

Funding the Future

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The Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) is now, as it was in Blair's days, Labour's favoured think tank. Half of its leadership from a year ago now seems to be in Downing Street. Those that are left are used to fly kites for potential Labour policy. So, its new report on democratic reform needs to be noticed.

IPPR says [in the introduction to that report](#):

One in every two adults living in this country voted at the 2024 general election. This is the lowest share of the population to vote since universal suffrage.

The 'turnout gap' has also widened – turnout was very unequal. While inequality across age and income groups has stayed roughly constant across the most recent general elections, the turnout gap between graduates and non-graduates has doubled since the 2019 election and grown by a quarter between renters and owners since the 2017 election.

*The only solution to the heightening doom loop of voting patterns, skewed policy and populist politics is **democratic reform**.*

So, what do they propose? They say their focus is on:

- 1. Make voting easier.** By taking down the barriers to electoral registration before election day, and barriers to arriving at the ballot box on election day. This could include automatic voter registration, removal or relaxation of voter ID requirements, moving polling day to a non-working day, and extending voter rights to some long-term residents with permanent residency rights.
- 2. Make voting more worthwhile.** By ensuring there is a perceived 'return' on voting relative to other forms of political influence, and that individuals have roughly equal 'returns' on their vote. This could include capping political donations, stronger rules and enforcement on political donations, electoral system reform and population-based constituencies.
- 3. Create norms of voting.** By cultivating a stronger culture of democratic participation using state and civic institutions. This could include extending voting

rights to 16- and 17-year-olds, citizenship education at school, compulsory voting and an election day service.

I noted all that and then looked for what was not mentioned. Proportional representation is not mentioned. This is what the report had to say on that issue:

In UK general elections, geography matters. In our electoral system, there will always be 'safe seats', where votes for parties other than the dominant one in that area are unlikely to change the outcome of the election. Where you live determines how influential your vote is on election outcomes. Some voters matter more than others, which is why it is not surprising that turnout is significantly lower in majoritarian electoral systems than proportional ones (Geys 2006, Blais and Carty 1990).

A full discussion of the electoral system for UK general elections is beyond the scope of this paper. In truth, there is little prospect of change in this parliament. The Labour Party won a historic majority with an extremely 'efficient' or 'disproportionate' distribution of votes, depending on which way you look at it. It is not surprising that the government has been clear that proportional representation is not on its agenda.

In the longer run, the prospects of electoral system change are probably waxing. That is because of structural changes in the party system. The growth of 'smaller' parties, or the collapse in vote share for the two main parties (who received the lowest combined vote share in at least a century), is likely a new structural feature of party competition. Whether parties as varied as Reform and the Greens will coordinate on issues of electoral system transition is another matter. At the same time, a growing number of Britons support adopting a proportional system (NatCen 2022).

In other words, they will not upset their political sponsors by suggesting PR, even though they recognise that its absence is the biggest reason why people do not vote in the UK.

What a farce, in other words. This is a meaningless whitewash, and any Democracy Act - which Labour is promising - will similarly miss the point.

Democracy does not matter to Labour. No wonder our politics is in a mess.