



There is a budding campaign to change the UK electoral system from a First Past the Post system (FPTP) to one that is based on Proportional Representation (PR)<sup>1</sup>.

The campaign makes many valid points. For example, that 68.5% of votes had no impact on the outcome of the 2017 General Election due to FPTP<sup>2</sup>. Here at NOTA UK, we noted in our recent white paper that the two major parties almost always receive less than 50% of the total votes possible (save in 2001), but still occupied about 90% of the seats in parliament.

These figures demonstrate that nothing short of a hijacking of our political system by the two major parties has been happening for decades as a result of FPTP. PR would certainly go some way to addressing this problem.

However, we would like to offer a constructive critique of the campaign for PR. We are not against it in any way, we simply want to demonstrate that as inclusion of a NOTA option on ballot papers is a pre-requisite for making any type of electoral system fully democratic, any PR proposal would be considerably improved if NOTA were a part of it. We also feel strongly that NOTA is a more achievable reform in the short to mid-term.

NOTA, which stands for 'None of the Above', is a ballot paper option that would allow individual voters to reject all parties and candidates put forward - and effectively withhold their consent for an election to deliver a winner - if they so choose. Implemented properly, in a formal and binding manner, we believe the presence of this NOTA option would, over time, organically lead to an alignment of the interests of political parties in parliament with those of the electorate, thus ensuring that our chosen representatives constantly endeavour to maximise the common good.

Why? Because the alternative, the current practice of largely ignoring voter concerns in favour of those of lobbyists and special interest groups, would inevitably lead to more NOTA voters, which in turn would have the potential to hugely undermine any political parties that they overtook and even render election results null and void if voting in sufficient numbers. The need to minimise this risk to avoid instability ought to eventually lead to an alignment of parliament and populous.

In any electoral system where consent cannot be formally and measurably withheld in a binding manner, consent - by voting - cannot truly be given either. This is a huge flaw, as it creates a 'lead, follow, or get out of the way' model that is inherently authoritarian and incompatible with democracy.

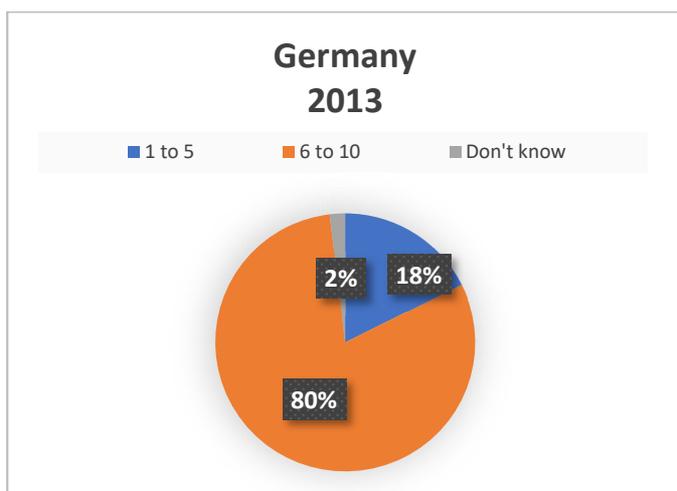
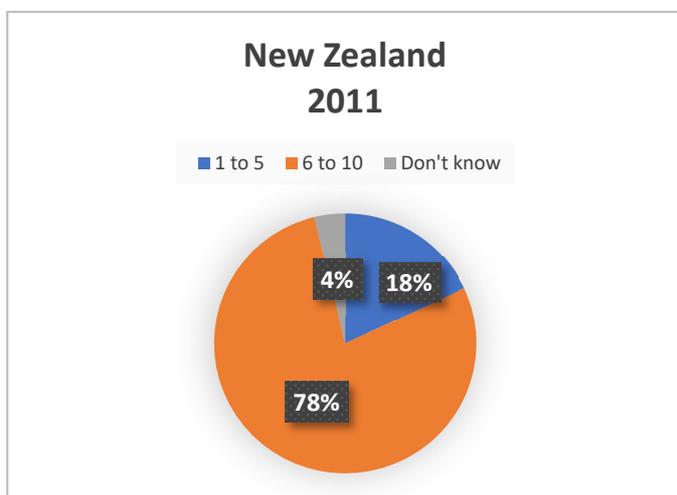
NOTA is the only way to ensure that the all-important formal and binding withholding of consent, and with it real democracy, is possible. For this reason, we believe that NOTA is an achievable reform with enough understanding of this fact and support from the public.

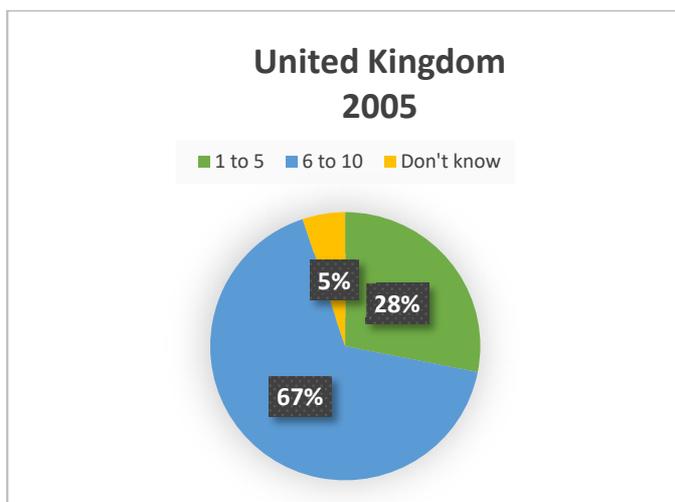
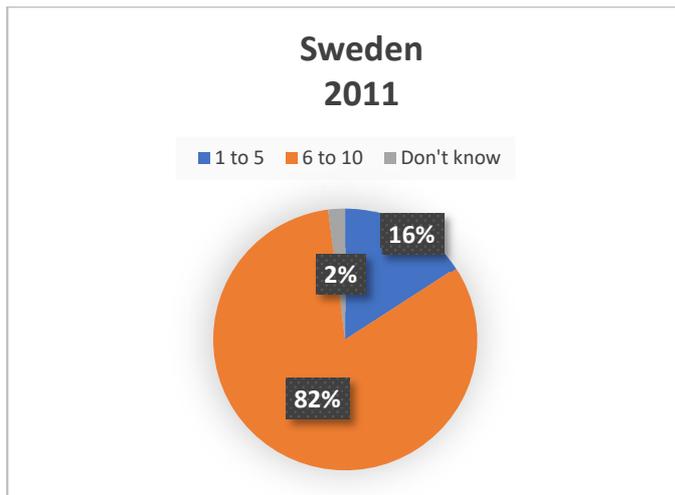
The campaign for PR endeavours to make all votes matter, which it definitely would, but we believe any and all electoral systems require a formal and binding NOTA option to truly ensure that all voters matter.

So how much difference does a PR system make to voter perception of democracy and governance? We used data from the World Values Survey<sup>3</sup>, as it provides easily comparable snapshots of public sentiment between many countries, using exactly the same questions and methodology. (Unfortunately, the last time the UK was included in one of its surveys was 2005, so that's all that is available).

Let's compare responses to pertinent questions, posed in countries that use PR to elect representatives, and contrast them with the responses in the UK. The countries chosen were: New Zealand, Germany, and Sweden.

**Question 1: How democratically is this country being governed today? (On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being completely undemocratic and 10 being completely democratic.)**

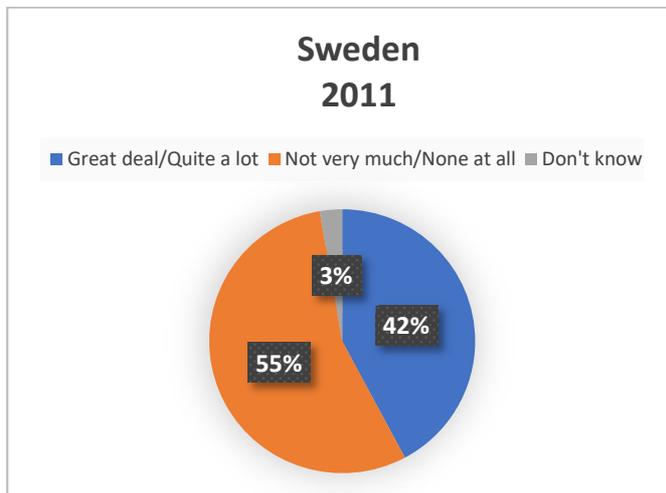




We can see in comparison to the UK, that public sentiment that the country is democratically governed is higher in countries with PR. However, even in the UK the majority think that we have democratic governance, even though the FPTP system largely ensures plurality rule. PR definitely ensures that seats are allocated on a fair basis amongst political parties, but is that all there is to democracy? Democracy is the manifestation of the will of the people, isn't it?

It's worth digging a bit deeper to find out if this change has actually occurred or if people are simply conflating a fairer distribution of seats with improved democratic governance. Because if PR actually were providing improved democratic governance, we would surely see increased confidence in political parties and parliament as well.

**Question 2: How much confidence do you have in political parties?**



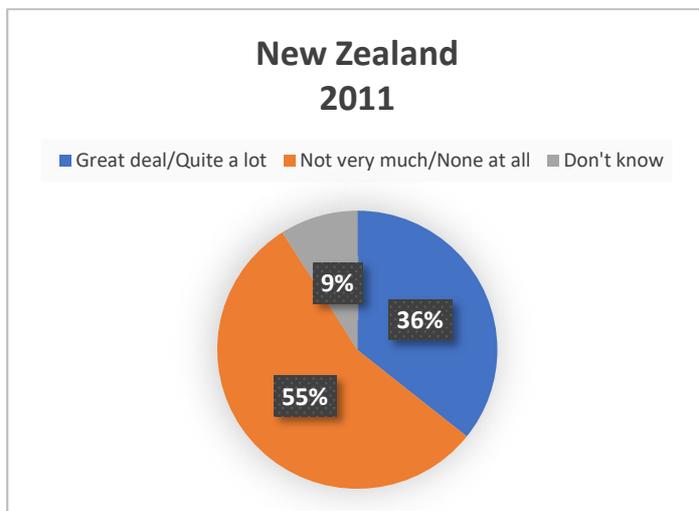


Now there is very little to differentiate attitudes in New Zealand, Germany and the UK. Even in Sweden, the majority of the population do not have confidence in their political parties.

How is it possible that a democracy with a PR system is governed by parties in whom the majority don't have confidence? If they had a democracy, then they would be governed by those in whom the majority had the most confidence and respect. What we seem to have here is the exact opposite.

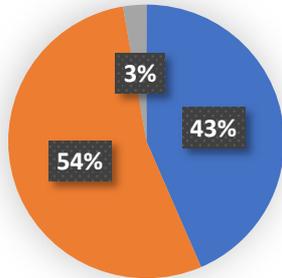
So how about the institution of parliament itself, how does PR affect perception of the legislature itself?

**Question 3: How much confidence do you have in parliament?**



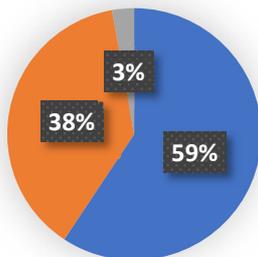
### Germany 2013

■ Great deal/Quite a lot ■ Not very much/None at all ■ Don't know



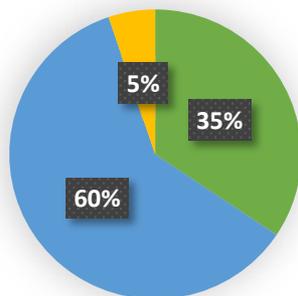
### Sweden 2011

■ Great deal/Quite a lot ■ Not very much/None at all ■ Don't know



### United Kingdom 2005

■ Great deal/Quite a lot ■ Not very much/None at all ■ Don't know



Once again, it's the lucky Swedes that are the standouts. Sweden is the only country where the majority have quite a lot of confidence in parliament. Neither Germany nor New Zealand offer up a response much different from that of the UK.

So, what is the point of these comparisons?

We at NOTA UK believe that simply changing to a PR system alone doesn't change political systems enough to ensure they are truly democratic i.e. ensuring the free expression of the will of the people. We think the significant change required to achieve this is to usher in voter-led politics through the NOTA option.

It's the public that lives with the consequences of the decisions made by parliament, so it is only they who ought to steer parliament, such that it will act to maximise the common good. With NOTA, the public will choose politicians and policies over time that improve their lives and discard those that have a negative impact.

So how does that work in practice within a PR system?

To illustrate, let us use a simplified hypothetical PR system. Imagine there is a 100-seat legislature, where seats are allocated in proportion to the percentage of votes obtained. So, 20% of the vote corresponds to 20 seats in the legislature.

It is unlikely that in a PR system, any single party will achieve enough votes to have a majority of seats in the assembly. A coalition will therefore usually be required, and there is no way of knowing whether the compromises required to build the coalition have the consent of the majority.

Nor is there any incentive for parties to work towards improving the common good. Even if they govern badly, most of them are going to be elected, again and again and again.

Parties usually have a monopoly status over the people who vote for them, so can bundle in all kinds of policies and people that do not enhance the common good, along with policies and people their voters support, while excluding policies and people their voters probably would support.

Anyone who has no representation can be ignored, as it is incredibly difficult to do anything about it. This in itself is a shocking omission.

Once again it is 'lead, follow, or get out of the way'. This is not a democratic election model. However, the addition of NOTA on the ballot can change it into a democratic one, as no longer do voters have to get out of the way.

Public dissatisfaction must be measured for effective governance. This is essential feedback for all, voters and candidates alike. Yet, under the vast majority of electoral systems we do not even try to measure it, and that includes PR without NOTA.

The only way to reliably measure the level of public dissatisfaction is through a formal and binding NOTA option.

NOTA voters should always have the same power as those who choose one of the parties or candidates on the ballot.

So, the percentage of voters who choose NOTA would match the percentage of empty seats in our legislative assembly – and empty seats would always automatically be registered as voting against any proposed legislation.

Why? Because this is the democratically valid result of choosing NOTA. But isn't that negative?

No. It provides an incentive to political parties in the assembly to minimise the number of empty seats, thus aligning their interests with the will of the people, so ensuring the maximisation of the common good in the long run.

In these circumstances, whatever coalition is formed, and even where no coalition is required, the assembly would aim to maximize the common good because failure to do so would increase the NOTA share of the vote. Also, parties must compete to win votes from the NOTA pool to expand or maintain their power in the assembly. The larger NOTA's share of the vote, the more difficult it would become to get legislation through the assembly. Should the NOTA vote exceed 50%, it would become impossible. And this is as it should be.

The political environment of the assembly is now solely focused on improving the lives of voters. No more can politicians live in a bubble where their own preferences, or that of their financial backers, take precedence over voter interests.

This is why we maintain that NOTA is a pre-requisite for any democratic electoral system that ensures adherence to popular sovereignty.

This model of democracy is not something we made up at NOTA UK, but one that has been endorsed by most governments through the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in which it clearly states that the will of the people confers legitimacy to government. We at NOTA UK show that a formal and binding NOTA option is required to honour that commitment.

The parliamentary Political & Constitutional Reform Committee (PCRC), in its 2015 report, recommended that the government consult on the inclusion of NOTA on ballot papers<sup>4</sup>, a recommendation that has to date been ignored.

We at NOTA UK are not trying to denigrate anybody else's work on electoral reform in the UK, clearly many approaches and reforms are required.

Many people support PR for good reasons that we respect. But to achieve the goal of ensuring that politics is always about maximising the common good and real democracy, we must ensure adherence to the democratic principle of popular sovereignty - and that can only happen through inclusion of a formal and binding NOTA option.

PR makes votes matter, but it requires NOTA to ensure voters matter.

## References:

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