It has become a well-worn trope to blame our disconnected politics on problems with political parties. What if, however, the problem isn’t simply that people are not supporting political parties; what if the deeper problem is that people no longer see politics as having agency in their lives? – and so are not voting.

Too often people complain about the disconnect between people and parties being due to the anomalies of the ‘first-past-the-post’ voting system. That view is valid – but it still only considers the votes cast. What is more interesting is to look at the proportion of votes NOT cast in elections – and how this has changed over time. More importantly, in this age of media spin and social media manipulation, the effect of reducing the overall number of votes cast is to reduce the margin required for any political position to gain power.

This chart illustrates how voting has changed over the past 90 years – since voting was first carried-out on an equal basis. It used to take a third to two-fifths of the vote to elect a government. Recently this has fallen to a quarter. Politics may not be the root of the problem; it might be ‘representation’ that is in trouble.

And what of the Brexit referendum? Counting the votes NOT cast in the Brexit referendum makes the reasons for the present national divide more readily apparent.

The divide is not “52/48”; the divide approximates a third for each ‘camp’ when you count the votes not cast. That situation becomes more complex now the options – ‘hard’, ‘soft’, ‘remain’, ‘new vote’ – have multiplied from just ‘yes/no’. It might be ‘representation’ that is in trouble.