

# Brexit has shown the limits of Britain's broken 'Westminster model' of politics

*The results of the recent European Parliament elections demonstrate how the traditional model of UK politics based on two 'main' parties is fracturing under the pressures of the Brexit process. **Jess Garland** sets out some proposals for reforming the system in line with voters' wishes for a more cooperative style of politics.*



Photo by [Zhifei Zhou](#) on [Unsplash](#)

The Palace of Westminster dates back to the mid-1800s – and since that time remains largely unchanged. Now the structure is fundamentally compromised with antiquated heating, ventilation, drainage and electrical systems; the roofs are leaking, the pipes corroding and plumbing failures regularly cause damage to the interiors. The [Parliamentary Buildings \(Restoration and Renewal\) Bill](#) – currently going through Parliament – hopes to fix this rot.

But there are other pressing structural problems at Westminster that need dealing with. Our failing political system is also causing damage – public trust in our politics is at rock bottom.

New polling for the Electoral Reform Society (ERS) shows that two-thirds of people (67%) feel they have very few or no opportunities to inform and influence the decisions made by MPs at Westminster – and only four percent feel they have a lot of opportunities. People are losing the little faith they had in politics to fix problems and they feel powerless to change things.

The need for a wholesale renewal of our democracy is now more urgent than ever. In a newly published report [Westminster Beyond Brexit: Ending the Politics of Division](#), the ERS sets out a vision for how we can achieve a flourishing democracy where power is dispersed across political institutions and citizens are empowered and engaged.

The Brexit deadlock is not the cause of our constitutional crisis, but rather a symptom of it, and the crisis has exposed the façade of 'strong and stable' government – the strength on which the system has been lauded.

Our politics is stuck in a 19th-century system and like the crumbling palace itself, the foundations of UK politics – the Westminster System – is at the root of many of the problems we see today. At the core is a broken two-party system propped up by majoritarian and disproportional elections.

Party fragmentation has pushed this system to its limits. In two of the last three general elections, the system has failed to deliver majority governments, much less stability. This volatility in voter choice has – quite fairly – put the system under strain, resulting in erratic and disproportionate results. The 2017 election saw the second highest aggregate level volatility – the movement of votes between the parties – since 1931 (with the most volatile year being 2015), and with a system unable to accommodate these changes in voter behaviour, results have been unpredictable.

But voter antipathy with the system runs deeper than simply the voting system. The 'Westminster system' as a whole – characterised by centralised, two-party politics – is now fundamentally out of kilter with how voters want to be represented today. In both local council elections at the start of the month and recent European elections, we can see how the UK electorate has switched to new and 'smaller' parties. The European Parliament elections in particular show a historically low combined vote share of Conservatives and Labour of just 23% – which indicates that voters are not only less closely aligned with the two 'main' parties, but wish to support a wider range of parties. When support for parties is so spread politicians need to work together to bridge divides and not be forced into the binary politics of government and opposition.

This oppositional mentality goes against how the public thinks our democracy should work: our research shows that whilst 64% of people think that our political system should encourage cooperation between political parties, only 19% believe that it actually does so.

It is now time to move decisively away from a Westminster model and build a politics that is fit for purpose and brings people, power and politicians together to shape our response to the challenges we face.

In the new report, we set out a map towards remaking democracy at Westminster and bringing citizens into political decision-making. There are two key pillars to the proposals. First, we need to rebalance power at the centre by reforming the unelected and undemocratic House of Lords. An elected second chamber could serve as the forum where representatives from the UK's nations and localities could gather to discuss national and cross-border issues. Looking at examples from overseas, we can see how a second chamber can represent different territorial interests in the centre.

Second, we need to bring power closer to the people and give them a genuine say in the future of their country and communities. Deliberative democratic processes can ensure that citizens are informed, are able to hear each other's views in a reflective and respectful environment, and can make decisions that have real impact. These changes are not just institutional, but are centred around a shift in our political culture.

As MPs sign off on plans to fix the physical structures of Parliament, it is time to rebuild our political system too. There is a public appetite for a different kind of politics. We need to remake politics at Westminster to place it on stronger and fairer foundations.

*This article gives the views of the author, not the position of Democratic Audit. You can read the Electoral Reform Society's new report here: [Westminster Beyond Brexit: Ending the Politics of Division](#).*

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## About the author



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