of MPs elected would accurately reflect the voting across the country (rather than the peculiarities of each constituency).

It is actually quite interesting to look at how the results would be different, *if* we had a national system of proportional representation.

	Seats:	Votes:	Vote share %:	Seats as proportion of votes cast	Difference
Conservative	365	13,966,451	43.6	288	-77
Labour	203	10,295,912	32.2	212	9
Scottish National Party	48	1,242,380	3.9	26	-22
Liberal Democrat	11	3,696,419	11.5	76	65
Democratic Unionist Party	8	244,127	0.8	5	-3
Sinn Féin	7	181,853	0.6	4	-3
Plaid Cymru	4	153,265	0.5	3	-1
Social Democratic & Labour Party	2	118,737	0.4	2	0
Green	1	865,707	2.7	18	17
Alliance Party	1	134,115	0.4	3	2
The Brexit Party	0	644,257	2	13	13
	650	31,543,223		650	

<https://www.bbc.com/news/election/2019/results>

In the results of the election, the Conservative Party won 43.6% of the votes cast, but got 365 out of the 650 seats which were available, or 56% of the seats available. If the seats were distributed proportionally (if the number of MPs elected would represent the proportion of the national votes cast), then the Conservative Party would only have won 288 seats. Crucially, that is 77 seats less than they actually got, but even more crucially, it is well below the 326 which they would need for a majority. Who knows what things might have been different, had the Conservative Party had to compromise on different policies?

For smaller parties, the difference is even more stark.

The Scottish National Party got 3.9% of the vote, but got 48 MPs. That's about twice as many MPs as their national vote share would entitle them to, if we used a national system of Proportional Representation (though, to be fair, the SNP only stands in Scottish constituencies, so perhaps that comparison isn't really fair).

What about for the Green Party. They got 2.7% of the vote, but only 1 MP. If the Green Party had the number of MPs which reflected their share of the vote, they would actually have 18 MPs. Not 1. 18!

Of course, there are also problems with a national system of Proportional Representation. For example, if there is 1 MP elected nationally, because such-and-such a party got 1/650<sup>th</sup> of the national vote, then who does that 1 MP represent. Certainly not everyone: 649/650 of the electorate voted for other people. But who *does* that MP represent? Where is – who is in – his or her constituency?

That sort of problem can be partly resolved if there is a sort of regional Proportional Representation. This used to happen with the elections for the European Parliament (well, it still does in other European nations, but not in the UK anymore). A region would elect between 3 and 10 MEPs (depending on how large the region was, or how many people lived in a region<sup>9</sup>). And the vote for each region was distributed in a sort of version of Proportional Representation.

So, in a constituency with 3 MEPs, if three parties had candidates, and each candidate got 33% of the vote, then each party would have one candidate elected.

Of course, this was better than just a first past the post system. At least there was a broader representation of the electoral preferences of voters in each regional constituency. But it still wasn't perfect. It was a sort of approximation to Proportional Representation.

For example, if a constituency with 3 MEPs had 35% of the vote for Party A, 25% for Party B, and 20% for Party C, then it would seem reasonable that there would be one MEP from each party, A, B, and C. But the 15% vote for Party D, and the 5% for Party E would still be unrepresented.

So, it's better, but it's still not quite accurate across the nation as a whole. It's just a regional approximation.

The key questions to consider here, are:

- whether we would have a more accurate representation of some smaller voting preferences (such as having 18 Green MPs, rather than just 1);

and

- whether our government would be forced to be more collaborative, more cooperative, more inclusive, in forming its policies, if our system of elections didn't give a strong *Parliamentary* Majority to a party which got received 43.6% of the votes cast (and, remember, that's only 29% of the possible votes, if everyone who had a vote had voted);

These are important questions to have in mind, when we get to thinking about what ideas we might want to explore further, when it comes to making our systems work better.

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<sup>9</sup> [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/unitedkingdom/en/european-elections/uk\\_meps.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/unitedkingdom/en/european-elections/uk_meps.html)



This is not to say that the Conservative party has done anything wrong.

Figures for previous elections are often equally unbalanced, and the lack of balance can be towards other parties, too.

In May 2015 and in December 2019 (as in many other elections recently), the Conservative party were simply better at working within the system. In other elections, the same has been true of other parties.

But do we really have a government which represents us?

And if the government doesn't represent us, then is it really a representative democracy?

Well, in Season 2 we will take a look at an example of how it might actually be even worse than it already looks, when we look at the issues around Government Ministers and 'Safe Seats' (the ones with huge, safe majorities). But that's to come later.

#### 2.4 Ministers and Safe Seats.



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\* \* \*

So ... next time, on *Taking the Party out of Politics* ...

Next time, we will compare Parliament with the Government, to be sure that we understand which is which, where they overlap ... and where they perhaps *shouldn't* overlap.

\* \* \*

For now, thank you for listening.

If you have enjoyed this podcast, then I hope that you will take the time to tell your friends.

And perhaps you could also take a moment to give us a rating wherever you found us – that not only helps other people to find us; it also just really makes us feel appreciated. ☺

That would be great. Thank you.