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# STV FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT: AN INTRODUCTION

## What's wrong with First Past the Post in local government?

First Past the Post's tendency towards producing lopsided majorities can be exacerbated in local authority areas. Councils such as Manchester, Knowsley or East Hertfordshire have all their seats filled by councillors from just one party.

In too many other council areas opposition is limited. After the 2014 local elections the ERS found that more than 16 million people in England and Wales, roughly 29% of us, lived in a council where more than 75% of the seats were held by a single party.

## COUNCILS WITH NO OPPOSITION

Council	Control	Party % of Seats	Most Recent Party Vote %
East Hertfordshire	Conservative	100%	58.7%
Knowsley	Labour	100%	76.0%
Manchester	Labour	100%	57.9%
Mid Sussex	Conservative	100%	59.0%
Newham	Labour	100%	59.7%

FPTP's often insurmountable safe seats can also harm electoral competition, leading to uncontested seats. In Eden District Council this year 55% of seats were uncontested. In South Northamptonshire a third were not contested.

A study by an academic from Cambridge University for the ERS found earlier this year this lack of electoral accountability had a real effect on governance. Through analysis of 132,000 contracts issued by councils the academics found £2.6bn of public money that had been wasted due to weak electoral accountability, tied to one party states and uncontested seats.

Councils with weak or non-existent oppositions can suffer from poor scrutiny of governing decision. A weak democracy has real knock on effect for constituents.

## What's the Alternative?

Northern Ireland, since 1973, and Scotland, since 2007, do not use First Past the Post to elect their councils, but rather use the Single Transferable Vote (STV) system.

STV is a candidate-centred, proportional representation system, which is explained in more detail below. The Scottish version used 3 or 4 member seats. The former are, of course, already common across England and Wales.

STV has resulted in an end to one party states. Councils like Glasgow, North Lanarkshire and Midlothian, once considered to be impenetrable fortresses, now see

### Uncontested wards in Scottish local authority elections



genuine electoral competition. Councillors talk of having to campaign everywhere in a council, and uncontested seats, of which there were 61 in the last Scottish FPTP election in 2003, have disappeared.

As STV asks voters to choose their favoured candidates and not their favoured parties, it does not discriminate against independents, and allows for proportionality with nonpartisan politics.

In Scotland the councils of Shetland, Orkney, and Na h-Eileanan Siar (Western Isles) are run by Independent groups, while Argyll and Bute and Highland councils are led by Independent council leaders working in coalition with parties.

### How does STV Work?

STV is a candidate-centred proportional system. They are presented with a choice of candidates who they can rank by placing '1' next to their most favoured candidate, '2' next to their second choice, '3' next to their third and so on, for as many or as few candidates as they wish to.

In order to be elected a candidate must win a 'quota' of votes, which is the number of votes divided by the number of seats + 1, so in a three member seat the quota is 25% of the vote, in a four member seat it is 20%. If a candidate wins more than the quota then they are considered elected.

Votes unnecessary to be elected (over the quota) are redistributed on the basis of their preferences, so that if a candidate needs 10,000 to win and gets 11,000, 1,000 votes will be transferred to the candidates for whom their voters mark '2', or if their second preference is no longer in the race, the candidate they have marked '3' and so on.

If no candidate reaches the quota then the candidate with the lowest number of votes is eliminated from the race and their votes redistributed as above. This process continues until all seats are filled.

### Where can I find out more?

Visit the Electoral Reform Society website at [electoral-reform.org.uk](http://electoral-reform.org.uk)

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