

A SHORT STORY OF THE VOTE (UK)

"Once upon a time..."

Once upon a time in England, power did not belong to the people.

1215, Magna Carta

In 1215, a group of barons forced King John to accept *Magna Carta*.

It didn't create democracy, but it planted a seed:

Even the King must follow the law.

A seed was planted

Over time, power shifted, from Crown to Parliament.

But still, not to the people.

From Crown to Parliament

Over the centuries, power slowly shifted.

By 1689, after conflict between Crown and Parliament, the **Bill of Rights 1689** established that:

No sole rule:

The monarch could not rule alone

Laws required Parliament

The monarch could not suspend or override laws without Parliament.

Soon after, the **Act of Settlement 1701** reinforced limits on royal power and helped secure judicial independence.

- ❏ Power was no longer absolute , but it still wasn't in the hands of the people.

A "democracy" with almost no voters

By the 18th and early 19th centuries:

3–5%

of

5–6M

population could vote

Out of roughly 5–6 million people, only a small elite had a say

Most people, workers, labourers, women, entire communities, were excluded.

Most people lived under decisions they had no power to influence.

Democracy existed in name, but not in participation.

How were voices heard?

Even without the vote, people were not entirely silent.

Voices travelled through:



Local communities

Concerns were shared and shaped at the community level



Public meetings

Open gatherings allowed collective voices to be heard



Social institutions, including the Church

Bishops sat in the House of Lords, and concerns moved upward through structured society



English Coffeehouses, Penny Universities

17th–18th century English coffee houses were hubs of ideas and debate, known as “penny universities.”

❏ It wasn't democratic participation, but it allowed concerns to travel through society.

The slow expansion of the vote

Over time, this changed.

Across the 19th and early 20th centuries:

- Voting rights expanded
- Property restrictions were reduced
- Universal suffrage gradually emerged

The system moved from:



A new problem

As participation grew, a new question emerged:

What happens if people stop turning up?

Should decisions require:

A minimum number of participants?

A quorum, a threshold before a result is valid

Or simply those who choose to vote?

Decisions made by whoever turns up, regardless of total numbers

The danger of quorum rules

At times, systems required:

Minimum turnout

Supermajorities

But this created a problem.

If you wanted to block a decision:

Don't vote at all.

Abstention became a strategy.

Systems could be **delayed, disrupted, or held to ransom.**



The 1979 lesson

In the 1979 Scottish Devolution Referendum:

A majority voted Yes

Most of those who participated supported devolution

But not enough participated

Not enough of the total electorate took part to meet the threshold

The result failed

Even though most voters supported it



The system we have today

So the UK took a different approach:

- No minimum turnout
- No quorum
- Decisions are made by those who vote

The system always produces a result.

Government always continues.

There is no minimum turnout required for a UK election to be valid.



But here's the question

If participation is not required...

What does participation actually mean?

The modern reality

Today, millions of people do not vote.

Often not out of apathy, but because they feel:

Disconnected

Distrustful

That it will not make a difference

But the system continues regardless.

And this is the part many people do not realise:

Whether you vote or not, the outcome still applies to you.

Choosing not to vote does not remove you from the result.

It simply means you did not take part in shaping it.

- The system carries on.
- Decisions are made.
- Representation is formed.
- **With or without your participation.**

The idea

What if:

The system continued to function **exactly as it does now**

But participation had **visible, meaningful relevance**

Not to stop decisions,
but to strengthen the connection between people and power.

Closing

Right now, participation is optional.
But its absence still shapes the outcome.

We inherited a voice.
We should not hand the next generation a weaker one.

Today, that understanding is being passed from community to community, **carried forward as a shared responsibility to engage with the system that shapes us all.**