

Election cancelled: The scourge of uncontested seats in England

Electoral Reform Society Briefing, April 2019

Background

Large parts of England are effectively ‘democracy deserts’, with hundreds of thousands of potential voters denied real choice in this May’s elections. 300 council seats in England have been guaranteed for one party or individual before a single ballot has been cast, weeks before the May 2nd polling day – affecting around 850,000 potential voters.

This includes nearly 150 councillors who will win their seats without a single vote being cast. In these wards the number of nominated candidates equals the number of councillors to be elected. Around 270,000 potential voters in these ‘democracy deserts’ will be denied their democratic right of expressing a preference about who will represent them locally, the ERS briefing shows.

Parties or independent candidates have also been guaranteed an additional 152 seats through multi-member wards going ‘under-contested’ – i.e. where a lack of competition means that at least 1 seat in the ward is guaranteed for a particular party or independent candidate. There are around a further 580,000 potential voters in wards such as these.

Key Findings

- Around 850,000 potential voters in England are in wards where a party or individual is guaranteed a seat – weeks before polling day
- 148 seats will see candidates handed councillor roles without any electoral challenge, meaning that for many, next month’s local elections are effectively cancelled. These uncontested seats are spread across 47 councils throughout England.
- The Conservatives are set to gain 137 of these uncontested seats, with the Liberal Democrats picking up five, four going to independent candidates and Labour securing two
- Across the country, parties have picked up a further 152 guaranteed seats long before polling day, as multi-member wards up for election go ‘under-contested’ across 54 councils. This is where there is insufficient competition to make the ward fully competitive.
- The Conservatives will secure 130 seats in these under-contested wards, with Labour gaining an additional 15 seats. The Lib Dems pick up six and one will go to an independent candidate.
- There are 74 councils in this round of elections which have either uncontested seats or ‘guaranteed party seats’ where a party is certain to win.
- The East Midlands has the highest number of uncontested seats, followed by the East of England, West Midlands and the South East in close proximity. Full tables below.
- Fenland District Council in Cambridgeshire is the worst offender by council, with 12 of the district’s 30 seats going uncontested. That means nearly half of this year’s council intake will be decided without a single

ballot being cast. Full list of the ‘Top 10’ least contested areas is at the bottom of the briefing.

This is in contrast to local elections in Scotland and Northern Ireland, where use of a proportional, multi-member voting system means voters are presented with a wide choice of parties and candidates.

Uncontested and guaranteed seats by region

Ordered by highest uncontested number of seats to lowest

Tables by region available here: <https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Uncontested-seats-by-region-ERS-May-2019-Elections.xlsx>

Region	Uncontested seats (in wards where there will be no voting due to the number of candidates being the same as number of Cllrs to be elected)	Electorate affected (number of potential voters in wards where there will be no voting because of uncontested seats)	Guaranteed seats (wards where there will be voting but party guaranteed at least one seat due to lack of candidates)	Electorate affected (number of potential voters in wards where there will be voting but party guaranteed at least one seat due to lack of candidates)
East Midlands	42	74893	48	162278
East of England	27	52642	29	109508
West Midlands	27	50359	18	66722
South East	25	48213	20	86585
North West	12	18398	14	47553
South West	11	17310	5	16572
Yorkshire & Humber	4	6839	12	56188
North East	0	0	6	31988
TOTALS	148	268654	152	577394

Includes councillors elected in seats where no voting will take place due to the number of candidates equalling the number of councillors to be elected or where voting will take place but a paucity of candidates means a party is guaranteed at least one seat in that ward.

Electorate sizes should be treated as estimates. For most of the wards, ERS researchers used Boundary Commission for England data from 2015. Where there was evidence that there have been boundary changes in a council since 2015, we have used figures from the most recent Local Government Boundary Commission (LGBC) for England review for that local authority.

The local authorities which used a LGBC review for were the following: Allerdale, Copeland, Ribble Valley, Bolsover, Ashford, Test Valley, Wealden, Torridge, West Suffolk, Somerset West & Taunton, Rutland, King's Lynn & West Norfolk, Horsham, Cheshire West & Chester, Blackburn with Darwen, Richmondshire, Harborough, Warwick, Barbergh, East Suffolk, Hertsmere, Mid Suffolk, South Norfolk, Tendring, Chichester, Dartford, East Hampshire, Cherwell, Crawley, South Gloucestershire, East Devon, Forest of Dean.

Total uncontested and guaranteed party seats by region

Region	Total uncontested and guaranteed seats (no voting or party guaranteed at least one seat)	Electorate affected (number of potential voters in wards where there is at least one uncontested seat, either because of no voting or where there will be voting but there is at least one guaranteed seat)
East Midlands	90	237171
East of England	56	162150
West Midlands	45	117081
South East	45	134798
North West	26	65951
South West	16	33882
Yorkshire & Humber	16	63027
North East	6	31988
TOTALS	300	846048

Comment by Darren Hughes, Chief Executive of the Electoral Reform Society

Elections are a cornerstone of our democracy. Yet around 270,000 people are being denied the chance to exercise their most basic democratic right and have their say on who represents them. Clearly something is not right, with voters going totally unheard.

It is frankly unacceptable in the 21st century for parties to have landed 300 seats without a single ballot being cast. Around 850,000 potential voters in England live in wards where a party or individual is guaranteed a seat – weeks before polling day.

Large parts of England are at risk of becoming ‘democracy deserts’, with seats going uncontested and residents having no say who represents them. But

this research also highlights ‘under-contested’ seats in multi-member wards, where representation is guaranteed due to a lack of competition. The result is councillors who have no proper mandate from the people they serve. This lack of democratic competition is bad for scrutiny, bad for local services and bad for democracy.

Since moving to a proportional voting system (STV) for local elections in 2007, the scourge of uncontested seats has almost vanished in Scotland. Yet voters in England remain restrained by a one-person-takes-all system, where all votes not cast for the winner go to waste. The result is a worrying number of ‘one party states’, safe seats and electoral wastelands. This is a disaster for faith in politics and – as we’ve seen – for competition too. Nowhere should be a ‘no go zone’ for parties.

It’s time we brought the era of rotten boroughs to a close, by scrapping the broken first-past-the-post system in England and ensuring there is always real competition. A more proportional system would end the crisis of local ‘one party states’ and open up our politics at last.

The Welsh government is currently consulting on allowing councils to switch to a more proportional voting system.

The top ten ‘Rotten Boroughs’ by council area:

Councils where the highest number of councillors will be elected without voting taking place:

1. Fenland (Cambridgeshire) = 12 councillors
2. Rutland = 8 councillors
3. West Suffolk = 8 councillors
4. Wychavon (Worcestershire) = 8 councillors
5. Lichfield (Staffordshire) = 7 councillors
6. Ashford (Kent) = 6 councillors
7. Blaby (Leicestershire) = 5 councillors
8. Melton (Leicestershire) = 5 councillors
9. Sevenoaks (Kent) = 5 councillors
10. South Holland (Lincolnshire) = 5 councillors

Councils which have the highest number of guaranteed councillors for one party, before any voting has taken place:

1. Fenland (Cambridgeshire) = 15 councillors
2. South Holland (Lincolnshire) = 13 councillors
3. West Suffolk = 13 councillors
4. Rutland = 12 councillors
5. Sevenoaks (Kent) = 11 councillors
6. Lichfield (Staffordshire) = 10 councillors
7. Melton (Leicestershire) = 10 councillors
8. North Kesteven (Lincolnshire) = 10 councillors
9. Blaby (Leicestershire) = 9 councillors
10. Wychavon (Worcestershire) = 9 councillors

Solving the problem of ‘democracy deserts’

The Electoral Reform Society are calling for a fairer local electoral system which more accurately reflects people’s wishes and encourages strong competition.

Scotland has been enjoying a fairer voting system since 2007, the

preferential Single Transferable Vote. Voters rank candidates by preference in multi-member wards (as already used in much of England). If their first choice already has enough support, or not enough to secure a seat, their second choice is taken – with the process repeated until the seats are filled.

Voter choice has more than doubled, uncontested seats have all but become a thing of the past, and the rotten boroughs that once plagued Scotland have been undone. Northern Ireland also uses the Single Transferable Vote for local elections, which means it also enjoys fully-contested elections at a local level.

Introducing STV for England and Wales would mean that people's votes were more accurately represented, and there would no longer be any 'no go' areas for the big parties.

Wales is now considering moves to allow councils to introduce a proportional voting system. England is looking increasingly isolated as the last defender of a broken, two-party electoral system.

Further information

- Hansard Society – Audit of Political Engagement <https://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/publications/reports/audit-of-political-engagement-16>
- Electoral Reform Society – Voters in England and Wales are being let down by their local democracy <https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/campaigns/local-democracy/>
- Electoral Reform Society – The Cost of One-Party Councils <https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/latest-news-and-research/publications/the-cost-of-one-party-councils/>