

General election 2019: what are the parties saying about electoral reform?

*During this general election campaign, there has been a disappointing lack of focus on what is required to reform democracy in the UK, when the public think it needs a lot of improvement. **Ian Simpson** from the Electoral Reform Society assesses which reforms have been promised in the parties' manifestos, and argues that they should be given greater attention, given the lack of public trust in our democratic institutions.*

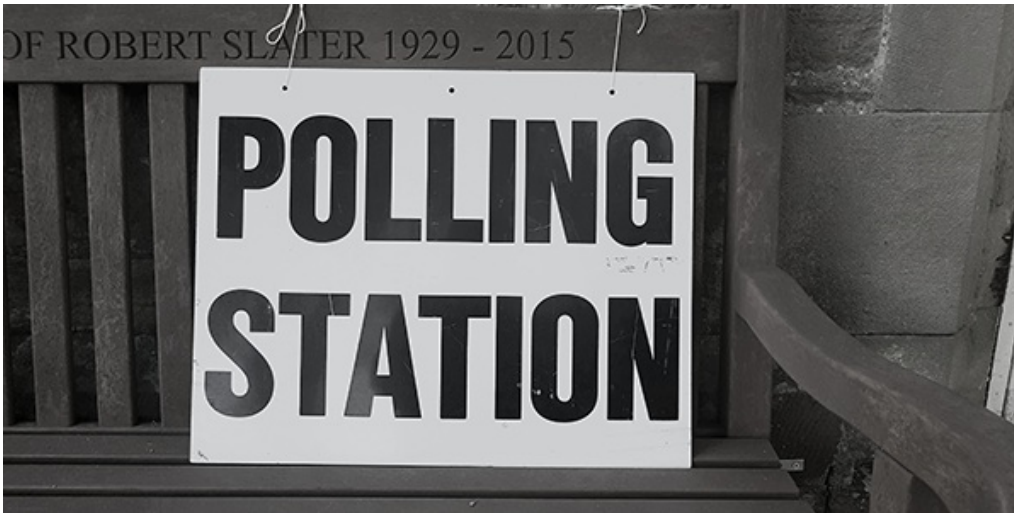


Photo by [Steve Houghton-Burnett](#) on [Unsplash](#)

New polling by BMG, commissioned by the Electoral Reform Society (ERS), found that 84% of people feel that politics is not working well, and 80% feel they have little or no influence on decision-making in the country. You would think parties would be shouting from the rooftops about their plans for improving how our democracy works and for helping people feel like they have more of a say, both in their local communities and in the country as a whole.

It is a shame that neither the media nor the parties appear very keen to talk about these democracy issues, particularly as parties have policies that would have a positive impact in different areas.

What the parties are saying

Proportional representation

There is agreement among a number of parties on the need to change our voting system for general elections. We have seen during the election campaign how our first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system disfigures political debate, with a lot of focus on issues such as electoral pacts and tactical voting, at the expense of policies.

It also means that parties pour resources into fighting 'marginal' seats, while those in seats considered to be 'safe' for a party are ignored. [BMG polling for the ERS shows that nearly a third \(30%\) of voters plan to vote tactically.](#)

A move to a proportional representation system for Westminster elections, as advocated by the Brexit Party, Green Party, Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru and the Scottish National Party (SNP), would mean that voters would be freed from the FPTP straitjacket. They could vote for their first-choice party knowing their vote was highly likely to have an impact and the days of parties taking voters for granted in 'safe seats' would be a thing of the past.

Unelected Lords

There is also a lot of agreement around the need to reform our wholly outdated, unelected and unrepresentative second chamber of parliament. Plaid Cymru and the Green Party are proposing that the House of Lords should be replaced with a fully elected second chamber, while the Liberal Democrats have called for reform 'with a proper democratic mandate'. The Brexit Party and the SNP have proposed abolishing the House of Lords, while Labour have pledged to end the hereditary principle in the House of Lords and work towards replacing it with an elected Senate of the Nations and Regions.

Extending the franchise

Extending the voting franchise at general elections to 16 and 17 year olds, something that has already been enacted for Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly elections, also receives a lot of support from nearly all of the parties (except the Conservatives and Brexit Party). The Green Party, Labour, the Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru and the SNP are all in favour. This would be a positive move, improving the chances of young citizens engaging with the democratic process at an early stage, hopefully increasing the chances of them becoming democratically engaged adults.

Registration revolution

It is vital that electoral registers are up to date to ensure that no one is disenfranchised in our democracy. Our current system of electoral registration is not fit for purpose, as seen by the Electoral Commission's data, published in September 2019, [showing as many as 9.4 million people either missing from the electoral register or not registered at their current address](#).

Another sign was the surge in people registering to vote during the course of the general election campaign, with close to 3.9 million people scrambling to ensure they are on the register, which puts a lot of strain on the local authorities that maintain the registers. The Electoral Reform Society has long called for a more automatic system of voter registration, which has also been proposed by Labour and the Liberal Democrats. This would go a long way to reducing the chances of people losing their democratic voice.

Campaign rules for the 21st century

In recent years there has been a revolution in political campaigning, with much now taking place online. Unfortunately, our campaign regulation laws were written in an analogue age and desperately need updating, to ensure that our democratic debate takes place in an open and fair way.

Labour and the Liberal Democrats are promising measures to improve the online transparency of political campaigning, while Labour and the Green Party are proposing increasing the fines available to the Electoral Commission when campaign rules are broken. The Conservatives and Liberal Democrats have proposed measures to prevent foreign interference in UK elections.

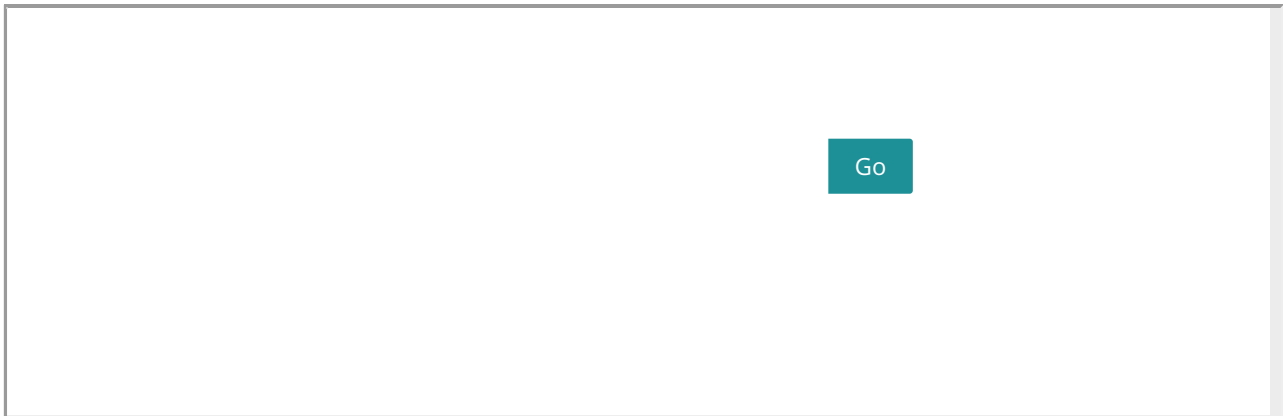
Meanwhile, the Liberal Democrats and SNP are proposing that leader debates at general elections be put on a firmer footing, to avoid the unedifying horse-trading between parties and broadcasters that has marred this campaign. These debates should be important moments, where the public have an opportunity to scrutinise leaders. We should not go into another election campaign with the status of these debates up in the air.

A Parliament that represents us

Although progress has been made over the last couple of decades in making our Westminster parliament more representative of the country, there is still a long way to go. The Green Party, Labour, Liberal Democrats and the SNP have all committed to enacting Section 106 of the Equality Act 2010, which would require political parties to publish data on the diversity of their candidates.

Having made commitments to improve democracy, it is now time for parties to give them a higher profile in their campaigns. With faith in politics and democracy at a low ebb, these policies should receive a warm welcome from millions of voters.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit.



About the author

Ian Simpson is a research officer for the Electoral Reform Society.

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