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Out of Proportion

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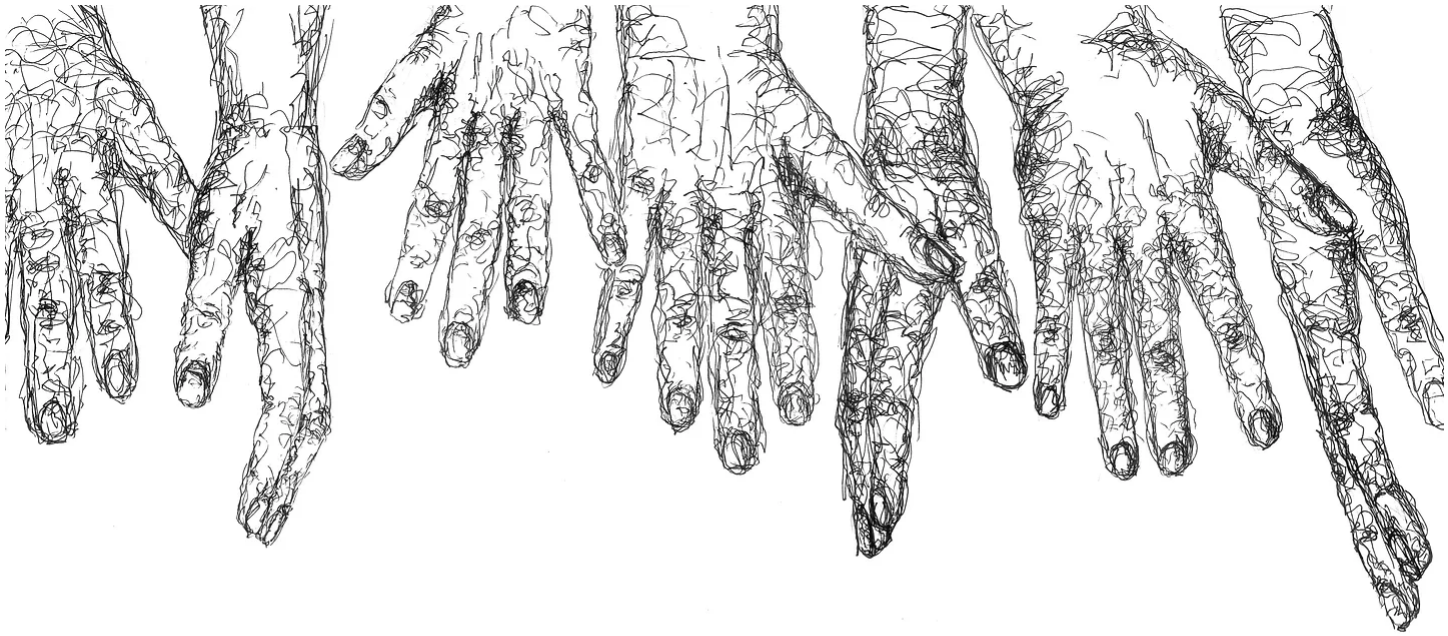
How electoral systems can transform climate policy

By Owen Winter



The hub at the centre of the push for a new voting system is in an unexpected location. Make Votes Matter, the single-issue movement for Proportional Representation (PR), has its headquarters on the third floor of a grand Georgian townhouse in Clifton, a suburb of Bristol. The campaign cannot fork out for central London offices and in a digital age most of their activists work remotely. The office is let to Make Votes Matter as a donation-in-kind by generous benefactors. In the cosy living-room-turned-office at the centre of the apartment, election result maps plaster the walls, with boxes of badges, t-shirts, and leaflets stacked beneath them.

This is where Klina Jordan, a Make Votes Matter co-founder and director, spends much of her time enthusing activists, lobbying politicians, and coordinating a nationwide movement to change the voting system. So what does this have to do with the world's climate?

Like the office, Jordan is an unexpected addition to the campaign for PR. Until recently, she vowed not to get involved in politics, convinced that it was dominated by 'two groups of blokes shouting at each other'. It is odd, then, that she has dedicated the last three years to campaigning for electoral reform, having given up her career in sustainable business. For her, this is not a surprising career change, but an issue of necessity.

> **'I've been a climate activist since I was very young', Jordan says, 'we're destroying the planet and something needs to change, so sustainability is close to my heart. But we can't do that without *real* democracy, which *genuinely* reflects what the majority of people want'.**

It is a bold claim – that PR is key to saving the planet – but it is gaining traction among supporters of electoral reform and is backed up by political scientists.

The vast majority of democracies (over 80%) use some form of PR for their main legislature, meaning that seats in parliament match how people voted. For example, if a party wins 20% of the vote, they should expect to win 20% of MPs. However, there are some significant exceptions, including the UK, which use the constituency-based First Past the Post (FPTP) system to elect MPs.

Under FPTP each local area has a constituency representative, elected by a simple plurality, but national results are often grossly disproportionate. In the UK, the most disproportionate general election ever came in 2015, with the Conservatives winning 51% of MPs with 37% of the vote, whilst the Lib Dems, Greens and UKIP won only 1.6% of MPs between them for 24.5% of the vote.

By comparing countries' political outcomes we can begin to paint a picture of how different voting systems produce radically different policies. This is how political scientists have uncovered the curious link between electoral systems and action on climate change.

Salomon Orellana of the University of Michigan compares 'proportionality' (how closely election results match how people have voted) with the percentage change in CO2 emissions per capita between 1990 and 2007 and Environmental Performance Index (EPI) score. He found that countries with a pure PR system could expect to have their percentage change in CO2 emissions decrease by 11%, towards a reduction in emissions, compared with countries with voting systems like the UK's. He also found they could expect a 4.5% higher EPI score. Similarly, Arend Lijphart (2012) found that 'consensus democracies' – of which a proportional electoral system is a key feature – score on average 6% higher than 'majoritarian' ones.

> **There is clear evidence of a correlation between a more proportional electoral system and better performance on climate issues. So what is driving this relationship?**

Electoral systems have a significant impact on the political parties which achieve representation and the types of government which they can form. Because PR ensures all parties have fair representation, it tends to lead to more political parties than FPTP and makes it harder for any single party to win a majority of seats. This means the governments formed are usually coalitions, rather than consisting of only one party.

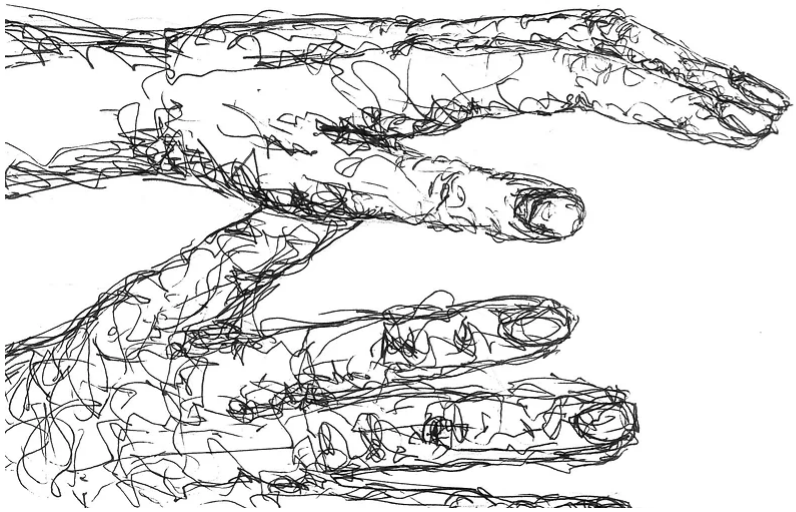
Some would argue that coalition governments are unstable, making it harder to pass legislation, because more parties are required to agree policy changes. However, the evidence shows that PR countries can take a more long-term approach to policy-making, which is crucial for environmental issues.

Arend Lijphart, for example, argues that whilst majority government leads to 'fast' decision making, this does not necessarily lead to 'wise' policies. In fact, without proper debate and scrutiny, countries with single-party governments have a tendency to have

poorly thought-through policies which frequently have to be reversed, because they have not been subject to proper scrutiny. Patrick Dunleavy argues that this is exactly what happens in the UK, with politicians more interested in supporting their party than properly scrutinising legislation. He argues that FPTP produces two parties that are incentivised to score points against each other and that can dominate the legislature to silence criticisms, rather than engage constructively with policy-making.

The presence of many parties can also make policy-making more consistent between different governments. In two-party systems the alternation of governments leads to frequent changes in policy direction. Under FPTP with two large parties, the opposition seek to replace the government at general elections. Once in power, they can easily reverse the policies of the previous government, leading to sharp changes in direction. Under PR, even when changes in government are more frequent, coalitions mean some parties remaining and some leaving rather than complete upheaval.

This theory of long-termism under PR is backed up by the work of Markus Crepaz, who argues that coalition governments under PR include more parties, representing more voters. Whilst FPTP countries frequently have majority governments elected with only 30-40% of the vote, governments under PR require majority support from the voters. In coalition governments made up of parties representing more voters, the average of each party's interests will likely come closer to converging with the general interest of the country. This consensus-building process makes policies more likely to be followed through, because a greater coalition of support – amongst politicians and voters – has been built behind them.



Crepaz also argues that single-party majorities are more likely to work for short-term partisan gain – for example cutting taxes before a general election – which is not possible when working as a coalition with multiple parties. The result is that policy-making under multi-party PR systems takes a more long-term approach, with governments free to view issues across multiple election cycles, rather than from a short-term perspective. For climate policy, which is so often sidelined for short-term economic gain, this is crucial.

As a climate activist and Finland's youngest MP for many years, Oras Tynkkynen takes a special interest in long-term policy-making. I asked him whether he thought Finland's proportional system had enabled politicians to take a more long-term approach to climate issues.

'We take the proportional election system for granted so I don't remember seeing studies or political debates on its impacts on long-term policy-making. More broadly speaking, I think there is a recognition that the election system results in broad multi-party governments which, in turn, contribute to a consensus-seeking political culture.'

Tynkkynen recently presented his thoughts on long-termism in Oxford, writing afterwards: 'in this respect, Finland fares reasonably well – better than we Finns might think. One could even argue that our country's long-term policies are top notch by

global comparison'.

He also points to some concrete methods the government uses to improve long-termism: a termly 'Government Report on the Future', which is debated publicly; the government-funded Finnish Environment institute; a national panel on climate change, comprised of independent experts; and the unique Parliamentary Committee on the Future.

> **'In certain respects, Finland has quietly taken its place among the top countries in terms of long-term policymaking.'**

Because of the nature of climate change, a long-term approach is crucial. The evidence suggests that proportional electoral systems can facilitate this approach, going some way to explaining why PR countries tend to perform better on environmental issues.

Many political scientists argue that the link goes further though, and that PR is better able to represent the supporters of 'green' policies and give green issues greater prominence.
One of those political scientists is David Vogel, who categorises climate action as being backed by 'diffuse interests'. Diffuse policies are those which have a large and diffuse number of benefactors and contributors. Environmental protection benefits all of us, so its beneficiaries are certainly diffuse, and in most cases are paid for by a large number of contributors – mostly through taxation. The opponents of green policies, on the other hand, tend to be concentrated into particular groups, such as certain environmentally harmful industries or specific local areas. Because proportional electoral systems tend to lead to coalition governments supported by a greater share of voters and parties, policies which have broader support are more likely to be adopted than those which satisfy special interests. On the other hand, under electoral systems which use single-member districts such as FPTP, legislators are more likely to feel the pressures of lobbyists, parochialism and 'pork barrel politics'.

Putting this in practice, we can consider MPs in the UK. Many MPs represent constituencies which include major employers in environmentally harmful industries. From an electoral perspective, these MPs are highly incentivised to support policies which protect or subsidise these industries. Take the recent by-election in Copeland, triggered by the resignation of local Labour MP, Jamie Reed. During the election campaign, Conservative leaflets hammered Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn for being opposed to new nuclear power plants, because Copeland is heavily reliant on the nuclear industry. Whilst building new nuclear power plants may or may not be the right thing to do nationwide, a local MP opposing nuclear power would face a huge electoral cost. Labour learnt this lesson the hard way, with the Conservatives winning the seat.

Across the UK as a whole, or any FPTP country, the majority of people would benefit from taking action on climate change. However, because the supporters of environmental policies are diffuse whilst the opponents are concentrated, there are many more constituencies where opposing environmental protection is a critical electoral issue, meaning more MPs with an incentive to oppose. Whilst most systems of PR retain some form of constituency system, multi-member districts mean the effect is weakened, with a broader range of interests represented in the constituency, rather than candidates ruthlessly chasing the plurality of voters who would win them the seat.

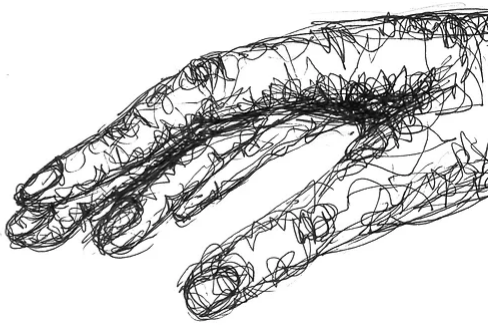
This effect permeates our party system, with political parties being very wary of how their target voters will respond to environmental issues. In two-party systems using FPTP, political parties are highly incentivised to tailor their policies to the 'marginal' constituencies which are likely to change hands at the election. The majority of seats in the UK are 'safe' – where one party is so popular that they are unlikely to lose the seat at the election. The key seats during election campaigns are those where more than one party has a reasonable chance of winning. By following the same logic as above, on a national scale, there are far

more votes to be won in ‘marginal’ seats by pursuing policies which support local interests, even if those are damaging for the environment.

PR upends this situation. By using multi-member constituencies and ensuring proportionality nationwide, ‘safe’ and ‘marginal’ seats are eliminated. Rather than winning elections by persuading a plurality of voters in a plurality of constituencies, parties must win support from the whole country. This allows them to support diffuse policies, rather than focussing on parochial concerns.

PR also facilitates the rise of political parties explicitly committed to diffuse policies, such as Green parties. By allowing a greater number of parties to compete effectively in elections, many PR countries, particularly in Europe, have developed large Green parties which frequently win legislative representation. Under FPTP these parties struggle to win representation because their support is diffuse. In the UK, for example, the Green Party won almost 4% of the vote in 2015 – over 1 million votes – but only managed to win one seat – less than 0.2% of MPs. In the 2008 Canadian federal election, the Green Party won almost 7% of the vote but no MPs at all. Again, environmental issues are important to many people but are rarely a critical electoral issue in individual constituencies.

As you might expect, countries with stronger green parties tend to have better records on environmental issues. Eric Neumayer found that green party strength in the legislature is correlated with lower levels of pollution. It could be argued that countries with significant green parties are already predisposed to better environmental policies, but there is a strong case that green parties draw attention to climate issues and can extract environmental concessions in coalition governments.



Take New Zealand: like most former British colonies, New Zealand inherited the First Past the Post electoral system. When the Values Party – a precursor of New Zealand’s modern Green Party – was founded, it struggled to turn votes into seats. In 1975, the Values Party won 5% of the vote but no seats. Through the 1980s the party failed to make an impact, but after New Zealand switched to Proportional Representation in 1996 the Greens’ fortunes turned around. In 1999 they won 7 MPs, and by 2011 the party had a record 14 MPs. This gave them a platform to push for environmental policies. Although the party did not join any formal coalitions until 2017, they managed to extract concessions including a $15 million energy efficiency and environmental package in the 2000 budget. It is too early to judge their record in government, but as part of Jacinda Arden’s coalition government the Greens will have a formal opportunity to influence government policy and push environmental concerns.

On an institutional level there is a strong case suggesting that PR can facilitate better environmental policy-making. Multi-party coalitions lead to governments more focussed on long term policy making and allow for better representation of ‘diffuse’ support for climate action and the rise of explicitly environmentalist Green parties. However, this institutional change still depends on the public being willing to support environmental policies.

This is where one of the most surprising suggestions is put forward by some political scientists, including Orellana. He claims that electoral systems can actually affect public attitudes on issues such as climate change. Far from simply being a way of representing public opinion, Orellana argues that electoral systems alter the flow of political information and can therefore influence public attitudes. As well as finding that PR countries have better CO2 emissions and EPI scores, he looked at public

responses to the statement: 'The Government should reduce environmental pollution, but it should not cost me any money'. By looking at this statement we can see not only whether the public support reducing environmental pollution, but whether they are willing to pay for it. Orellana finds that countries with purely proportional systems could expect to have 9% higher support for environmental protections than those which use FPTP.

The explanation for this comes from the 'information environment' of a country's political system. Orellana argues that proportional electoral systems lead to a broader range of parties contesting elections, leading to a broader political discourse. This allows controversial issues and policies to be put forward earlier, becoming mainstream earlier than in countries with strict two-party systems. Although environmental protection tends to be relatively uncontroversial, expensive policies which will actually tackle climate change are much harder to suggest.

Orellana points to the United States as an example. Both Democrats and Republicans frequently attack the other for raising taxes on gasoline, despite the cost of car use to the environment. Raising the gas tax is seen as too controversial for either party to support. Whilst there is no third party to argue the case for higher gasoline tax, the elite consensus reinforces public opinion and no alternative is discussed. The two main parties restrict the information environment and prevent public acceptance of the cost of protecting the environment.

Stacy Gordon and Gary Segura reinforce this point, arguing that electoral systems can affect the levels of 'sophistication' of voters – their ability to consume information and act rationally on the basis of that information. They argue that proportional electoral systems create competition nationwide, rather than being confined to 'marginal' constituencies. Because all votes count equally, turnout is higher and people are more engaged with the political system. They also argue that FPTP, because it leads to uncertainty about how election results will be represented in the legislature, creates a disincentive for accurate accumulation and usage of political information.

Voters under proportional electoral systems are exposed to a broader range of political views and experience greater national competition, meaning they come across controversial ideas earlier and have the political sophistication to be willing to pay the price for environmental policies. Orellana also points to New Zealand as an example of this process, with new parties winning representation after 1996 leading to greater media coverage of issues such as climate change, as well as specific controversial measures such as eco-taxes and the use of industrial hemp.

These theories suggest that Proportional Representation can both create political institutions that are more receptive to environmental policies *and* create a political culture which facilitates greater public willingness to deal with climate change. This explains why multiple political scientists have observed better environmental records from PR countries. Of course, there are PR countries with poor records on environmental issues, and FPTP countries which exceed expectations, but these countries are the exceptions rather than the rule. Moreover, political reform is not a panacea. We cannot solve climate change simply by changing the way we vote, but the evidence on this issue is too strong to discard.

Fortunately, the vast majority of democracies already use PR. But in those countries which retain FPTP – Canada, India, Pakistan, UK, USA, etc. – environmentalists should support adopting more proportional systems.

> **‘Every country which uses First Past the Post has a major campaign to abolish it’, says Jordan. ‘People around the world are waking up to the fact that FPTP completely distorts our elections and politics, leading to policies that are damaging for everyone’.**

She points to Canada, where British Columbia will soon vote on whether to adopt PR for provincial elections, and the USA, where the election of Donald Trump has intensified criticism of the ‘electoral college’ system.

‘We have a huge opportunity in the UK to win real democracy but it has to happen from the bottom up. We won’t convince people just by saying things are unfair without linking it to real life issues. We all need to work together - environmentalists, trade unionists, women’s and minorities’ organisations - to demand a voting system that represents *us all*!’

Owen Winter reads for a BA in History and Politics at Jesus College, University of Oxford. He is the co-founder of Make Votes Matter.

Illustrations by Thea Stevens

Whilst she is not referenced in this article, special thanks should go to Darcie Cohen, whose 2010 thesis proved to be very useful resource and summary of the literature on this issue.