

English Local Elections

5 May 2011 | Foreword by Prof Vernon Bogdanor

Report
and
Analysis



Electoral
 Reform
 Society

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Introduction

Professor Vernon Bogdanor

Localism has become today's catchword. Politicians compete with each other to proclaim their belief in the dispersal of power and strengthening of local government. However, not much has been done to secure this aim, and local democracy remains in a distinctly unhealthy state.

Turnout in local elections is generally between 30% and 40% – the lowest by far in Western Europe; and, of those who do vote, many support the same party locally as they do in national elections, treating local elections, not as a means of passing a verdict on their local council, but as a plebiscite on the government's record. That indeed is how the results are presented in the media, where national, not local, politicians are asked to comment on the outcome. Local elections have become miniature general elections. In consequence, many voters regard local councillors as party emissaries, and independent-minded people are deterred from seeking election. Local councillors are seen as representing not 'us' but 'them'.

It is because local government seems so little valued that national governments of both political parties have been able to take its powers away with so little protest. In consequence, Britain has become a profoundly centralised society.

While centralisation is a product of many complex cultural as well as institutional factors, there is little doubt that the First Past the Post system undermines local democracy. For, under First Past the Post, many local government wards and many local councils are permanently safe for one party. There was only one Parliament in the 20th century in which the opposition was almost totally obliterated – that of 1931 when the government held 554 of the 615 seats on just

two-thirds of the vote, a two-to-one plurality in votes leading to a nine-to-one majority in seats. However, in local government, such results are commonplace. That cannot be good for democracy. To be effective, local authorities, like governments, need a lively opposition to keep them on their toes and scrutinise what they are doing. A permanent one-party local authority is almost as offensive as a permanent one-party state.

The anomalies, moreover, are not random. They tend to benefit the Conservatives in rural areas and Labour in the cities, so exaggerating, rather than mitigating, social and geographical divisions. They make Britain appear a more divided country than in fact it is, because the electoral system deprives the Labour minority in the countryside and the Conservative minority in the cities of an effective political voice.

In many local authorities, there may seem little point in voting, since the outcome, under First Past the Post, is a pre-ordained clean sweep. That is one main reason why so many local government wards are uncontested. Where a ward is safe, opposition parties sometimes feel that it is a waste of time putting up a candidate; but the consequence is that many voters come to be disenfranchised.

In national elections, the 'wrong' side won in three of the 26 general elections in the 20th century – those of 1929, 1951 and February 1974. In the 2011 English local elections, the wrong side won in 15 local authorities, so that, in these authorities, voters were not given the outcome for which they asked.

The First Past the Post system is currently used for local government elections only in England and Wales. In Northern Ireland, the single transferable vote has been used

since 1973, while, in Scotland, the single transferable vote was adopted for local government elections in 2007. The outcome showed a striking contrast to results in England, and to results in the 2003 elections in Scotland conducted by First Past the Post. In 2003, Labour had won 71 of the 79 seats in Glasgow on just 48% of the vote, and had won Edinburgh despite winning less than 28% of the vote, while in Renfrewshire, the SNP had won control of the council despite being outpolled by Labour. No such anomalies occurred in 2007, and there were no uncontested seats, by contrast with 2003 when there had been 61. There was also a 9.5% increase in valid votes cast, and councils hitherto thought to be no-go areas for particular parties were opened up. The Scottish local elections, therefore, yielded much more genuinely representative local government than local elections in England.

Under the single transferable vote, the voter, instead of casting her vote with an X, votes preferentially – 1, 2, 3 etc. The system thus combines a primary and an election, and the primary is one in which every voter automatically takes part. There is no need for a separate primary in which fewer are likely to participate than in a general election, with participation in primaries sometimes being restricted to party members. Multi-member wards enable voters to distribute preferences across parties if they so wish, and to discriminate amongst members of their favoured party. A voter can therefore choose between various candidates from her favoured party, or across parties, on the basis of who has been, or might prove, the more effective councillor. In single-member wards, by contrast, there is no way in which the elector can distinguish between effective and less effective councillors. Effective councillors are doomed to defeat along with the less effective

solely because the party to which they belong is unpopular at national level.

It is perhaps not for the government to decide upon the best system for each local authority, but for local voters themselves. Under the Localism Bill, soon to be on the statute book, 5% of registered electors in every local authority area will have the right to secure a referendum on any matter within the legal powers of their authority. It would be natural to extend this principle by allowing for 5% of registered electors to secure a referendum on the electoral system for their authority. What is clear is that electoral reform is an essential precondition for localism and for making local government a more effective part of the constitution.

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Snapshot of Key Facts and Figures

Background to the 2011 English Local Elections

The 2011 English local elections were held on Thursday 5 May, a year after the pivotal general election of 2010. Most local authorities held elections, although some significant areas of the country (including London) did not. Seats were contested in 36 metropolitan boroughs, 49 unitary authorities and 194 non- metropolitan districts. Although all councillors serve four-year terms, the electoral cycle varies across different authorities. There are three methods of holding elections to local councils: by whole council, by thirds and by halves. The 2011 elections were all by whole council or by thirds.¹

Local elections are very much 'second order' elections in England and, in common with elections to the European Parliament, suffer from both low turnout (typically 30-40%) and a tendency to be viewed through the prism of national politics. The national political context meant that this round of local elections held particular significance for all three major parties:

The Liberal Democrats were in government in Westminster for the first time in the post-war era. Traditionally reliant on a strong base in local government, the Lib Dems faced, for the first time, the challenge of harmonizing local campaign issues with national policymaking. Coalition government is usually harsher on the junior party: they must sacrifice more ground and wield less executive authority, thus running the risk of being outmanoeuvred

by their coalition partners. The Lib Dems were particularly vulnerable as they had fostered a large, anti-establishment 'protest' vote, as well as drawing on support from a broad ideological spectrum. Entering government wiped out their protest vote credentials in the space of a few months and tightened perceptions of the party's ideological position.

The elections presented an additional risk for the Lib Dems in the form of a referendum on a new voting system – the 'alternative vote' (AV) – held on the same day. Offered to Nick Clegg and the Lib Dems as a concession from the Conservatives, the referendum exposed tensions within the coalition, and David Cameron publicly opposed Clegg's calls for a 'Yes' vote. The potential double whammy of a resounding 'No to AV' vote and a poor Lib Dem performance in the local elections were regarded by some commentators as a serious threat to the futures of both Clegg's leadership and the coalition itself.²

With the Lib Dems expected to lose seats across the country, the Conservative and Labour parties were locked in a separate battle of their own. The elections presented the first opportunity for newly elected Labour leader, Ed Miliband, to recover ground lost during the Blair-Brown years. Experts set Labour the imposing target of 1,000 seat gains to signal a recovery and for Ed Miliband to establish his leadership. Colin Rallings, professor of politics at Plymouth University and leading expert on UK elections, was quoted as saying, 'If Labour does not make 1,000 gains, it is a failure.'⁴

Labour gains from the Conservatives would represent more than just symbolic victories for the Parliamentary Labour Party, as local successes in target Westminster seats are

1. See Elections and Electoral Arrangements, <http://www.communities.gov.uk/localgovernment/localgovernanceelections/>

2. See, for example, Cameron, Clegg May Be Rattled by Local Votes, Referendum, Bloomberg Businessweek, <http://www.businessweek.com/news/2011-05-05/cameron-clegg-may-be-rattled-by-local-votes-referendum.html>

3. See Luke Sloan, Measuring Minor Parties in English Local Government: Presence vs. Vote Share, http://www.psa.ac.uk/journals/pdf/5/2011/719_270.pdf

4. See <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/labour-told-gain-1000-seats-in-council-elections-or-youve-failed-2266946.html>

typically the first steps towards general election victory. Many of the constituencies won by Labour in the landslide general elections of 1997 and 2001 were now barren ground, even at the local level. Success in authorities like Braintree and Tendring in Essex, or Swindon in Wiltshire, would show that Labour was again capable of crossing the north-south divide.

The Conservative Party's aims and expectations were less clear-cut. The economy was the major issue on voters' minds, so unexpectedly low growth figures meant party strategists were realistic about the prospect of punishment at the ballot box. Heavy losses would hand the initiative to Labour, while a solid performance from the Conservatives would be taken as vindication of the coalition's economic approach.

Smaller parties were hopeful of success, as all three major parties had recently been in government. The United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) was hopeful that David Cameron's backtracking on a referendum on European Union membership would help them attract Eurosceptic Conservative voters. The Green Party had recently seen its leader, Caroline Lucas, elected to parliament in Brighton Pavilion, so was particularly hopeful of success in the Brighton and Hove City Council elections. Both parties were expecting to benefit from the Lib Dems' newfound status as establishment insiders.

The British National Party was in financial disarray after a series of expensive legal disputes. Its vote share had increased somewhat in the 2010 elections, but the results failed to live up to expectations. The economic downturn, rather than galvanising the far right, seemed to be having the entirely

opposite effect. Few predicted a strong showing from the BNP.

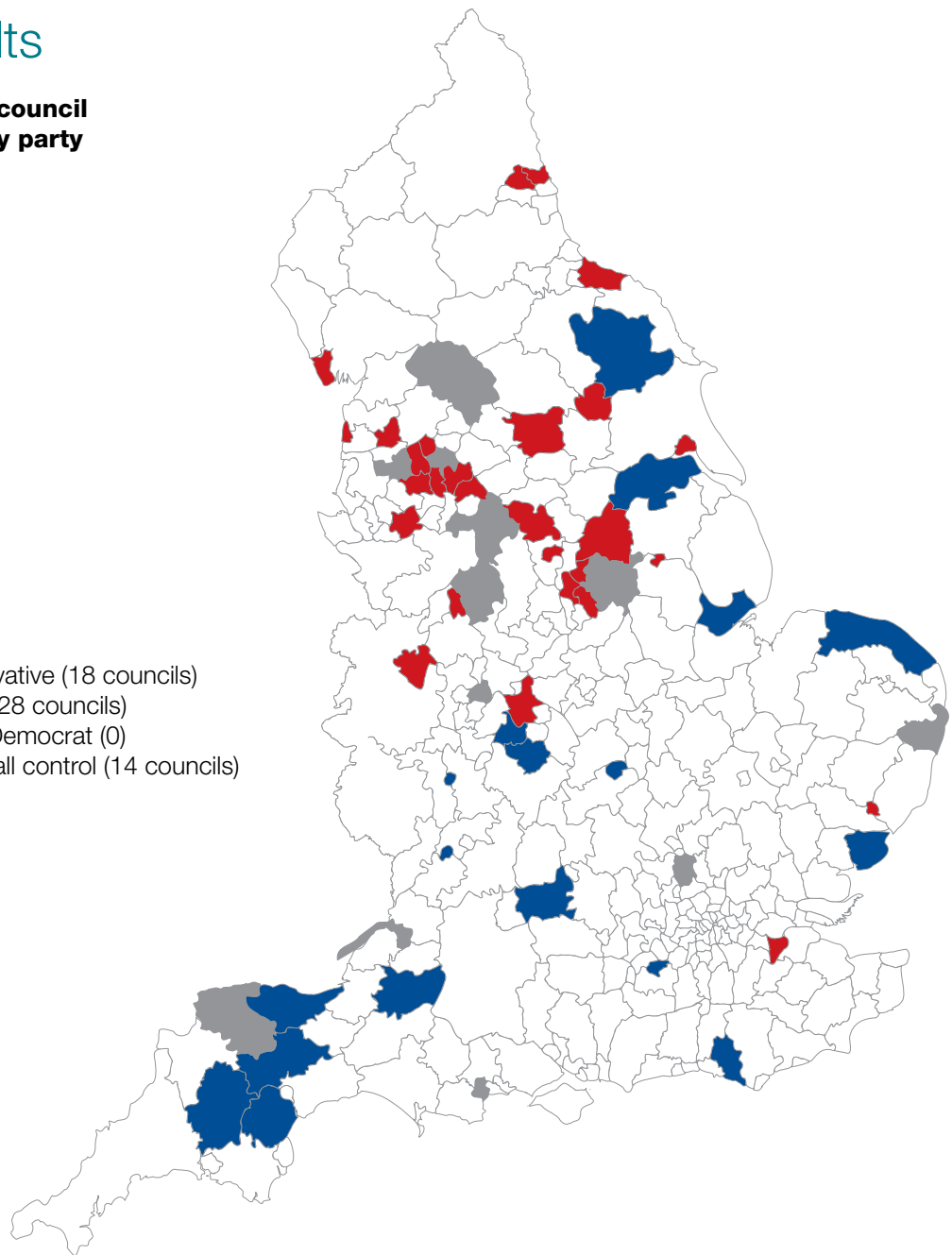
As always, local party groupings and independent candidates were set to play a key role in many local authorities. In some areas these groups are well established, and successfully challenge the major parties for overall control. These elections were a chance to find out whether the trend of increasing minor party participation and vote shares would continue under the Conservative-Lib Dem coalition.³

In five authorities (Bedford, Leicester, Mansfield, Middlesbrough, and Torbay), the position of mayor (as part of a mayor/cabinet executive arrangement) was up for direct election. Two of the four incumbent mayors – Leicester was electing its mayor for the first time – were independents, highlighting the particular local context to local elections. For these reasons, it was difficult to predict exactly how national polling figures would translate into local results.

Results

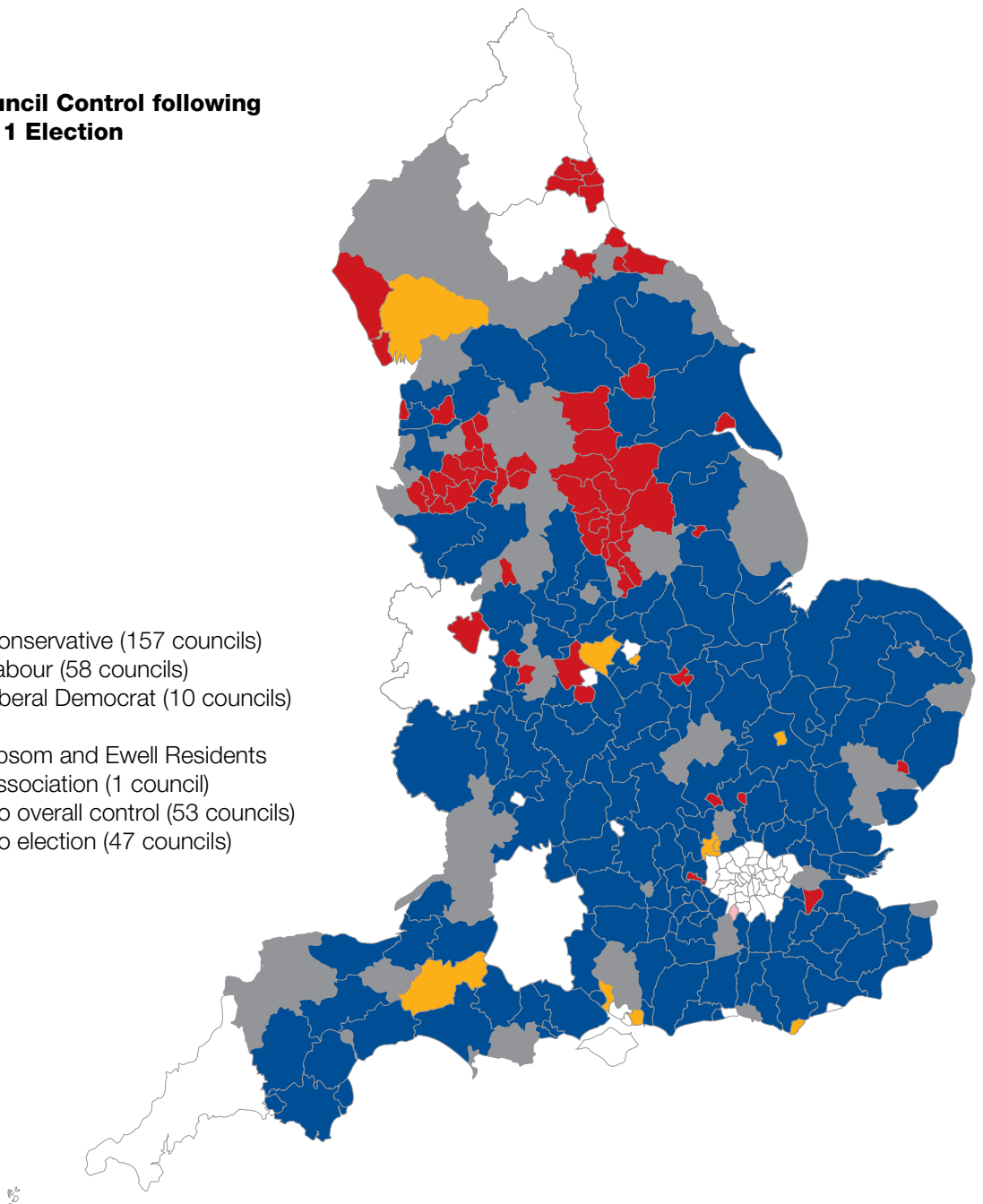
Gains of council control by party

- Conservative (18 councils)
- Labour (28 councils)
- Liberal Democrat (0)
- No overall control (14 councils)



**Council Control following
2011 Election**

- Conservative (157 councils)
- Labour (58 councils)
- Liberal Democrat (10 councils)
- Epsom and Ewell Residents Association (1 council)
- No overall control (53 councils)
- No election (47 councils)



Gains of council control by party⁵

Party	Councils		Councillors	
	Total	Change	Total	Change
Conservative	157	+3	5,108	+86
Labour	58	+27	2,459	+839
Liberal Democrat	10	-9	1,099	-748
Green	0	0	79	+14
UKIP	0	0	7	0
BNP	0	0	2	-11
Residents Association	1	0	48	-3
Liberal	0	0	8	-2
Boston Bypass Independents	0	-1	4	-14
English Democrats	0	0	2	+1
Independent Community and Health Concern	0	0	1	-3
Respect	0	0	0	-2
Others	0	-1	2	-188
No Overall Control	53	-19		
			8,819	

Turnout

Turnout was low, as expected. Many local authorities did not publish full turnout data, but the indications were that the AV referendum had little effect on turnout in most authorities, and that typical patterns of turnout persisted.

Higher levels of turnout were observed in affluent areas (e.g. 46.2% in Brighton and Hove), with much lower turnout in deprived areas (e.g. 29.8% in the Moss Side ward of Manchester City Council).

It has recently been posited that uncompetitive elections increase the likelihood that eligible voters will be put off casting a ballot if small 'costs' (e.g. a rain shower) come into play.⁶ Local elections, being both 'second order' and (often) uncompetitive, are particularly

susceptible to this effect. This can only be resolved by introducing a voting system, which encourages heightened levels of competition.

Party Performance

Conservative

The Conservative vote held up well, and, alongside the result of the AV referendum, made election day a success. They saw a net gain of three councils, wresting control of 18 councils and losing overall control in 15 authorities. Eleven councils switched from Conservative to No Overall Control (NOC). It must be noted that 26 of England's NOC authorities have Conservative-led executives.

In terms of overall seats, the Conservatives managed to slightly increase their share of available seats by 86 to 5,108.

5. Source: <http://www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/RP11-43>

6. Bernard Fraga and Eitan Hersh, Voting Costs and Voter Turnout in Competitive Elections, http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1643019

Labour

Labour managed an ostensibly quite solid performance, achieving a respectable increase of 839 councillors. Although this fell short of the 1,000 councillors that some commentators suggested they needed to prove they were back on the road to recovery. They now control 58 of the councils contested, an increase of 27.

Their key battles against the Conservatives yielded only four council gains (Blackpool, Gedling, Gravesham and North Warwickshire – two of which were ‘wrong winner’ results), and they even lost one authority to the Conservatives (North Lincolnshire).

In the south of England, Labour picked up only two authorities: Ipswich (from NOC) and Gravesham. The lacklustre performance in the south showed just how much ground the party still needs to cover. Gains against the Lib Dems in the north were easy pickings, but the real challenge was to re-establish the party outside its traditional heartlands.

Labour’s best showing was in the North West, where they gained control of ten authorities (Blackburn, Blackpool, Bolton, Barrow in Furness, Bury, Hyndburn, Oldham, Preston, Rochdale and Warrington). Of these, only Blackpool was won from another party, with the rest having been under no overall control.

Liberal Democrats

As expected, the Lib Dem vote collapsed. This cost the party 748 seats and control of nine authorities (Bristol, Chesterfield, Kingston upon Hull, Lewes, Newcastle upon Tyne, North Norfolk, St Albans, Stockport and Vale of White Horse).

Although local elections are fought on local

issues, this illustrated the national dimension to local campaigns. Councillor defections and a jaded activist base meant that the party was unable to campaign with the vigour that had delivered such strong results over the previous decade. There were isolated success stories in places like Eastleigh, where the party won every seat available.

United Kingdom Independence Party

Despite a threefold increase in candidates and optimistic predictions, the elections were something of a disappointment for UKIP. Improved vote shares failed to translate into seat gains, and there were calls from UKIP MEP, Marta Andreasen, for party leader, Nigel Farage, to resign. Beneath the surface, though, the bleeding of a new generation of ‘Young Independent’ candidates and a string of second-place finishes bode well for the party.

Green Party

The Green Party ran candidates in 205 of the 280 authorities holding elections. They increased their share of councillors from 116 in 42 authorities to 130 in 43 authorities. Their strongest authority remains Brighton and Hove, where they held 13 seats and gained ten – making them the largest party grouping in the authority, which they now lead.

British National Party

The elections were a disaster for the BNP, who held only two seats, losing 11. The party lost all five of their seats in Stoke-on-Trent, where it launched its campaign in England.

Other Parties

One hundred and thirty-four candidates stood as English Democrats and the party won two seats on Boston Borough Council. Local parties tended to struggle against the gains made by Labour and the Conservatives.

Independent Candidates

Four hundred and ninety-five independent candidates were elected in total.

The number of independents is in long-term decline. From about 7,000 in the 1970s it gradually fell to 2,000 at the beginning of the millennium. It currently stands at about 1,200.

The regional breakdowns were as follows:

Region	Independents
East of England	72
East Midlands	53
North East	29
North West	72
South East	56
South West	115
West Midlands	48
Yorkshire and the Humber	50

Independent candidates ensure that local elections are fought on local issues. Their success is one measure of the accessibility of local democracy to people who do not wish to be a candidate for an established political party. ■

What do the results tell us?

Uncontested Seats

The most obvious sign of a breakdown in the democratic process is the widespread phenomenon of uncontested seats. In these seats, councillors are elected unopposed and voters are not presented with a choice.

In 24 local authorities, at least one in 10 councillors were elected unopposed. The worst case was Eden District Council in Cumbria, where exactly half of all councillors won their seats uncontested. A third of winning candidates for East Dorset District Council were elected unopposed.

Uncontested seats are the most extreme manifestation of the more widespread lack of electoral competition in most local authorities. There are countless other examples of seats being contested by only two candidates, or where parties stand 'paper' candidates who don't campaign, and who don't expect to win.

Voters in an uncontested ward have no chance to express approval or disapproval for a particular candidate or party. Their representative on the council wins his or her seat by default. The basic purpose of elections – to hold our representatives to account – is defeated.

Authorities with high instance of Uncontested Seats

Authority	County	Region	Previous	Current	Hold /Gain	Uncontested Seats	Seats Available	Uncontested %
Eden	Cumbria	North West	NOC	NOC	HOLD	19	38	50.0%
East Dorset	Dorset	South West	Con	Con	HOLD	12	36	33.3%
South								
Northamptonshire	Northamptonshire	East Midlands	Con	Con	HOLD	13	41	31.7%
Waverley	Surrey	South East	Con	Con	HOLD	16	57	28.1%
North Kesteven	Lincolnshire	East Midlands	Con	Con	HOLD	12	43	27.9%
Ryedale	North Yorkshire	Yorkshire and Humberside	NOC	Con	GAIN	8	29	27.6%
Wychavon	Worcestershire	West Midlands	Con	Con	HOLD	11	44	25.0%
Rochford	Essex	East of England	Con	Con	HOLD	3	13	23.1%
Hambleton	North Yorkshire	Yorkshire and Humberside	Con	Con	HOLD	9	40	22.5%
Malvern Hills	Worcestershire	West Midlands	Con	Con	HOLD	8	38	21.1%
St Edmundsbury	Suffolk	East of England	Con	Con	HOLD	9	45	20.0%
Rutland	Rutland	East Midlands	Con	Con	HOLD	5	26	19.2%
Tewkesbury	Gloucestershire	South West	NOC	Con	GAIN	7	38	18.4%

Cont.

Authority	County	Region	Previous	Current	Hold /Gain	Uncon- tested Seats	Seats Available	Uncon- tested %
Derbyshire Dales	Derbyshire	East Midlands	Con	Con	HOLD	6	38	15.8%
South Kesteven	Lincolnshire	East Midlands	Con	Con	HOLD	8	55	14.5%
East Devon	Devon	South West	Con	Con	HOLD	8	59	13.6%
Maldon	Essex	East of England	Con	Con	HOLD	4	31	12.9%
West Devon	Devon	South West	NOC	Con	GAIN	4	31	12.9%
Allerdale	Cumbria	North West	NOC	NOC	HOLD	7	56	12.5%
Richmondshire	North Yorkshire	Yorkshire and Humberside	NOC	NOC	HOLD	4	34	11.8%
East Hampshire	Hampshire	South East	Con	Con	HOLD	5	44	11.4%
Lichfield	Staffordshire	West Midlands	Con	Con	HOLD	6	56	10.7%
East Northamptonshire	Northamptonshire	East Midlands	Con	Con	HOLD	4	40	10.0%
Ribble Valley	Lancashire	North West	Con	Con	HOLD	4	40	10.0%

Excessive Majorities

The First Past the Post electoral system is capable of delivering extremely distorted results. In the elections in Eastleigh, the Lib Dems won 100% of the available seats on only 46.9% of the vote. In Bournemouth, the Conservatives won nearly 90% of the seats on only 38.6% of the vote.

The most disproportionate general election result was Labour's 2001 victory, where the party won 63% of seats on 40.7% of the national vote.

The 2011 local elections delivered 143 results, which were more disproportionate than Labour's 2001 general election victory. In most cases, this meant that one party

was given overall executive authority, despite the majority of voters opposing them.

Disproportional results inflict long-term damage on local democracy because they damage multi-party competition. Local parties need to win seats in order to remain viable, and excessive majorities stifle dissenting voices. This can lead to the development of personal 'fiefdoms', where the leaders of dominant parties enjoy untrammelled control over their local authorities. Precisely this state of affairs encouraged the Scottish Labour Party to change the voting system for Scottish local elections. The 2011 results show that there is a strong case for making the same change in England.

1. The disproportionality of election results can be measured using the Least Squares Index (also known as the Gallagher Index), which measures disproportionality between distributions of votes and seats. See http://www.tcd.ie/Political_Science/staff/michael_gallagher/EISystems/Docts/ElectionIndices.pdf

Top 50 most disproportional results

Authority Name	Region	Previous Control	Current Control	Gain?	Least Squares
Eastleigh	South East	LD	LD	HOLD	43.6905
Shepway	South East	Con	Con	HOLD	36.0531
Bournemouth	South West	Con	Con	HOLD	35.8296
Stoke-on-Trent	West Midlands	NOC	Lab	GAIN	34.8363
East Riding of Yorkshire	Yorkshire and Humberside	Con	Con	HOLD	33.5226
Rotherham	Yorkshire and Humberside	Lab	Lab	HOLD	33.4403
Leicester	East Midlands	Lab	Lab	HOLD	33.3374
Havant	South East	Con	Con	HOLD	33.1343
East Hertfordshire	East of England	Con	Con	HOLD	32.9083
Waverley	South East	Con	Con	HOLD	32.8743
Stevenage	East of England	Lab	Lab	HOLD	32.3444
Windsor and Maidenhead	South East	Con	Con	HOLD	32.1963
Bracknell Forest	South East	Con	Con	HOLD	31.9450
Liverpool	North West	Lab	Lab	HOLD	31.7626
South Staffordshire	West Midlands	Con	Con	HOLD	31.7513
West Oxfordshire	South East	Con	Con	HOLD	31.1160
Ashfield	East Midlands	NOC	Lab	GAIN	30.6557
Newcastle-under-Lyme	West Midlands	NOC	NOC	HOLD	30.5299
Manchester	North West	Lab	Lab	HOLD	30.5157
Doncaster	Yorkshire and Humberside	Lab	Lab	HOLD	30.3896
Oadby and Wigston	East Midlands	LD	LD	HOLD	30.2594
Maldon	East of England	Con	Con	HOLD	30.0400
Central Bedfordshire	East of England	Con	Con	HOLD	29.7272
Wokingham	South East	Con	Con	HOLD	29.6094
Worthing	South East	Con	Con	HOLD	29.5203
Kingston upon Hull, City of	Yorkshire and Humberside	LD	Lab	GAIN	29.1467
Nottingham	East Midlands	Lab	Lab	HOLD	28.9967
South Bucks	South East	Con	Con	HOLD	28.8375
Rossendale	North West	Con	NOC	GAIN	28.7928
St Albans	East of England	LD	NOC	GAIN	28.7048
Bolsover	East Midlands	Lab	Lab	HOLD	28.6220
Swindon	South West	Con	Con	HOLD	28.4203
Rushmoor	South East	Con	Con	HOLD	28.1894
Amber Valley	East Midlands	Con	Con	HOLD	28.0810
Christchurch	South West	Con	Con	HOLD	28.0568
Runnymede	South East	Con	Con	HOLD	27.9365

Cont.

Authority Name	Region	Previous Control	Current Control	Gain?	Least Squares
New Forest	South East	Con	Con	HOLD	27.8449
Dacorum	East of England	Con	Con	HOLD	27.8223
Fenland	East of England	Con	Con	HOLD	27.8198
Arun	South East	Con	Con	HOLD	27.7014
Daventry	East Midlands	Con	Con	HOLD	27.6349
Cambridge	East of England	LD	LD	HOLD	27.0890
Watford	East of England	LD	LD	HOLD	27.0342
Epping Forest	East of England	Con	Con	HOLD	26.9968
Wealden	South East	Con	Con	HOLD	26.9167
Portsmouth	South East	LD	LD	HOLD	26.6686
Spelthorne	South East	Con	Con	HOLD	26.6267
Breckland	East of England	Con	Con	HOLD	26.5604
Tameside	North West	Lab	Lab	HOLD	26.5430
Sandwell	West Midlands	Lab	Lab	HOLD	26.5088

Wrong Winners

In 15 local authorities, the party with the most votes did not win the most seats. These perverse outcomes demonstrate the capacity of First Past the Post to misrepresent voters' wishes:

One factor that increases the chance of such results is the use of multi-member wards (those in which two or three winners are elected). The First Past the Post system, a flawed method in any case, is especially unsuitable for electing candidates in multi-member seats – usually one party will win every seat in the ward, even in a close race.

	Most Votes	Most Seats
Broxtowe	Labour	Conservative
Calderdale	Labour	Conservative
Darlington	Conservative	Labour
Gravesham	Conservative	Labour
High Peak	Conservative	Labour
Hinckley and Bosworth	Conservative	Lib Dem
North Norfolk	Lib Dem	Conservative
North Warwickshire	Conservative	Labour
Portsmouth	Conservative	Lib Dem
Purbeck	Conservative	Lib Dem
Redditch	Conservative	Labour
South Somerset	Conservative	Lib Dem
Stroud	Conservative	Labour
Telford and Wrekin	Conservative	Labour
West Lancashire	Labour	Conservative

Gender Representation

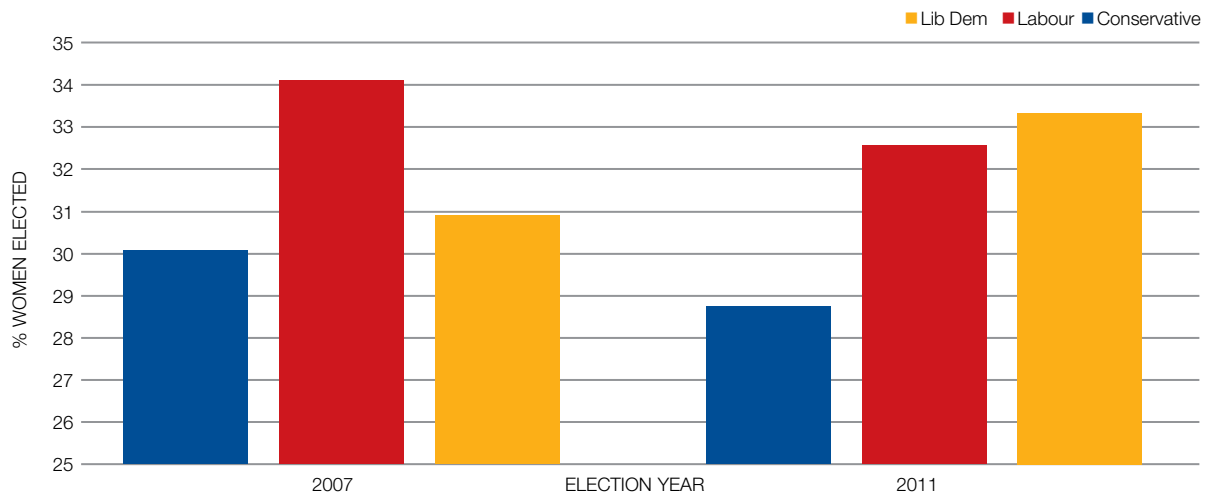
The number of women councillors elected as a whole in 2011 was 30.7%. This represents a decline of 2.9% from the previous year, which stood at 33.6%. This is higher than the proportion of women MPs at Westminster, which reached 22% in the 2010 General Election, but lower than the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly where respectively 35% and 40% women were elected in 2011. The overall figure for local politics has stubbornly hovered around the low 30% mark for a number of years. Not only is this a long way from equal representation; it is also an issue of concern given women's relatively high use of local public services, which adds importance to their participation.

The vast majority of councillors (92.5% in

2011) are elected from the three main parties. By comparing this year's results to those of four years ago, we can see that both Labour and the Conservatives elected proportionately fewer women councillors, and the Lib Dems slightly out-performed Labour as returning the highest proportion of women councillors. However, many of these Lib Dem women are in very marginal seats, which would make a sustained increase difficult. The party also suffered a net loss of nearly 750 councillors in 2011, so the impact on the overall proportion of women was lower than it might otherwise be.

In only seven authorities were half or more of the councillors elected women. This represents just 2.5% of the total number of local authorities that held elections in 2011 (279 in total). Put in another way, 97.5% of all authorities elected a majority of male councillors to fill their available seats. Such a result should set alarm bells ringing.

Women Councillors Elected by Party



Top Authorities Electing Women Councillors

Authority	County	Current Control	No. Women Elected 2011	% Women Elected 2011	% Women on Council
Woking	Surrey	Con	8	61.5	33.3
Burnley	Lancashire	NOC	9	60.0	37.8
Sandwell	West Midlands	Lab	13	54.2	44.4
Norwich	Norfolk	NOC	7	53.8	53.8
Liverpool	Merseyside	Lab	15	50.0	45.6
Rochdale	Greater Manchester	NOC	10	50.0	41.7
Weymouth and Portland	Dorset	NOC	6	50.0	33.3

All of these authorities are elected in thirds, so although they elected 50% or more women councillors in 2011, only one authority – Norwich – actually has a majority of women on the council taking into account the other

members elected in previous years.

The worst performing authorities that elected 10% or fewer women councillors in 2011 are as follows:

Worst Authorities for Electing Women Councillors

Authority	County	Current Control	No. Women Elected 2011	% Women Elected 2011	% Women on Council
Oldham	North West	Lab	2	10.0	26.7
Lincoln	East Midlands	Lab	1	9.1	24.2
Forest Heath	East of England	Con	2	8.3	11.1
Calderdale	Yorkshire and Humberside	NOC	1	5.9	25.5
Stratford-on-Avon	West Midlands	Con	1	5.6	26.4
Wirral	North West	NOC	0	0	28.8
Purbeck	South West	NOC	0	0	16.7

First Past the Post is one of the worst voting systems for electing women. As the election is often a zero sum game, parties are encouraged to stand safe candidates, which they believe will ensure them victory, and they frequently choose a man. First Past the Post continues to be a major obstacle to women breaking through the 30% glass ceiling at local level. Local government can act as a springboard to becoming an MP, and reduced opportunities at the local level will mean fewer routes to high office.

Incumbency

One of the easiest ways of increasing women's representation is to use the opportunity offered by vacancies arising as a result of incumbents standing down (usually due to retirement, deselection or death). According to a study of 100 local authorities by the centre for women & democracy, over three quarters of the candidates were incumbents.² This meant that about 25% of the seats that parties could reasonably expect to win were open to new candidates. The majority of councillors standing down in 2011 happened to be men (493 out of 700), which offered the potential for a significant number of women taking their place. However, for women's representation to improve, parties would need to replace all the retiring women councillors with women candidates and the majority of retiring male councillors with women candidates. Although the former was achieved by the three main parties, the latter was not.

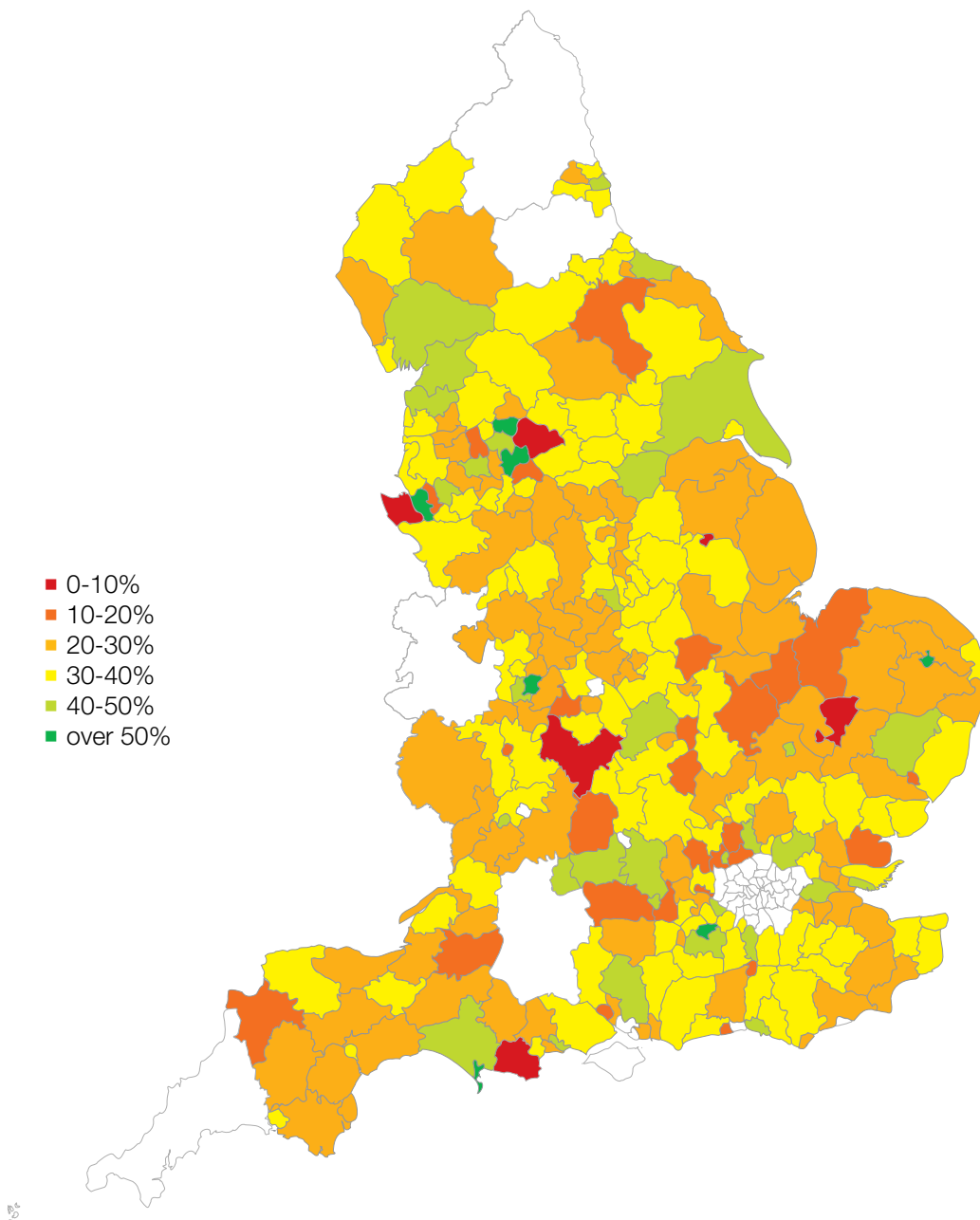
Party	Cllrs not seeking re-election	Women Cllrs no seeking re-election	Women replacement candidates
Con	390	105	105
Lab	173	61	82
LD	137	48	53
All	700	214	240

As in previous years, the Conservatives and the Lib Dems did not replace retiring incumbents with significantly more women candidates. In the case of the Conservatives, it was a one-for-one replacement.

In the 2011 election, over half of the male retirees (51%) were replaced with men. Women were replaced by women in only 14% of the seats. All in all, there was a net gain of just 26 women councillors through the vacancies route, although this was somewhat offset by women losing in marginal seats that changed party hands. ■

² See, Representative Democracy? Women in the 2011 Local Government Elections in England, Centre for Women & Democracy, <http://www.cwfd.org.uk/uploads/pdfs/RepresentativeDemocracyFinal.pdf>

**% women elected in
2011 elections**



The Case for Change

A Vision of Local Government

This year's election results again provided ample evidence of a malaise afflicting English local government. Voters consistently rate local issues like council tax, road repairs and refuse collection as high priorities; yet local democracy in most parts of the country remains uncompetitive and uninspiring.

The structure of local government in England – including the voting system – stifles innovation, fails to reward excellence, and only rarely allows voters to hold bad representatives to account. It is not surprising that turnout levels are so low, when participation is so ineffectual.

Uncontested seats are the most striking aberration. Voters are effectively disenfranchised in every uncontested ward. Even if the winning party in a particular seat is a foregone conclusion, voters should still be offered a choice of candidates within that party.

Overlong incumbency (a related phenomenon) is also a major issue. While the imposition of term limits would be a simple solution to this problem, it would have the adverse effect of preventing popular candidates from re-standing. Instead, local electoral structures should be designed to encourage candidate competition – both between parties and within parties.

The revitalisation of Scottish local government over the past four years is an appropriate model for those seeking to enhance local democracy in England. Their switch to a new voting system – the Single Transferable Vote – led immediately to an increase in inter-party and intra-party competition, and meant that many more voters saw their first preference candidates elected.¹

1. This was the experience in Scotland, which switched to STV for its local elections in 2007. In 2003 (the last under First Past the Post), there were 61 uncontested wards in Scotland; at the 2007 election, there were none.

The Single Transferable Vote

The electoral reform debate in the UK is often understood as a choice between (a) the majoritarian First Past the Post system currently used for parliamentary elections and English local elections, and (b) various forms of proportional representation – such as the additional member systems used for elections to the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly, or the Single Transferable Vote system used in Northern Ireland and in Scottish local elections.

It is worth pointing out to begin with that voting systems do not function in isolation. The purpose of elections to the national parliament is very different from those that we use to choose our local representatives. It is therefore perfectly consistent for advocates of majoritarian elections at the national level to support the adoption of a different model at the local level.

A number of problems exist at the local level, which are not apparent at the national level:

- Very low turnout.
- Uncontested seats.
- Slower turnover of elected representatives.
- Slower turnover of governing executives.
- Subordination to national political narratives.

The debate over electoral reform in Westminster typically pits those who value 'strong', single-party executives and decisive changes of government against those who

prefer a more politically representative legislature. At the local level, though, electoral reform should be understood less as an issue of balanced representation, and more in terms of the need for effective, accountable representation.

How STV works

The Single Transferable Vote (STV) is a form of proportional representation that uses preferential voting in multi-member constituencies.

Candidates don't need a majority of votes to be elected, just a known 'quota', or share of the votes, determined by the size of the electorate and the number of positions to be filled.

Each voter gets one vote, which can transfer from their first-preference to their second-preference, so if your preferred candidate has no chance of being elected or has enough votes already, your vote is transferred to another candidate in accordance with your instructions. STV thus ensures that very few votes are wasted, unlike other systems, especially First Past the Post, where only a small number of votes actually contribute to the result.

It is currently used for local elections in Northern Ireland, Scotland, the Republic of Ireland and parts of New Zealand.

elections in those authorities in which one party enjoys a de facto guarantee of control. By combining sets of uncompetitive single-member districts into larger multi-member wards, uncontested seats would almost certainly be a thing of the past.

STV could benefit women's representation, as under this system, parties are encouraged to present a slate of candidates that appeal to a broader base of supporters. It is certainly no guarantee, but combined with equality measures, gender parity could be achieved. First Past the Post is the worst of all worlds for women and there will be little prospect of equality if it continues.

It is true that STV increases the likelihood of coalition or minority executives, but these are already commonplace in local government – there were 77 such authorities coming into the election, and there are now 59. Local government is an inherently less ideological affair, so some surprising coalition permutations have proved viable.

STV also undoubtedly strengthens the link between a representative and his or her local electorate. There can be little doubt that this is a desirable effect in local government.

With the government committed to increasing local autonomy through the introduction of the Localism Bill, there has never been a more pressing need for electoral reform in local government. ■

The principal benefit of the Single Transferable Vote is that it allows voters to choose candidates both between and within different parties. This fact alone would revitalise