

Digital Democracy and the Need for Greater Voter Participation

This AGM recognises the proposals outlined in the 'Digital Democracy Manifesto' launched by Jeremy in August 2016 and calls for these to be fully included in our next Election Manifesto.

We believe that the widespread adoption of online connectivity through smartphones combined with Labour's proposal for the provision of household broadband as a public utility of right, affords a vital opportunity to massively expand our democracy and the active involvement of citizens in it.

In particular, we endorse the Digital Democracy Manifesto's proposal for the creation of a Digital Citizen Passport "a voluntary scheme that provides British citizens with a secure, private and portable identity for their on-line activities." Through this, we would offer citizens the option of automatic voter registration and secure online voting. This could encourage millions more citizens to participate in future elections.

At present we have an outdated and often exclusionary method of voting. Elections are held on workdays which inevitably bars a significant section of what is now a highly mobile workforce, unlike some other countries where elections on a Sunday enable a bigger turnout. Many workers may be working overtime, on shift work or doing extra jobs.

Indeed, this requirement to be physically present to vote can make it difficult for anyone away from their registered locations such as students on course holidays, or holidaymakers. And it excludes all British citizens living abroad from voting. Not least, it can create difficulties for disabled or older citizens, or those with caring responsibilities to get to the polling stations.

The existence of a postal vote option does provide an alternative for some of these excluded groups but the advance timing and bureaucratic effort required often leads to many missing the boat and being deprived of their vote.

Moreover, voter registration on which the whole system is based is a cumbersome and inefficient procedure wherein registration is mainly conducted via postal enquiry to home addresses. This particularly discriminates against the young who less and less use mail. As a result, too many potential voters fail to respond to such postal enquiries or if they are new to a household don't even receive one. In a society with a growing rented sector and an increasingly mobile population too many citizens are being excluded from voter registration and voting. This system is further tainted by its link to household credit/debt ratings and local taxation, both of which has often deterred citizens in difficulty from registering to vote.

As if this was not bad enough, the Conservatives are seeking ways to make voting even more difficult through the use of ID requirements, an idea for voter suppression that they have imported from their Republican counterparts in the US. Thus, the Tories want to reduce the electorate and deter sections of the population from voting.

In contrast, Labour wants to make voter registration and voting much easier in the UK and thereby encourage a much bigger turnout. Through this we would be able to extend online participation and voting to other areas of decision-making. This opens up the possibility of mass direct participation in deciding on key aspects that affect our lives.

As our Digital Democracy Manifesto expresses it: "We will utilise information technologies to make popular participation in the democratic process easy and inclusive. The holders of a Digital Citizen Passport will be automatically placed on the electoral register of their new constituency as soon as they change their home address. We will aim to organise both online and offline meetings for individuals and communities to deliberate about pressing political issues and participate in devising new legislation. The National Education Service will enlighten the British electorate with the theoretical knowledge and practical skills of digital citizenship. We will create a 21st century networked democracy where everybody can be a political decision-maker."

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