



**Beyond the PR System and First Past The Post:  
A Call for a Mixed Electoral System for Sierra Leone**

**1. Overview**

An electoral system acts as a bridge between the will of the people and the formation of a government and can therefore be a powerful tool for national development by ensuring political stability, inclusive representation, and government accountability (International IDEA).

Developing a responsive electoral system is particularly crucial for a country like Sierra Leone, which faces significant political and developmental challenges. These include a deeply polarised bipolar party system that exploits ethnic and regional divides, leading to winner-takes-all politics and diminished social cohesion. The economy is marked by high levels of corruption and severe economic constraints, reflected in years of extreme poverty, high youth unemployment, and over-centralisation of power. The country also faces a multi-billion-dollar funding gap to meet its national development goals (2024–2030), along with notable deficiencies in education, healthcare, and energy supply, especially in rural areas. The need for a political system that is responsive to the development challenges of this West African nation is urgent. However, despite these challenges, debates about electoral systems have largely neglected this reality.

One of the key questions leading up to the 2023 elections, and one that continues to be a thorny issue for Sierra Leone, is which electoral system the country should adopt. Since returning to multi-party democracy in 1996, Sierra Leone has alternated between two systems: Proportional Representation (PR) and First Past the Post (FPTP). The country used PR from 1996 to 2002 (covering two elections), then switched to FPTP from 2007 to 2018 (covering three elections), and reverted to a form of PR, the district block system, in 2023. A 2022 IGR Sierra Poll found that the vast majority, nearly three-quarters (74%), reported not knowing which electoral system Sierra Leone was using, which suggests that ongoing debates about the electoral system are driven mainly by elites.

In this Critical Perspective, we examine the strengths and weaknesses of both FPTP and PR to demonstrate why neither system fully addresses the governance and development challenges affecting citizens. We argue that the debate over which is better is artificial and distracts from the real issue: neither system has effectively tackled the country's deep-rooted ethno-regional polarisation, winner-takes-all politics, and national development shortcomings.

Instead of choosing between FPTP and PR, we suggest that Sierra Leone would benefit from a hybrid electoral system that combines the advantages of both. Such a system would be better equipped to tackle the underlying causes of exclusion, political instability, and weak accountability that continue to hinder democratic consolidation in Sierra Leone and foster contentious elections.

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<sup>1</sup> Critical Perspectives of Governance is IGR's quarterly publication that investigates governance issues to generate debates among researchers and practitioners. IGR notes that sometimes conventional theory and practice can be ill-suited to the challenges of governance. Please contact [info@igr-sl.org](mailto:info@igr-sl.org) for more information.

## 2. Analytical Framework

We present an analytical framework in this paper, mindful that electoral systems are not neutral. They influence and can be influenced by political incentives and help to determine who is elected, how they behave once in office, and to whom they are accountable. In Sierra Leone, the two leading political parties consistently try to shape electoral systems to gain a competitive advantage. Interestingly, Sierra Leone's two electoral systems have consistently produced different political outcomes, reinforcing the view that debates over electoral reform are often politically motivated. Notably, the three parliamentary elections held under PR have all been won by the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP), while the All People's Congress (APC) has dominated elections conducted under FPTP.

In light of the above, even though we agree with Lindberg (2005), who has argued that electoral systems can shape political outcomes, we also believe that they can address governance and national deficits, four of which we highlight in this paper: government accountability, security and national stability, inclusivity and diversity, and long-term economic planning and management. We select these in particular because they represent enduring challenges in Sierra Leone that electoral design has the potential to address.

1. **Government accountability:** Corruption levels have consistently been high in Sierra Leone at both local and national levels, and it has been identified as the biggest hinderance to the country's goal of transforming its vast natural resource wealth into improved services. Therefore, the electoral system should offer a trusted mechanism for citizens to throw a "rascal" Member of Parliament (MP) and their party out if they fail to deliver on development promises to citizens.
2. **Security and National Stability:** Sierra Leone is largely a peaceful country. However, violence, mostly linked to election cycles, poses significant security and stability challenges. Instability is largely rooted in political tensions, high youth unemployment, and economic fragility.
3. **Inclusivity, Diversity Management and Representation:** Given Sierra Leone's ethno-regional divisions and perceptions of political party strongholds, it is important that an electoral system ensures that national diversity is properly managed, that all groups in society feel included in the running of the state, and that opportunities are equitably distributed.
4. **The High Economic Cost of Politics and Election:** Perhaps one of the biggest development challenges Sierra Leone faces is addressing the huge cost of elections. In light of the country's financial constraints, ensuring affordability of elections should also be a key consideration.

## 3. Citizens' Views of the Electoral System and Proposed Solutions to Governance Challenges

In this section, we present nationally representative data drawn from four years of IGR and Afrobarometer's research on citizens' perceptions of the electoral system and the solutions proposed by ordinary people to Sierra Leone's governance challenges. The data show that, in the eyes of citizens, both FPTP and PR, as currently practised, have largely failed to address the governance challenges mentioned above; instead, they have, in various ways, contributed to reinforcing elite capture, weak accountability, and political exclusion, and are disconnected from the realities of the ordinary person.

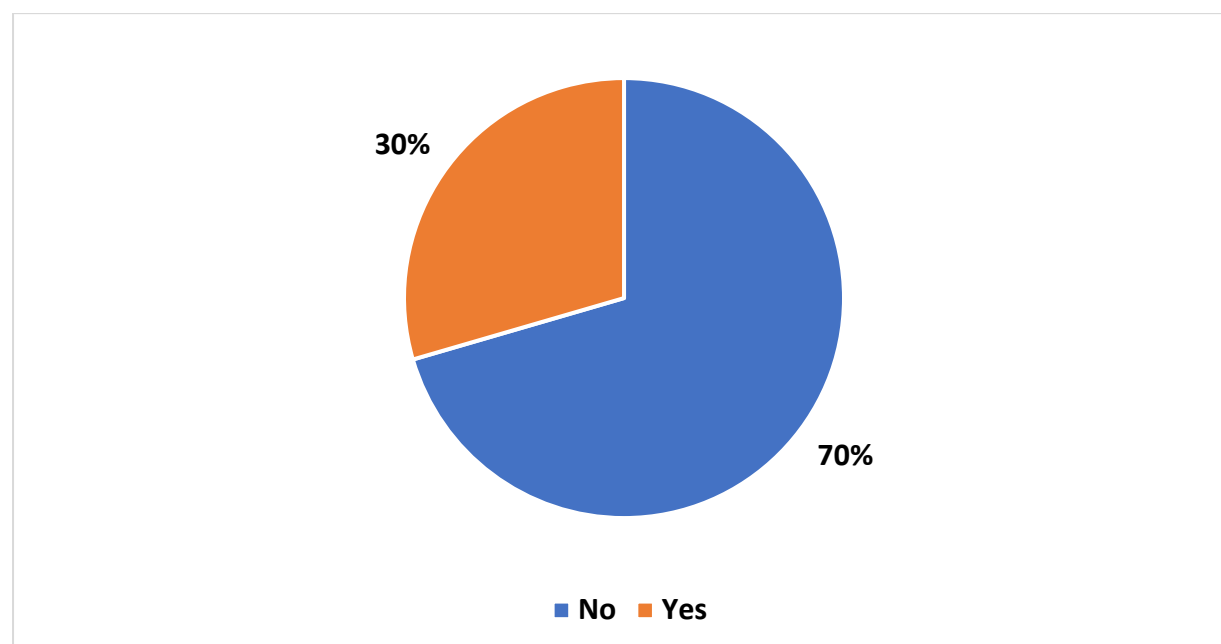
A 2022 IGR Poll (funded by Irish Aid) found that the vast majority of citizens had little knowledge of electoral systems: 79% had not heard of PR, and 82% had not heard of FPTP (Figures 1 and 2). Nearly three-quarters (74%) reported not knowing which electoral system Sierra Leone was using, with more women (81%) than men (67%) reporting not knowing (Table 1) (Sierra Poll, 2022).

| <i>Questions</i>                                                                                 |          | <i>No</i> | <i>Yes</i> |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------|-----------|------------|
| <i>Do you know the electoral system Sierra Leone is using?</i>                                   | National | 74%       | 18%        |
|                                                                                                  | Men      | 67%       | 26%        |
|                                                                                                  | Women    | 81%       | 9%         |
| <i>Have you heard about the electoral system called First Pass The Post (FPTP)?</i>              | National | 82%       | 18%        |
|                                                                                                  | Men      | 74%       | 26%        |
|                                                                                                  | Women    | 89%       | 11%        |
| <i>Have you heard about the electoral system called Proportional Representation (PR System)?</i> | National | 79%       | 21%        |
|                                                                                                  | Men      | 68%       | 32%        |
|                                                                                                  | Women    | 90%       | 10%        |

Source: Sierra Poll 2022

Similarly, at a time when parliament was debating the shift to PR, most citizens remained disengaged (Sierra Poll 2022). Approximately 70% reported not having heard about the debates (Figure 1). These findings suggest that public opinion on electoral systems is often poorly informed, limiting the extent to which citizens can meaningfully engage in reform processes.

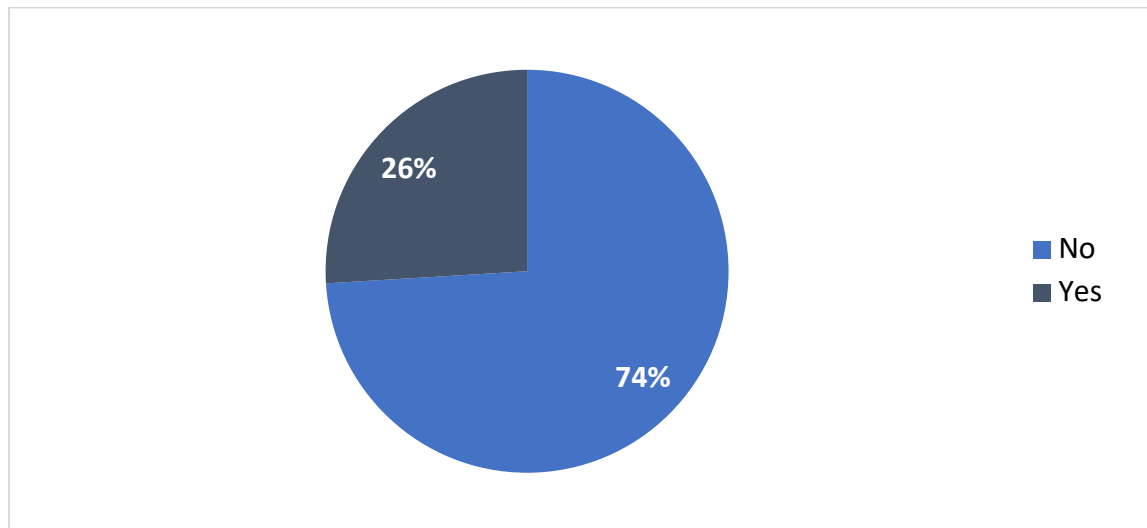
Figure 1: Awareness of discussions around electoral system reform (2022)



**Respondents were asked:** Have you heard the discussions in Sierra Leone about changing the electoral system from FPTP to PR?

More recent data indicate that this information gap still persists. Afrobarometer findings from March 2025 show that only 26% of Sierra Leoneans were aware of the ongoing review of the country's electoral system (Figure 2) (IGR, 2025). This points to a significant disconnect between the elite discourse and public awareness.

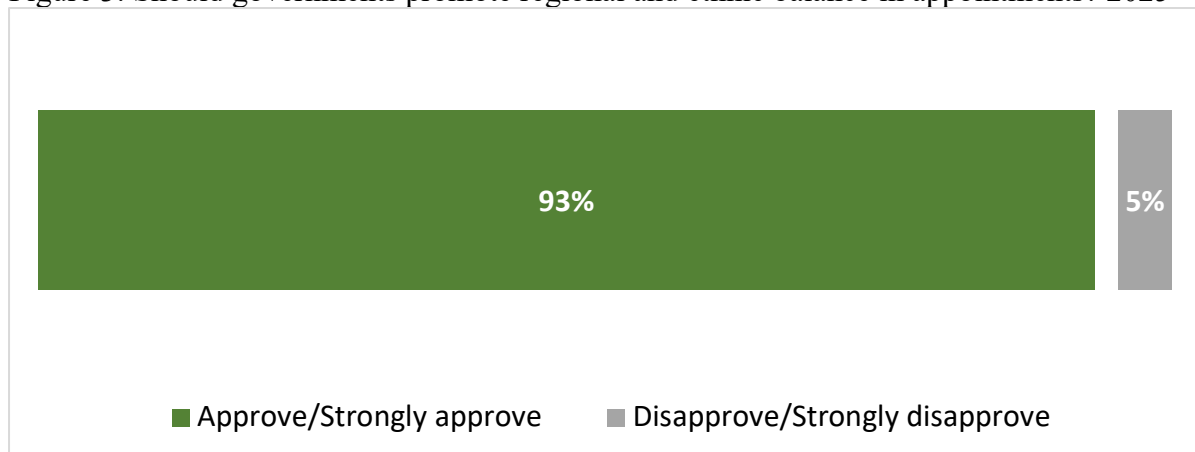
Figure 2: Awareness of electoral system review, 2025



**Respondents were asked:** Have you heard about the review of the country's electoral system following the June 2023 presidential elections?

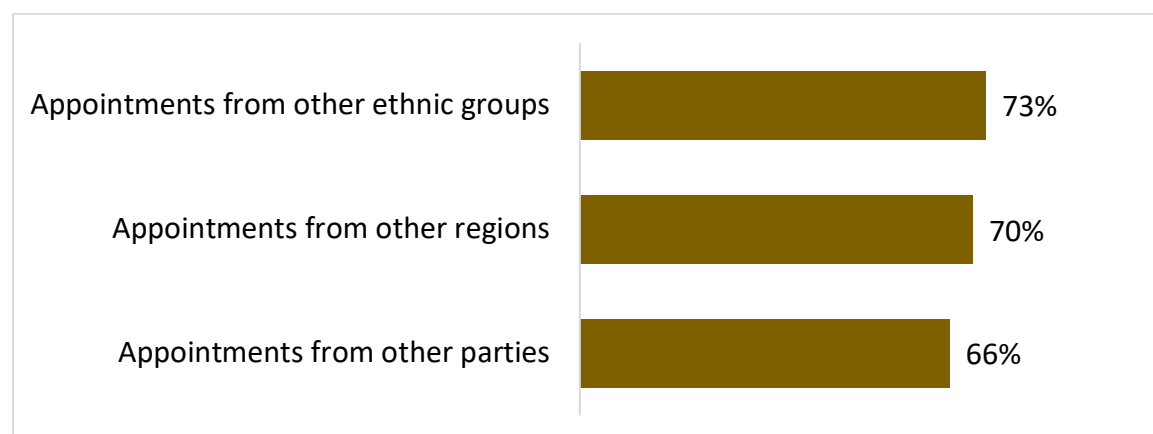
More importantly, citizen priorities extend beyond the technical question of electoral systems. The same data reveal overwhelming support for inclusive governance: 93% of respondents believe governments should promote regional and ethnic balance in political appointments (Figure 3), while majorities indicated willingness to support leaders who appoint individuals across party (66%), regional (70%), and ethnic (73%) lines (Figure 4) (Afrobarometer, 2025).

Figure 3: Should governments promote regional and ethnic balance in appointments? 2025



**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me whether you disapprove or approve of the following recommendations on the country's electoral systems: All governments should be required to promote regional and ethnic balance in political appointments.

Figure 4: Support for political inclusion: Ethnicity, region, and political party, 2025



**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me whether you disagree or agree with each of these statements:

*I will fully support my political party if it decides to appoint people from other political parties into key political positions.*

*I will fully support my political party if it decides to appoint people from other regions into key political positions.*

*I will fully support my political party if it decides to appoint people from other ethnic groups into key political positions.*

(% who “agree” or “strongly agree” with each statement)

These findings suggest that, for citizens, the core issue is not whether Sierra Leone adopts FPTP or PR, but whether the political system actually respond to governance challenges. That is, how political systems expand inclusion within dominant parties and promote fairness and national cohesion by reducing winner-take-all dynamics.

Ongoing debates on electoral systems, including the regional consultations, have presented a PR/FTPT binary that largely ignores citizens' deeper concerns about Sierra Leone's governance challenges. This paper, therefore, shifts the focus of the debate. Rather than asking which electoral system is “better,” it examines how different systems interact with Sierra Leone's political realities—and which institutional arrangements are most likely to address the underlying drivers of division and mistrust, as well as incorporates citizens' perspectives on electoral system reform to address Sierra Leone's challenges.

## 4. How Do Electoral Systems Respond to Sierra Leone's Governance Challenges?

In the section below, we elaborate on the governance challenges, discuss how current electoral systems address them and the gaps within those systems, and conclude with suggestions on how a more plural approach can tackle the issues.

### 4.1. Improving Government Accountability

A key aspect of governance is enabling citizens to hold those in power accountable, by establishing a strong link between representatives and their local constituents. The shift to FPTP in 2007 was partly motivated by the aim to improve accountability through direct connection of MPs to geographic constituencies. Under this system, citizens have some say over who gets elected for a seat in parliament. In theory, this system allows voters to “hire and fire” individual representatives, thereby strengthening the relationship between citizens and

their elected officials. Similarly, wards had representative councillors responsible for pushing development at the local level.

Many have argued that the shift to the PR district block system has increased concerns about representation. Under this system, it is parties that hold the power to elect parliamentary representatives. Another issue is that it has created significant gaps in community-level representation. Data collected by IGR show that 20% of the 174 wards in six districts where we operate have no representation in local councils, meaning they lack a Councillor linked to that ward (Table 2). In working with locals to develop district plans, we observed that this lack of representation hampers accountability in local planning.

*Table 2: Number of Wards without Councillors Across 6 Districts*

| District                       | Number of wards | Gaps | Percentage |
|--------------------------------|-----------------|------|------------|
| Karene                         | 23              | 2    | 9%         |
| Tonkolili                      | 33              | 4    | 12%        |
| Moyamba                        | 24              | 3    | 13%        |
| Kono                           | 30              | 6    | 20%        |
| Falaba                         | 25              | 7    | 28%        |
| Western Rural District council | 39              | 12   | 31%        |
| TOTAL                          | 174             | 34   | 20%        |

The gap in representation under the current PR system justifies the argument that for effective and direct representation, Sierra Leone should adopt a system that allows communities to directly elect representatives who are accountable to them. This makes the constituency and ward design under the FPTP model ideal for enhancing political accountability.

It is unsurprising then, that position papers from organisations such as the National Election Watch (NEW) and the Council of Churches in Sierra Leone show a preference for FPTP, citing its perceived advantages in ensuring representation. However, evidence from Sierra Leone indicates that these anticipated gains have been limited, and this preference appears to be based more on the promise of representation than on its actual delivery, as we show later on in the paper.

It is also worth noting that although the FPTP system is based on constituencies and wards, assigning numbers to these wards and constituencies in 2007 (a practice that was introduced as part of the post-war reforms) rather than using community or hometown names has made it harder for citizens to recognise and identify their MPs and Councillors. Many citizens still commonly use the old (pre-war) names of constituencies such as Freetown East I, Freetown Central, or Bo West, Bombali Central instead of using constituency labels like 99, 105, or 68 that are not generally understood. Any model aiming to enhance political accountability and boost citizen participation should strongly consider renaming constituencies to make local areas represented by elected officials easily relatable for the public.

#### 4.2. Responding to Security and National Stability Challenges.

Another major challenge for Sierra Leone is the weakness in security and national stability. According to Afrobarometer 2026 data, only 19% of citizens trust the police, while 36% trust the courts (Afrobarometer 2025a). This lack of public trust in the police and judiciary has

arguably contributed to the rising risk in national stability, as evidenced by an increase in violent protests and political unrest. A study in 2024, revealed that between 2020 and 2023, eleven incidents of violent protests and political instability occurred, primarily in opposition-controlled areas of the Western, Northern, and North-Western regions, disrupting the economy for a total of 42 days (IGR 2024). Over 36 months, 83 people, mainly young men, died in the political unrest.

The study also concluded that 2023 was expected to be a promising year for economic growth. GDP growth was projected to reach double digits. However, ongoing political violence, which caused over 20 deaths that year, and the economy being closed for 24 days—almost 10% of productive days—resulted in a 7% loss to the country's GDP (equivalent to \$417 million) in 2023. Instead of double-digit growth, the economy only grew by 3%. For each day the country was closed, the economy lost approximately USD 21,000,000.

In designing an electoral system that would respond to these challenges, Sierra Leone must ask itself the following questions:

- Which electoral system features can lower social tensions and violence by restructuring how power is contested and shared, reducing the "winner-takes-all" stakes that have been a major source of conflict?
- How can Sierra Leone incentivise cooperation and ensure broader representation in ways that turn violent competition into peaceful political engagement? For example, a system that rewards political parties for seeking support beyond their narrow identity groups and for building cross-ethnic coalitions, fostering national cohesion, and placing constraints on polarising tactics?
- How can Sierra Leone lower the stakes of losing elections, which is a primary driver of electoral violence and corruption?

Answering these questions will require a review of electoral and political violence, as well as the promise of inclusion under both systems.

While there has been electoral violence in all elections, we illustrate in the subsequent section, that the FPTP as implemented in Sierra Leone, has proven to be weak in promoting stability because it reinforces winner-takes-all politics at constituency and national levels, which has been widely identified as a barrier to national cohesion and exacerbated ethno-regional polarisation, as elections become zero-sum contests between dominant parties. The system incentivises strategies such as gerrymandering, manipulation of census processes, and “half-country” electoral strategies, in which political parties concentrate their efforts on securing dominance in key regions rather than building broad-based national support.

While the PR, in theory, should promote inclusivity by enabling political parties to secure seats beyond regional strongholds, the high threshold of 11.9% set in the 2023 elections makes it difficult for minority parties and independent candidates to compete, reinforcing exclusion and raising the spectre of violence. Instead of expanding inclusion, it has reinforced the entrenchment of a two-party system that makes it difficult to promote significant political party reform, drawing as the two parties do, on ethno-regional bases for support.

A PR system with a lower threshold (under 5%) could therefore be a better way of helping political parties to win seats outside their strongholds and reducing winner-takes-all politics.

At the same time, it is important to note that security and stability challenges cannot be addressed solely through electoral system redesign; the conduct of EMBs is highly important. Strengthening electoral management bodies to ensure transparency, timely and open result tabulation, and impartial dispute resolution can reduce concerns of tampering and, relatedly, help minimise violence as well as (re)build trust in these institutions, including the Election Commission of Sierra Leone, which saw its lowest levels of trust following the 2023 elections (M'Cormack-Hale and Lavali, 2025).

#### **4.3. Enhancing Inclusivity, Diversity Management and Representation:**

In addition to the security and stability challenges discussed above, another significant challenge facing Sierra Leone is the poor management of national diversity, often characterised by politicised tribalism and regionalism, and inequity in the distribution of resources. Ethnic manipulation in politics and patriarchal societal structures restrict opportunities for women and minority groups, perpetuating poverty and preventing the harnessing of diversity as a national strength.

The impact of poor management of national diversity is severe. Fights over public-sector jobs in Sierra Leone have caused significant political and social tensions, serving as a major flashpoint for political polarisation and instability. The struggle for limited employment opportunities, often driven by regionalism and partisan loyalty, has created a "zero-sum game" where job security is tied to which party is in power. Under both SLPP and APC, there are reports of systematic, politically motivated dismissals of public servants, particularly those perceived to be opposition supporters. These employees are often removed, with or without fabricated accusations of corruption, to create positions for supporters of the ruling party. With over 60% of the workforce unemployed or underemployed, competition for the limited formal jobs is intense. The World Bank (2025) reports that 75,000 new jobs need to be created each year to meet the demand of the growing youth population.

To respond to this challenge, reformers will have to consider similar questions already raised in the section above, showing that inclusion and stability are entwined. The questions are:

- Which electoral system features will compel political parties to be broad-based and discourage gerrymandering, especially around the census, and make national politics less focused on narrow ethnic or kinship ties?
- Which features can increase the representation of women and minorities in key districts?
- Which features can compel regimes to be inclusive in resource allocation, especially public sector jobs?

While it is useful to note that the electoral system alone cannot adequately address inclusivity, a well-designed system could lay the foundation for a more inclusive future for Sierra Leone.

To respond to these questions, IGR reviewed the results of the last six elections under the two systems and assessed the fairness of group and regional representation. Table 3 reveals the mismatches and distortions between the votes cast and the share of seats allocated to parties ... the issue that is at the heart of electoral system debate. We use the table below to illustrate the incentive that is driving political party support for particular electoral systems.

Table 3: Analysis of Seat Allocation by Party Vote Share in Parliamentary Election Results (1996 to 2023)

| Year | Electoral system | Party  | Valid Votes | % of Vote | No of MP seats | % Seats in Parliament | Variance in votes and seats | No and % of women MPs elected |
|------|------------------|--------|-------------|-----------|----------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1996 | PR System        | SLPP   | 269,486     | 35.8%     | 27             | 40%                   | 4.2%                        | 5 women (6%)                  |
|      |                  | UNPP   | 161,618     | 21.5%     | 17             | 25%                   | 3.5%                        |                               |
|      |                  | PDP    | 114,409     | 15.2%     | 12             | 18%                   | 2.8%                        |                               |
|      |                  | NUP    | 42,443      | 5.7%      | 5              | 7%                    | 1.3%                        |                               |
|      |                  | APC    | 39,280      | 5.2%      | 4              | 6%                    | 0.8%                        |                               |
|      |                  | DCP    | 35,624      | 4.8%      | 3              | 4%                    | -0.8%                       |                               |
| 2002 | PR System        | SLPP   | 1,352,206   | 69.9%     | 83             | 74%                   | 4.1%                        | 19 women (15%)                |
|      |                  | APC    | 409,022     | 19.8%     | 27             | 24%                   | 4.2%                        |                               |
|      |                  | PLP    | 69,778      | 3.6%      | 2              | 2%                    | -1.6%                       |                               |
| 2007 | FPTP             | APC    | 728,898     | 40.7%     | 59             | 53%                   | 12.3%                       | 16 women (13%)                |
|      |                  | SLPP   | 707,608     | 39.5%     | 43             | 38%                   | -1.5%                       |                               |
|      |                  | PMDC   | 275,435     | 15.4%     | 10             | 9%                    | -6.4%                       |                               |
| 2012 | FPTP             | APC    | 1,149,234   | 53.4%     | 70             | 62.5%                 | 9.1%                        | 16 women (12.3%)              |
|      |                  | SLPP   | 819,185     | 38.3%     | 42             | 37.5%                 | -0.8%                       |                               |
| 2018 | FPTP             | APC    | 989,431     | 39.9%     | 68             | 52%                   | 12.1%                       | 18 women (12.3%)              |
|      |                  | SLPP   | 964,659     | 38.9%     | 48             | 36%                   | -2.9%                       |                               |
|      |                  | NGC    | 215,315     | 8.7%      | 4              | 3%                    | -5.7%                       |                               |
|      |                  | C4C    | 119,006     | 4.8%      | 8              | 6%                    | 1.2%                        |                               |
| 2023 | PR System        | APC    | 1,113,918   | 40.0%     | 54             | 40%                   | 0.0%                        | 41 women (30%)                |
|      |                  | SLPP   | 1,577,259   | 56.6%     | 81             | 60%                   | 3.4%                        |                               |
|      |                  | Others | 93,428      | 3.3%      | 0              | 0%                    | -3.3%                       |                               |

Source: Official results compiled by IGR

**4.3.1. Disparities in seat distribution:** While SLPP benefits mainly from elections under proportional representation (PR), and APC dominates elections under first-past-the-post (FPTP), the difference between seats and votes indicates that the PR system is a fairer way of allocating seats nationally. For example, in 2023, under the PR system, SLPP received 56.6% of the parliamentary votes and secured 60% of the 135 directly elected seats. Meanwhile, APC gained 40% of the votes and claimed 40% of the seats (EU Election Observer Mission Report 2023). Although it can be argued that the results in 2023 were criticised by the opposition APC, this does not negate the fact that the PR system had maintained similar small disparities in seat distribution in 1996 and 2002 (See table 3 above).

Conversely, under the FPTP, the disparities between electoral votes and seats becomes more pronounced. Parties that concentrate their efforts and succeed in securing votes in a few regions or districts end up with a disproportionate share of the parliament, even when margins of victory are small. For instance, in 2018, the parliamentary results of APC and SLPP were within the same range, but the variance in seats between the two parties was 15 percentage points. APC had 39.9% of the parliamentary vote but secured 68 seats (equivalent to 51% of seats) while SLPP had 38.9% of the votes cast but secured 48 seats (equivalent to 36% of the seats) (see IFES, analysis of 2018 election results). We note this variance in seat allocation was at the heart of the crisis in parliament in 2018 and is still fuelling current controversies.

A similar phenomenon can be seen in the performance of smaller parties. When in 2018 a minority party, Coalition for Change (C4C), concentrated its campaign in

Kono, pulling 50% of its 119,006 votes from that district alone, the party won eight of the nine seats and controlled the two local councils. With just 8 seats from one district (Kono) C4C was able to control 6% of parliament even though the party had only 4.8% of the votes nationally. In that same election, another minority party NGC, that did not entirely focus its strategy on one district, won 8.7% (nearly doubling C4C votes) but secured only 4 seats and 3% of parliament. This further shows that under FPTP, parties can increase their electoral advantage by concentrating their efforts in targeted constituencies or wards. Such a strategy can reinforce regional division, making it difficult for parties to adopt a national character.

Electoral reformers should therefore implement mechanisms to ensure that small differences in vote share does not lead to large disparities in representation.

- 4.3.2. **Representation of women:** The table also shows that women's representation remained persistently low in five elections under both FPTP and PR, hovering around 12–15 percent prior to recent reforms, placing Sierra Leone among the lowest-performing countries in the region (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023). This indicates that without a legislation that mandates political parties to allocate a share of seats to women, neither systems can increase women's representation given Sierra Leone's patriarchal political culture. Sierra Leone only achieved 30% women's representation through a quota system in 2023, that mandated that parties nominate at least one woman for every three nominations in the district block PR system. This finding is in line with research by Gretchen Bauer and others which shows that PR systems must be combined with well-designed quota mechanisms to be successful at increasing inclusion: across Africa, countries such as Rwanda, Senegal, and Namibia have achieved significant gains in women's political participation only when PR systems incorporate party quotas, placement mandates, and have strong women's movements (Bauer 2012, Bauer and Britton 2006).

While the 30% quota law was a major reform, the action of political parties minimised the chances for more women to be elected. The 2022 Political Parties Act, Public Elections Act, and the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Act mandated that at least one in every three candidates be women. However, the absence of clear placement rules led to women being systematically positioned in third slots on party lists. In practice, this limited women's representation to around 30%, rather than enabling more meaningful gains.

Additionally, as currently structured, there are no safe seats for women in the district block system. When a seat becomes vacant due to the death or other absence of a sitting MP or councillor, the next person on the list automatically becomes the replacement. If that person is a man, it can decrease the number of women, as recently occurred in Kenema in March 2026, when a man replaced Hon. Ella Goba, a female parliamentarian who had passed away. This reinforces the fact that the presence of quotas alone is insufficient. Effective quotas must be enforced, require careful attention to succession and placement rules (e.g., zipper systems), and the degree of party control over candidate selection. Alternatively, women (or other special categories) must be nominated and contest in winnable seats or have reserved seats.

- 4.3.3. **Dismantling the dominance of major parties:** Perhaps the biggest threat to inclusivity is the dominance of major parties that largely promote ethnic based voting.

While both systems had made room for minority parties to enter parliament in four of the six elections, a lower PR threshold, such as the one practised in 1996, proved to hold the greatest promise for smaller parties. Six of the 13 political parties that contested made it to parliament that year, dismantling the dominance of the SLPP and APC and increasing opportunities for cross-party and cross-regional cooperation. Sierra Leone had the most ethnically diverse and inclusive parliament in 1996, compared to present day, when most minority ethnic groups are largely missing.

Reformers must design an electoral system that enables smaller parties and independent candidates to be represented in parliament, reflecting an agreed-upon vote share threshold that should be set low enough to accommodate a plurality of diverse voices.

Election results and political dynamics over the past 30 years, since the country's return to democracy, offer valuable insights into promoting greater inclusivity for women and minority groups, as well as encouraging political parties to move beyond divisive strongholds. One might expect that the Tripartite Committee, which produced 80 recommendations to improve the quality of elections, would have reflected on ways to enhance inclusivity. However, it seems that the immediate political interests of the leaders who negotiated the agreement, most of whom are primarily focused on securing national leadership positions, eclipsed citizens' interests in developing an electoral system that addresses concerns about ethno-regional bias and the winner-takes-all political framework. To address this, we recommend the following:

- Sierra Leone to develop an electoral system that will ensure minority votes matter and compel governing parties and the opposition to have substantive presence and support in all districts, not just in the strongholds they feel entitled to. The current 11.9% threshold for winning a seat under the district block system has not adequately responded to calls for inclusivity.
- Political parties should strongly consider adopting a more national character by rotating their leadership across regions and ethnic groups and/or having multi-ethnic leadership within their executives. The leadership of parties meant to serve the entire country should not be monopolised by a single region or group.

#### 4.4. Addressing the Huge Economic Cost of Politics and Elections

Many African states are shifting from reliance on external donors to state-funded elections, making cost mitigation a critical priority for sustainable development. The economic cost of elections in Sierra Leone includes both the direct government expenditure to conduct the polls and the significant personal financial burden on candidates, which often discourages political participation. For the 2020–2024 electoral cycle, the Electoral Commission for Sierra Leone (ECSL) estimated a total cost of approximately \$97 million (SLL 970.5 billion). Some of the cost components include:

- a. State Direct Costs: Administering voter registration and polling, technology for elections management, printing of ballot papers, public education, and securing elections.
- b. Candidates' Direct Costs: Running for office in Sierra Leone is costly, especially after the 2023 shift to a district block proportional representation system. This is because the

district block system required an MP candidate to campaign across an entire district rather than a single constituency. This expenditure includes:

- i. **Securing the "Symbol":** Candidates often spend around **NLe150,000 (\$7,500)** just to secure their party's "symbol" (official nomination) and a favourable spot on the district list.
  - ii. **Campaigning to voters:** Many political aspirants reported spending over NLe400,000 (approx. \$20,000) to run for office in 2023.
  - iii. **Informal Social Costs:** Aspirants often use personal savings or bank loans to meet community expectations, such as paying medical bills, school fees, and food for local festivals. This cost can be higher when there is direct representation at the constituency level, where citizens expect politicians to foot their personal bills.
- c. **Running By-elections Cost:** Another cost of election is holding a bye-election. Bye-Election expenses is one cost item that establishes a striking difference between the PR system (where no bye election is held) and constituency based FPTP system (where bye-elections are held to fill in a vacancy. Because the stakes are high for every bye election, the cost of policing and running by-elections and campaigning can be high. Sierra Leone has filled 12 vacancies in the last two years without holding a bye-election. We estimate that an approximate NLe20m would have been spent in the past two years had bye-elections been held after the 2023 elections.

*Table 4: Budget for Bye Elections that would have conducted in since 2023*

| NO | DISTRICT  | Type of election      | ECSL             | Police           | Political Parties | Candidates       | Total             |
|----|-----------|-----------------------|------------------|------------------|-------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| 1  | BO        | City council          | 242,250          | 350,000          | 435,000           | 520,000          | 1,547,250         |
| 2  | KARENE    | District Council Ward | 262,553          | 350,000          | 435,000           | 520,000          | 1,567,553         |
| 3  | FREETOWN  | City Council          | 242,250          | 350,000          | 435,000           | 520,000          | 1,547,250         |
| 4  | FREETOWN  | City Council          | 242,250          | 350,000          | 435,000           | 520,000          | 1,547,250         |
| 5  | KENEMA    | City Council          | 242,250          | 350,000          | 435,000           | 520,000          | 1,547,250         |
| 6  | KOINADUGU | District Council Ward | 242,250          | 350,000          | 435,000           | 520,000          | 1,547,250         |
| 7  | BONTHE    | MP                    | 663,000          | 890,000          | 320,000           | 1,200,000        | 3,073,000         |
| 8  | KENEMA    | City Council          | 242,250          | 350,000          | 435,000           | 520,000          | 1,547,250         |
| 9  | KENEMA    | City Council          | 242,250          | 350,000          | 435,000           | 520,000          | 1,547,250         |
| 10 | KARENE    | District Council Ward | 242,250          | 350,000          | 435,000           | 520,000          | 1,547,250         |
| 11 | MOYAMBA   | District Council Ward | 242,250          | 350,000          | 435,000           | 520,000          | 1,547,250         |
| 12 | TONKLILI  | District Council Ward | 242,250          | 350,000          | 435,000           | 520,000          | 1,547,250         |
|    | TOTAL     |                       | <b>3,348,053</b> | <b>4,740,000</b> | <b>5,105,000</b>  | <b>6,920,000</b> | <b>20,113,053</b> |

Cost of elections estimates compiled by IGR from multiple sources: ECSL, SLP and Cost of Politics Studies by Westminster Foundation for Democracy

Alongside these financial costs, there are also indirect costs such as the impacts of violence and unrest on communities. The question for reformers is how Sierra Leone can develop a system to help reduce the cost of elections and make politics affordable for the State, political parties, and individual politicians.

Two major reforms that could significantly reduce election costs are: a) decreasing the number of elections by removing bye elections; and b) ensuring that candidates do not have to campaign across an entire district. Lowering costs will therefore involve combining two benefits of the FPTP and the PR systems. This means eliminating by-elections and limiting elections to the constituency or ward level.

## **5. Beyond the Binary: The Case for a Hybrid Political System**

The central argument of this paper is therefore that the debate between FPTP and PR presents a false choice. What we observe is that while FPTP promotes accountability, it undermines inclusion; PR promotes inclusion but can weaken accountability. This suggests that rather than forcing an artificial choice between systems, we need to combine their strengths while mitigating their weaknesses. Thus, we can forge a hybrid electoral system that reflects Sierra Leone's political realities while also being reform-oriented and addressing these shortcomings.

Given the issues outlined above, a hybrid system should leverage constituency-based representation (to preserve geographic accountability) while also maintaining proportional or list-based elements (to enhance inclusion and correct representational distortions).

Below, we offer some suggestions for what such a system would look like and call for a technical exercise that leverages experts to help us draft it.

A hybrid system would allow Sierra Leone to:

1. Maintain constituency and ward-based representation to preserve accountability. Deepen political accountability by renaming political constituencies in ways that enable citizens in cities, towns, and chiefdoms to easily relate with their representatives.
2. Introduce proportional elements to correct distortions in representation ensuring that representation is closely tied with the electorate's will ... the gap between a party's popular votes and share of seats is minimised.
3. Embed inclusion mechanisms, particularly for women and areas outside party strongholds.
4. Minimise the cost of election by ensuring one MP or councillor candidate does not campaign across an entire district and vacancies can be filled at minimal cost.

Importantly, a hybrid system also provides an opportunity to embed gender-responsive and citizen-centred design features more effectively. For example:

- Integrating quotas that allow for greater inclusion of women and other minority voices, which can be done within both systems.
- Ensuring greater representation of smaller parties.
- Structuring candidate selection processes that enhance citizen participation and reduce excessive party control.

As Lindberg's work makes clear, electoral systems shape outcomes. Thus, our work as activists and governance experts should focus not on choosing between competing models, but on designing a system that produces the kinds of political outcomes that would be beneficial for

Sierra Leone – that is, one where inclusion, accountability, stability, and economic development considerations are prioritised. This is particularly important given that Sierra Leone’s governance challenges are not simply the result of poor leadership or weak institutions, but rather stem from the rules that structure political competition. The experience of both FPTP and PR demonstrates that no electoral system is inherently transformative. What matters is how systems interact with political incentives.

Leveraging a hybrid electoral system can help us to move beyond zero-sum politics, expand inclusion without sacrificing accountability, and create incentives for more responsive and representative governance. We need to think of electoral reform as part of a broader political project to reshape the incentives that drive political behaviour and to change the rules underpinning the political game. Without a structural understanding of the problem, technical solutions that prioritise either FPTP, PR, or a hybrid risk reproducing the very governance failures they seek to address.

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