

“We live in a democracy”: Can you show me some evidence of that?

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 redu-

cing 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.

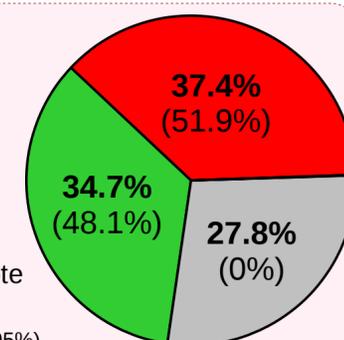
Politics may not be the root of the problem; it might be ‘representation’ that is in trouble.

And what of the Brexit referendum?

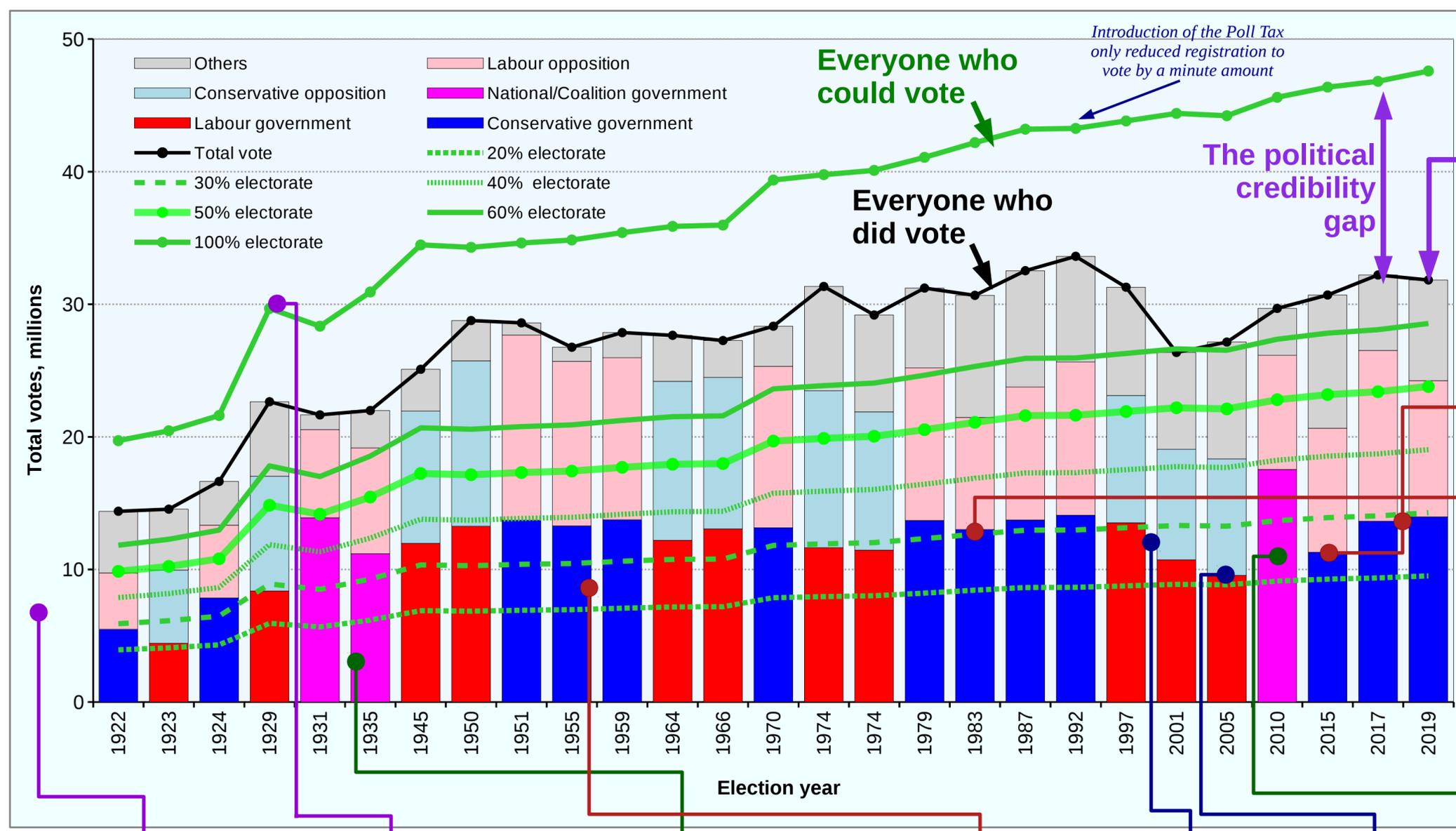
Counting the the votes NOT cast in the Brexit referendum makes the reasons for the present national divide more readily apparent.

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’.

■ Leave
■ Remain
■ Did not vote
■ Spoiled
0.1% (0.05%)



Year	Government	cast	total
1922	Conservative	38%	28%
1923	Labour	31%	22%
1924	Conservative	47%	36%
1929	Labour	37%	28%
1931	National	64%	49%
1935	National	51%	36%
1945	Labour	48%	35%
1950	Labour	46%	39%
1951	Conservative	48%	40%
1955	Conservative	50%	38%
1959	Conservative	49%	39%
1964	Labour	44%	34%
1966	Labour	48%	36%
1970	Conservative	46%	33%
1974	Labour	37%	29%
1974	Labour	39%	29%
1979	Conservative	44%	33%
1983	Conservative	42%	31%
1987	Conservative	42%	32%
1992	Conservative	42%	33%
1997	Labour	43%	31%
2001	Labour	41%	24%
2005	Labour	35%	22%
2010	Coalition	59%	38%
2015	Conservative	37%	24%
2017	Conservative	42%	29%
2019	Conservative	44%	29%



The “Get Brexit Done” election had a lower turnout than 2017, and a lower number of votes cast than the 2016 referendum. Boris’ ‘landslide’ was based upon a freak of the electoral system, not popular support

Like Blair, the last three Conservative election wins have been made upon less than 30% of the electorate

Margaret Thatcher’s premiership was based on a lower proportion of the vote than previous Conservative governments – her 1983 ‘landslide’ was her lowest proportion of the whole electorate

The Representation of the People Act 1918 had tripled the electorate at the 1918 election, from 7 to 21 million. All men over 21 could vote, but women over 30 had to qualify by living in a rateable property worth £5/year. Women were two-fifths of electorate

Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act 1928 gave vote to men and women equally, resulting in a large increase in franchise for 1929 election

The ‘National Government’, led by Conservatives, included Liberals & Independent Labour MPs, working together in the national interest during The Depression. Stanley Baldwin’s government received the highest vote of any election since the equalisation of the franchise – 64% of the votes cast, or 49% of the electorate

Anthony Eden’s Conservative government of 1955 was the last single party to almost achieve a majority of the electorate – 49.7% of the votes cast, but only 40% of the electorate

Tony Blair is elected not on a ‘landslide’ popular surge of approval, but on a collapse in voter turnout for all parties – which deepened at the following election in 2001.

At the 2005 election Tony Blair sets a new record – winning the election on 35.2% of the votes cast, just 21.6% of the electorate

The 2010 Conservative–Liberal Democrat government is elected on 59% of the votes cast, but due to the collapse in turnout it is still only 38% of the electorate.