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# Electoralism or class struggle?

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March 2015

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the ruling class with the opportunity an election gives us to talk politics to our class. We in no way see the election as an alternative to direct action. By the brick and the ballot.

I disagree that the election gives us a unique opportunity to talk politics. For a start, assuming so underwrites the illusion that politics is in the state rather than in everyday life. However, even were it true, why does that conversation have to involve standing candidates?

The main reason that Class War have gained headlines, and kicked up a serious political stink, is their campaign against poor doors. They gained a substantive victory out of it as well as airtime and column inches.

But that's not electoralism, it's direct action. That is precisely the thing which will give the ruling class the "short sharp kick in the bollocks" Class War are after. As Johnny Void puts it, "Find a weak spot, organise, and kick it till it fucking breaks."

An election campaign can't compare to that, and is indeed a distraction from it.

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The SPGB try to argue that a coup could not work because “strikes, demonstrations and army mutinies would immediately break out and the whole thing would be over in a day or two.” This isn’t an answer so much as hand-waving. There is no way that a global revolution could happen entirely in unison, so the forces of capital would be able to call upon external military power if the internal military power had successfully been shut down. It is a fact that any revolution will have to defend itself militarily — there is no off switch for violence to be found within parliament.

The SPGB ask “If on the eve of the revolution a majority of the population are in favour of it and are organised to participate in it, why should they not demonstrate this by putting up their own candidates to oppose and beat those who do support the continuation of the capitalist system?”

The answer is threefold. One, because it’s a massive distraction from the more pressing task at hand. Two, because its stated aim of making revolution entirely non-violent is a nonsense. And three, because if you want a system of recallable delegates, you should build that system rather than try to graft it onto a state apparatus that you in theory wish to dismantle.

### **Class War’s ‘talking politics to our class’**

Class War’s reason for getting involved in the General Election at least has the benefit of not being as daft as the SPBG’s.<sup>3</sup> For the most part, they appear aware that they have no chance of winning and that if they did it wouldn’t be a revolutionary moment. Rather, it is a propaganda stunt.

We are standing Class War candidates in the general election on May 7<sup>th</sup> 2015. We are doing this to launch a furious and co-ordinated political offensive against

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<sup>3</sup> Leaving aside the declaration in their statement of intent that “We live in a feudal society.”

bonds, all limited liability companies and corporations null and void. This means that the means of production become the common heritage of all. The socialist majority can also co-ordinate the physical take-over of the means of production by people outside parliament, organised and ready to do this and keep production going.<sup>2</sup>

To be fair to the SPGB, if they ever reached a position where they could win a majority in parliament, that majority would very clearly be a socialist one. Unlike SPEW which stands for election as part of the Trade Union and Socialist Coalition, SPGB's socialism isn't just social democratic policies with a quasi-radical veneer, but openly revolutionary workers' control.

However, this doesn't change the fact that building a mass movement beyond parliament and creating a party capable of winning a convincing parliamentary majority cannot practically be synchronised. For a start, there is the fact that not all of those involved in the former will agree with the latter — either due to opposing electoralism, or advocating a different approach to elections, or being in a different party. And vice versa, since you will equally have those willing to vote for socialism but not organise and fight for it. Then there is the fact that the conditions which determine peaks and troughs in class struggle and movement building don't necessarily overlap with those which lead to upswings in electoral fortunes.

Ultimately, a mass movement capable of enacting revolutionary change is likely to emerge far ahead of a party capable of forming a government on a ticket of socialism.

Even if this wasn't the case, the idea of taking parliament via elections is to make the revolution a peaceful one. But to think that such an overhaul of society can be done without violence is naive at best.

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<sup>2</sup> [www.worldsocialism.org](http://www.worldsocialism.org)

While there are many pieces talking generally about the problems and limitations of representative democracy, this series looks at and debunks specific 'tactical voting' strategies and election narratives from an anti-electoral, working class perspective.

## On holding your nose to vote Labour

*As the 2015 General Election looms ever closer, more and more media commentary is going to be dedicated to who people should vote for. Rather than talking generally about the problems and limitations of representative democracy, this is the first of several posts looking at and debunking specific 'tactical voting' strategies and election narratives from an anti-electoral perspective.*

A number of commentators 'on the left' (for lack of a better term) tell us that in the coming elections we need to 'hold our noses and vote Labour.'

If we don't, then all we're doing is helping the Tories to win and bring on the apocalypse. It's the bloke who looks like a meff in any and all situations or the harbingers of hell will eat the souls of the most vulnerable while wearing their fancy new fox-pelt coats.

I don't want to understate the menace of the Tories, of course. They're shameless purveyors of the fuck-awful and that's even without being amongst those mired in a massive scandal for harbouring and covering up institutional child abuse. If you don't react to seeing David Cameron speak by wanting to hit him in the face with a shovel, then there's something wrong with you.

But does this mean we have no choice except to vote Labour as so many liberals and leftists advocate? Well, obviously not.

The reason that their argument holds any weight at all is that, in purely electoral terms, it's true. Without any doubt, either the Labour Party or the Conservative Party will get the most seats in this election. This means that one or other will either be forming

a majority government or the major partner in a coalition government.

With upswings for the Greens, the SNP in Scotland and UKIP respectively, a number of different coalition combinations have been touted in opinion pieces but the one or other of the two main parties will be the power broker.

Thus, it follows that if you don't want one — you need to vote for the other.

But suppose Labour get in instead of the Tories. Then what? They've pledged to match Tory spending plans, won't reverse the cuts of the last five years, and promise even more cuts. While liberals get excited about pledges to scrap the Bedroom Tax (see Nick Clegg's famous pledge on tuition fees for why not to trust that), the continue to fart out reactionary bullshit about benefits, migrants and other subjects.

All of this fits in with their record. The first attempts to privatise Royal Mail came from Labour, as a considerable chunk of NHS sell offs through the Private Finance Initiative. They introduced the tuition fees that the Tories later tripled. They made over two thirds of the cuts to staff in HMRC in the last ten years. They made the first attempt to attack civil service redundancy rights that the Tories later succeeded with by changing the law.

Nor is this limited to New Labour. The 'spirit of 45' nonsense glosses over the Labour Party government holding down public sector wages, building the welfare state off the back of the empire, breaking strikes, attacking trade unions and propping up capitalism throughout its history rather than as a brand new idea with Kinnock and then Blair at the helm.

In other words, there is no dragging them to the left. They've never been there, and they've spent decades destroying every possible route back even to the unduly mythologised past that people like to pretend was on the left.

So yes, voting Labour might mean you're not stuck with the Tories. That might be enough if you don't want job cuts, benefit sanc-

groups which, on the face of it, know precisely the limitations of electoralism and trying to capture the state, yet carry on and do it anyway.

I'm talking about the Socialist Party of Great Britain (SPGB) and Class War, now rebranded as The Class War Party.

### **The SPGB's 'utopian electoralism'**

The SPGB has two unique selling points. First, that they were called 'The Socialist Party' first, despite it now being more commonly associated with the Socialist Party of England and Wales (SPEW), formerly Militant Tendency. And second, that they believe in a global socialist revolution driven by a party winning elections in order to dismantle capitalism from within parliament at the behest of populace which is overwhelmingly in favour of socialism.

#### **SPGB wrote:**

Of course, establishing socialism is not just a question of voting for a socialist candidate and waiting for a majority of socialist MPs to vote it in (much as people do today who vote for a party which promises some reform of capitalism). People have to have organised themselves outside parliament into a mass democratic socialist party, into trade unions and other workplace organisations, into neighbourhood councils and the like. The socialist MPs would be merely the delegates — the messenger boys and girls — of the organised socialist majority outside parliament.

So, we have in mind a democratic, majority political revolution which begins with the winning of political power via the ballot box by a socialist-minded majority. The majority then uses this control of political power to dispossess the capitalist class, declaring all property titles, all stocks and shares, all bills and

ular measures of this government and built a cohesive, tangible solidarity that has seen off a number of attempted evictions. Workfare came to the brink of collapse as a result of campaigning and pickets, forcing Iain Duncan Smith to change the law in order to revive its shambling corpse.

These are a few, recent examples. The point is that where people organise and take action together they can resist attacks, win improvements, and force change.

While the #NoVoteNoVoice position is that not voting lets politicians off the hook, in fact it is defining politics as something external which happens in parliament that lets the state off the hook. If we want change, we need to organise – to build a movement which can resist attacks on our rights and conditions and fight for positive improvements.

By organising and taking direct action, we can win improvements ranging from extra benefits at work to the passing of beneficial laws. More than that, by organising and building a movement on such a basis, we build the consciousness and the confidence of the class in its own power. This is a necessity if we are to take seriously the idea of revolutionary change.

At the moment, that movement is embryonic. It needs to grow, and it needs to be acknowledged that electoralism isn't an accompaniment to that but a competitor for time and resources.

## **An afterthought: 'extra-parliamentary electoralism'**

*As a post script to the series on 'tactical voting' strategies and election narratives, a critical look at two different parties at the more radical end of radical electoralism.*

Although I've already dealt with the pitfalls of radical electoralism, there are two specific variants of it which I want to give a closer look. This is because these strategies are being pursued by

tions and service closures to be overseen by grinning maniacs who probably power-wank at the thought of other people's suffering and misery. But what if you want those things to actually stop rather than those implementing them just to be less gleeful about it?

The only way to stop or slow down the current onslaught, let alone win actual positive improvements, is to organise. We need a working class movement willing and capable of taking disruptive direct action against the state, landlords, bosses and the ruling class.

You can't vote for that.

## **The pitfalls of radical electoralism**

*The second in a series looking at and debunking specific 'tactical voting' strategies and election narratives from an anti-electoral perspective.*

Disillusionment in Labour is becoming more and more widespread. However, this doesn't automatically equate to a rejection of electoralism in favour of extra-parliamentary struggle. Voting remains the expected means of social change, but now instead of simply choosing the least worst they want something more positive – and the seeming answer to this is to vote for a third party.

The major problem is the main two horse race – i.e. that whichever direction you're defecting, so many more people will stay where they were for fear of letting the other side win. Tribalism is a powerful force, whatever the motives for it.

Then there's the question of which one?

We'll discount UKIP on the grounds that while reactionary parties feeding upon alienation is an important issue, this piece is about illusions in "radical" parties. That's not something those mouth-breathing, racist shit-gibbons who think that the Tories

aren't quite crap-on-small-children's-heads evil enough for them can be accused of being.

But the SNP are booming in Scotland, the Greens are on the upswing, Left Unity appear to have got off to a strong start with 2015 as their first real test, and TUSC... Hahahahahahahahaha. Anyway, the point is that there isn't one main contender to barge their way into the front running.

Forget that though. Say that one third party really can shake things up, or that a number of them can shatter the two party system for good and all. Then what?

SYRIZA's rise to power in Greece is already being touted as proof positive that this is definitely the outcome to root for. Others have already dealt in-depth with SYRIZA's limitations, but the fact that within a day they had formed a coalition with the Greek equivalent of UKIP is instructive.

No matter who gets in, you're stuck with the fact that all of these parties are vying for the same job. That job (running the state) can be done in slightly different ways, but ultimately whoever gets the job will be bound by the same basic parameters. Much like getting a job in HMRC means you'll collect tax rather than, say, riding on horseback through slums and tossing handfuls of money to the peasantry. Whatever your intentions, the job is what it is.

And what's the job?

**Managing capitalism.** It's easy to claim that politicians are corrupt for being funded by various different business interests who want something in return. That may well be true, but it's not the whole story.

We live in a capitalist society. Workers have to sell their labour to survive, bosses thrive by expropriating rents or surplus value — and the state needs money to pay for its existence. That money doesn't grow on trees, but comes from taxation and is inevitably going to reduce if the economy tanks it.

So growth is a necessity, with GDP bankrolling the police force that defendss the state's monopoly of violence at home, the mili-

there's no set recipe and no pre-determined length of time in the oven which guarantees success.

Even aside from this, improvements in our present conditions come overwhelmingly from extra-parliamentary activity. Sure, it's the politicians who enshrine our victories in law, but not because we voted for them. They do it because our strength as an organised movement made that the least disruptive option available.

In the workplace we win, advance and defend our pay and conditions by forming unions and pitting our collective strength against the bosses.

A powerful, militant campaign by workers at Ritzy Cinemas last year forced bosses to pay the London Living Wage. Cleaners at the Royal Opera House scored a similar victory with their own campaign of action. Both of these results, as well as improving the lot of the workers directly involved, has also served as an inspiration to other workers to advance similar demands.

The knock on effect of this is felt by even the likes of David Cameron declaring that he supports the idea in principle<sup>1</sup> and a number of parties putting minimum wage rises in their manifestos.

But, of course, this doesn't mean you can vote for the living wage — it means that as we win by exercising our class power, those managing or seeking to manage the state will try to divert any possible momentum from these wins towards electoral politics. The fact remains that the impetus for this change grows with the victories won through direct action, and wanes when the pressure that creates goes away.

This isn't just evident in the workplace, but in the community too. The Focus E15 Campaign successfully resisted eviction by Newham Council and residents of the New Era Estate in Hackney saw off a corporation looking to evict them and treble the rent, both of which put housing on the national agenda. Organised community campaigns have made the Bedroom Tax one of the least pop-

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<sup>1</sup> Obviously, taking Dishface at his word would be colossally naive.



So what, then? If voting is pointless and not voting is equally pointless, what's the answer?

Well, I've alluded to it in every single one of these posts, but I'll go into more depth in the final part of this series.

## Waiting for the revolution?

*The final part in a series looking at and debunking specific 'tactical voting' strategies and election narratives from an anti-electoral perspective.*

If anarchists, as a rule, don't vote – or at least don't go in for all the wasted energy and fruitless illusion of electoral politics – then what do we do? Are we, as those who earnestly see voting as a social duty might suggest with a condescending chuckle, just sitting around waiting for the revolution?

Bluntly, no.

This false dichotomy is ever present. You can either sit around waiting for the revolution, with a V for Vendetta mask or Les Misérables soundtrack ready according to taste, or you can suck it up and vote. An X in a box or the heads of the bourgeoisie on pikes – there is no in-between.

Aside from being transparent nonsense, this line of non-thought ignores the main reasons that people consciously reject voting in the first place. That is, that voting on the individuals who run the state doesn't change the fundamental nature of the state itself and that social change doesn't come from the ballot box but as a result of organisation and struggle.

Anarchists are revolutionaries. That much is apparent from the fact that existing capitalist society cannot be incrementally reformed into anarchist communism. But revolution isn't a "moment," something that happens out of the blue and has a definite start and end point. Societal upheaval isn't like baking a cake –

tary, trade and aid that assert the national interest abroad, the bureaucracy that keep the state functioning, and the services it provides.

**Maintaining social order.** This is fairly straightforward – you can't govern a territory if you don't control it, and unrest is a challenge to your control. The instances, prolific and global, of socialist governments crushing strikes, Green governments sending the police against environmental protests, and so on, may be surprising given the professed ideology of the parties in power. But they make perfect sense from the perspective of someone whose job is to run the state.

**Balancing the books.** This should also be fairly obvious. A level of debt is sustainable as long as the tax is rolling in (and this level varies depending on who's running the show) but money's still finite and tied to the economy. Plus you're an employer now, and from the employer's point of view workers are fundamentally a cost. This is nothing to do with personal malice and everything to do with material interests.

The result? In a word, cuts. Left wing and socialist governments will enforce austerity, lay off staff and cut services as readily as any other government when it's necessary to do so.

Libcom.org's excellent introduction to the state goes into more depth on this. But for our purposes it is fundamental to say that any party elected to government will be pro-capitalist, enforce dominant social and property relations, and make cuts.

Further to which, assuming third parties did break the two party system, the main result would be more coalitions. And coalition, fundamentally, is compromise.

But would the presence of more third parties create pressure on the government to pull them leftward? Not a chance. See as one example the complete lack of reaction to Caroline Lucas becoming an MP versus the panicked shit storm in response to two chinless Tory chucklefucks swapping a blue rosette for a purple one.

The media and politicians will create a narrative about what is putting pressure on them which justifies them going in a direction they wanted to anyway.

Third parties can't pull the state leftward, but mass social movements can force concessions from it. The former is a massive drain of time, energy and effort from the latter. Worse, it creates the illusion that the latter isn't necessary since we can just vote 'radically' instead of all that inconvenient hard work of organising and fighting.

The Greens are the main exemplars of this right now, and we're earnestly told that the attacks on workers, privatisation, sticking the homeless in shipping containers, evicting travellers and general wankiness of the Brighton Green Council is an aberration and not representative of the party at large.

But the party in power is always an aberration from what the party pretends to be. Ultimately, believing in a third party of any variety boils down to still believing in this:

Don't get fooled again.

## **Voting is no substitute for anti-racism**

*The third in a series looking at and debunking specific 'tactical voting' strategies and election narratives from an anti-electoral perspective.*

Beyond choosing the lesser of two evils, and voting for a radical alternative, there is a third major reason that a lot of people use their vote: to keep the bad guys out.

If we don't use our vote on one of the mainstream parties, then we run the risk of giving ground to the fringes. No matter how bad the current crop in parliament are, we need to stop the *real* swivel-eyed lunatics getting anywhere. Previously this threat was embodied by the British National Party, which has now collapsed into a mere shell of the hateful joke it once was thanks to split after split after split after split. In their place, we have UKIP.

which could be better used organising in the community or the workplace. And which indeed often stops or limits people doing that since human beings tend to have a finite amount of time and energy spare.

- So much of the fucking left who've seen this all play out so many times wilfully refuse to know better because this time it'll be different. Wanna buy our party line in newspaper format?

But aren't there some who think that not voting can be some kind of weapon or tactic?

Possibly. I don't think it's a great many people, but I have heard the arguments before. If we actively en masse spoil our ballot papers, then we show the politicians that it's not apathy. They have to count the spoiled ballots, so they know that we're there.

Yeah, and then what?

A few points:

- There are many reasons for not choosing any of the candidates on the ballot paper, most non-revolutionary and many actively reactionary. In itself it doesn't say anything.
- If spoiled ballots ever reach a critical mass that politicians have to react to they'll take the interpretation that suits their agenda.
- Reaching that critical mass comes under the same 'waste of time, energy and resources' label as election campaigning.
- Somebody will always vote. Sorry.
- Even if they didn't, would the government then turn around and go 'okay, we'll abolish ourselves?' Of course not.

erlessness is what breeds real apathy, not the unwillingness to vote but the feeling that they can't change anything.

That makes the real challenge not getting out the vote but giving workers confidence in their own collective power to force change in the workplace and the community. For that, you have to think outside the ballot box.

## Active abstention isn't the answer either

*The penultimate part in a series looking at and debunking specific 'tactical voting' strategies and election narratives from an anti-electoral perspective.*

I've dealt with holding your nose to vote Labour, third parties as an alternative, and the ideas that if only we reformed the voting system or tackled voter apathy then elections would mean something. But what about not voting? Do I seriously advocate that as a solution?

Well, no. I don't.

Anarchists don't advocate not voting, we rather don't advocate voting. See the difference? We also don't advocate line dancing, this doesn't mean that actively not line dancing is a solution to anything.

If you want to vote, go ahead.

My objections aren't to the act of voting. They're to:

- The social stigma some attempt to apply to those who don't vote.
- The ridiculous illusions people have in voting and representative democracy more generally, which are often a barrier to being aware of our own collective power as a class through direct action.
- The enormous amount of time, energy and resources expended on getting people to vote for this or that candidate,

Nigel Farage, who tragically survived his helicopter crash, is everywhere. The media continually raise his profile while wondering confusedly how his profile has raised so dramatically. The SWP managed to squeeze yet another cheap front organisation (Stand Up To UKIP) out of him. The likes of Britain First see him and his party as a back door for their racist politics into mainstream discourse and perhaps even parliament.

More importantly, while playing at being "common sense" and "anti-establishment," they peddle a racist and anti-worker agenda that's to the right of the Tories. They're definitely not people that we want taking power.

Unfortunately, the answer to UKIP or any threat that preceded them is so often presented as "vote to stop UKIP." Too often, a specific party (usually Labour) is presented as who we need to vote for to prevent catastrophe.

The problem with this is that, ultimately, it represents a failure.

In terms of anti-racism it's the equivalent of sticking a bucket underneath a drip but never bothering to patch up the leak. Attitudes in society cannot be voted away, and the physical threat of bigotry isn't something you can mitigate with an X in a box.

Whilst society today is more tolerant than it was in the past, this is due fundamentally to social movements challenging bigotry. The same methods are necessary today as were needed in the past – propaganda on the one hand, challenging dominant narratives and prejudices, and physical defence on the other to repel violent threats such as organised fascist movements. But no matter how far we've come, the idea of racism as something on the fringes and the preserve of UKIP et al is erroneous.

UKIP has attracted an awful lot of attention in the media much as the EDL and BNP did, with every gaffe they make plastered all over the papers. But this isn't because the media is anti-racist – rather it serves a distinct propaganda function.

When now-ousted BNP leader Nick Griffin made his infamous appearance on BBC Question Time, for example, nearly all of the

commentary focused on what a disaster it was for the far-right. How stupid and cartoonish these racists were, and how easily their arguments are torn apart! Except that after tearing Griffin a new one for his outlandish racism and ill-thought out ideas on “indigenous” Britons, Conservative community cohesion spokeswoman Sayeeda Warsi and Labour Justice Secretary Jack Straw (as they were then) argued over whether Labour’s immigration policy was too soft.

This was at a time when the Labour government had built up a state within a state of immigrant prisons, instituted exactly the scenario of hired thugs smashing in refugee doors and dragging them to forced deportation that the BNP longed for, and condemned untold numbers of “illegal” immigrants to life as enslaved non-persons on the black economy.

Media focus on the racism and bigotry of parties on the fringes serves at once to sanitise mainstream racism by comparison and to drag mainstream politics rightward. Likewise, voting Labour or any other mainstream parties may or may not keep UKIP out of office, but it won’t keep their ideas out.

Ultimately, stamping out racism means building a movement which gives the working class a way to actively challenge their alienation and the present conditions so that the far-right can’t offer scapegoats and false solutions that turn them against other sections of the class. Until we fill the vacuum, we still need to challenge racist ideas and physically repel racist organisations and movements.

Getting out the vote against UKIP et al is at best a stop gap measure. At worst, it only feeds the illusion that racism is “out there,” something external rather than right at the heart of British party politics.

involved in struggles for social change. You know, the stuff that **actually could** change everything.

If you’re dismayed with the dismal lack of change that comes from elections, maybe look at why electoralism isn’t a vehicle for social change, before you start the rallying cry to ‘wake up sheeple!’

That isn’t to say there isn’t a serious issue to be addressed.

A considerable majority of those who don’t vote will be of that position because they see no point. Even without necessarily having an anarchist analysis of the state, they can see that largely the same shit results whoever gets in. They’re alienated, atomised and disenchanted.

In other words, they’re suffering not from apathy but from the proletarian condition. And though they might not consider themselves ‘political,’ a lot of them will see what the problem is better than those who simply insist that we need to vote Labour.

If they’re white, working class and alienated, then there’s a huge risk that someone like UKIP or the BNP will have some appeal. Not because they’re racist, necessarily, but because the main parties have abandoned them, the left is non-existent on council estates, and these guys are actually talking about jobs, housing and social conditions — even if they are picking the wrong target and using the issues to stir up racism and xenophobia.

So yes, ‘apathy’ needs to be tackled. There needs to be a serious effort to talk politics with our class, counter the racist myths, and build real working class unity instead of partitioning it and allowing class to be co-opted for race and nation (white working class, British working class, etc).

But does this mean that we need to get people voting, specifically, or write them off as uncaring if they don’t? Of course not.

Whether someone votes or not is incidental. Apathy isn’t defined by whether you put an X in a box every five years but by whether you care about the real issues assaulting our class. Most people do, but feel powerless to do anything about them. That pow-

## Voter apathy isn't the problem

*The fifth in a series looking at and debunking specific 'tactical voting' strategies and election narratives from an anti-electoral perspective.*

Despite the vast amount of column inches dedicated to who you should vote for, tactically or on principle, and the huge amounts of time, money and energy spent to 'get out the vote,' a great many people won't. They won't vote Labour to stop the Tories, or vote a third party to either pull Labour left or present an alternative to them.

In fact, they won't be voting at all because (whiny liberal voice) "they just don't care."

This graphic sums up the argument of why this is supposedly such a problem:

### **Non-Voters outnumbered the supporters of every single political party in 2010**

- 3.5 million people voted Other
- 6.8 million people voted Lib Dem
- 8.6 million people voted Labour
- 10.7 million people voted Tory
- 15.9 million people DID NOT VOTE <- These people could change everything

It should be immediately obvious what's wrong with this graphic. 'These people' are highly unlikely to all vote in a similar direction, let alone for the same party, so they're not a decisive victory for a single party waiting in the wings.

Not to mention that a 100% turnout wouldn't change the fundamental role of the state as the manager of capital and upholder of social order with a monopoly on violence. Nor would it guarantee that people do anything other than vote, like join unions or get

## Alternative voting systems are no alternative

*The fourth in a series looking at and debunking specific 'tactical voting' strategies and election narratives from an anti-electoral perspective.*

The argument periodically arises around elections that our voting system needs reforming. The argument is currently gaining in popularity due to the fact that, while Syriza has stormed to victory in Greece, and despite surges by the Greens and the SNP, the General Election is still essentially a two horse race between Labour and the Tories.

As Mark Serwotka argues for the *Huffington Post*:

The next general election will arguably be the most important in this country for decades. Yet it will be characterised by a paralysing absence of political choice, with voters essentially asked what brand of austerity they would prefer: Tory Full Strength or Labour Lite.

Looking enviably to Greece, Syriza's stunning election victory is an inspiration to those of us who know there is an alternative to this fear and gloom. In little over a decade Alexis Tsipras's coalition of left wingers has enjoyed a meteoric rise, while the former centre-left party of government, Pasok, has been all but wiped off the political map.

This is a resounding rejection of austerity by the Greek people whose suffering under brutal cuts programmes has become emblematic of the latest economic crisis. By voting Syriza into office, they are saying they want hope to return to their country for the first time in many years.

While any comparisons with the UK come with a health warning, it is worth considering to what

extent our electoral system would limit the kind of Greek-style uprising that many of us want to see here.

Although I've already dealt with 'radical' electoral alternatives, and no matter how far Syriza retreat from their anti-austerity platform, this idea will persist. Every individual example that the state's structural functions under capitalism don't change depending on whose arse is in the seat can be written off as an aberration. And the hope will remain that if only we can vote differently, the outcome will be different.

It has been clear for some time that 'first past the post' is broken and the arguments in its favour are no longer relevant. The chances of another hung parliament and coalition are very high, so it even "fails on its own terms" by not providing the stability of a one-party government. In May MPs and the party or parties of government will be elected with a lower share of the vote, and more questionable mandates, than ever before.

Designed for another era of two-party politics, FPTP now stultifies elections and degrades our democracy, alienating voters and skewing voting patterns, as YouGov found when it asked people who they would vote for if a party's candidate had a chance of winning in their constituency.

So what we have is bland and complacent two-dimensional politics, where Tories and Labour vie for a mythical centre ground and target policies at handfuls of voters in marginal seats. A fairer system that fostered a greater range of credible alternatives would genuinely shake this consensus and could help diminish the concept of the protest vote, sidelining

those who play the system only to stoke fear, hatred and suspicion.

Proportional representation is already well established in our devolved legislatures and in Scotland, for example, it has opened up space for socialists and the Greens, giving them seats in parliament that more closely matched the votes they received at the ballot box.

But as nice as this is in theory, when looking at whether it works we have examples to look at in practice. Proportional representation isn't a theoretical, untested idea, or a transitional demand which threatens the foundations of capitalism. A whole list of countries around the world use it.

Yet how many of those countries have a Syriza, even one which is flawed, backtracking, and in coalition with right wing racists?

Parliamentary democracy the surrender of decision-making power to persons assumed to know better on such matters. Because of the makeup of society and what the state needs to function, those people act for the ruling class and in the best interests of capital. This doesn't change if the method of surrendering power is "fairer" or "more representative" of which party people choose. We are still choosing from a range of parties whose only differences are strategic – reflecting differences of opinion amongst the ruling class.

Whether we have first past the post or proportional representation, the fundamental nature of the state remains unchanged. Not only that, but campaigning around votes takes an enormous amount of energy, time, and resources, all of which could be much better spent building practical alternatives to the current system.

Our voting system, flawed or otherwise, isn't a barrier to change. But the belief that it matters and its existence as a focus of attention are a distraction from it.