

London's Local Elections: Lessons from Scotland

April 2022

In May 2022, local elections will take place throughout Scotland and Wales, as well as in many parts of England, including the election of all local councillors in Greater London.

In Scotland, these will be the fourth set of local elections held using the Single Transferable vote (STV),¹ the ERS' preferred system of proportional representation. STV puts power in voters' hands and allows them to make nuanced choices, not just between parties but often between candidates of the same party. It is a straightforward system for voters to use, ranking candidates in order of preference – 1,2,3 etc. Electors can give their first preference to their favourite candidate, while also being able to influence the election's outcome via their latter preferences.

STV in Scotland sees councillors elected in multi-member wards of typically between three or four seats. These larger wards are designed to ensure that the diversity of opinion in an area is at least relatively well represented by those candidates who are elected and by extension secure a reasonably proportional outcome across the council area as a whole. It is highly unusual, almost impossible, for candidates from the same party to secure all the seats in one of these STV multi-member wards, unless it is a genuine reflection of overwhelming support for one party above all others.

This year's local elections in Wales will take place under First Past the Post (FPTP). However, following the Senedd's passing of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021, Welsh local authorities will soon have the power to switch to using STV for their local elections.²

In England, there has been no progress towards the adoption of STV for local elections and this year's elections will again take place under FPTP.

London's councils and the problems of FPTP

The election of all councillors across Greater London's 32 boroughs take place in one go, every four years. As such, they provide some prime examples of the inadequacies of FPTP when it comes to local democracy in England, particularly as almost all wards in London are represented by more than one councillor.

In 2018, London saw elections across 632 council wards of various sizes: Four (<1%) single member wards; Fifty-five (9%) two member wards; and Five hundred and seventy-three (91%) three member wards. Of these 628 multi-member wards, electing either two or three councillors, 565 saw one party win all of the seats up for grabs. This means that 90% of all the multi-member wards in London were represented by only one party after the last set of local elections in 2018. This widespread domination by one party at ward level, inevitably translates into some highly disproportional results at council level.

This contrasts starkly with the situation in Scotland, where no single party has ever won all the seats in an STV multi-member ward. Independent candidates have sometimes won all available seats but never a single political party. These much more representative ward-level outcomes meant that after the last set of Scottish local elections in 2017, no one party had a majority on any council in the country, though Independent candidates made up a majority of councillors in three authorities.

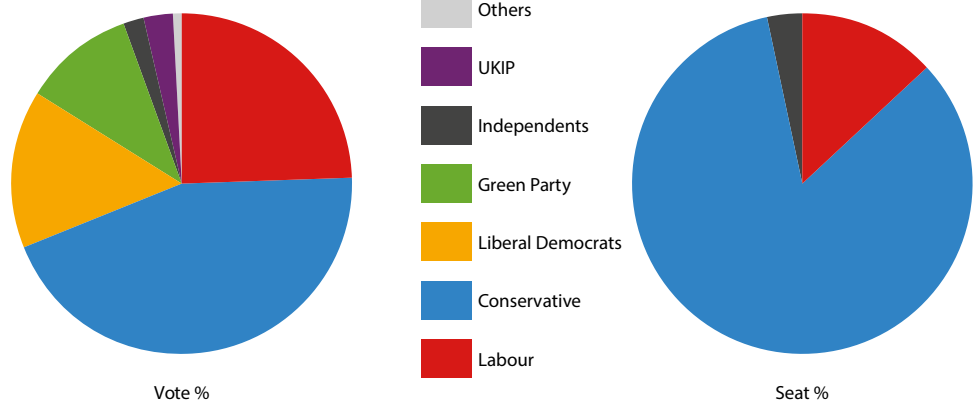
The rest of this paper focuses on three examples from the 2018 London local elections, highlighting disproportional outcomes at ward and council level, and contrasts these with what occurred in Scotland's capital, Edinburgh, at the 2017 Scottish local elections.

¹ <https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/voting-systems/types-of-voting-system/single-transferable-vote/>

² <https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/right-to-scrap-first-past-the-post-won-for-welsh-councils/>

Case Studies

Bromley



Council level results

For the following multi-member London ward and overall council results, we have calculated vote share by using the vote of each party's best placed candidate. This is the approach taken by local election experts Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher, directors of the Election Centre, a major resource for local election data in the UK.

<https://www.electionscentre.co.uk>

Party	Votes	Vote %	Seats	Seat %
Labour	26295	24.5	8	13.3
Conservative	47777	44.6	50	83.3
Liberal Democrats	15896	14.8	0	0.0
Green Party	11460	10.7	0	0.0
Independents	2013	1.9	2	3.3
UKIP	3065	2.9	0	0.0
Others	642	0.6	0	0.0
TOTAL	107148	100.0	60	100.0

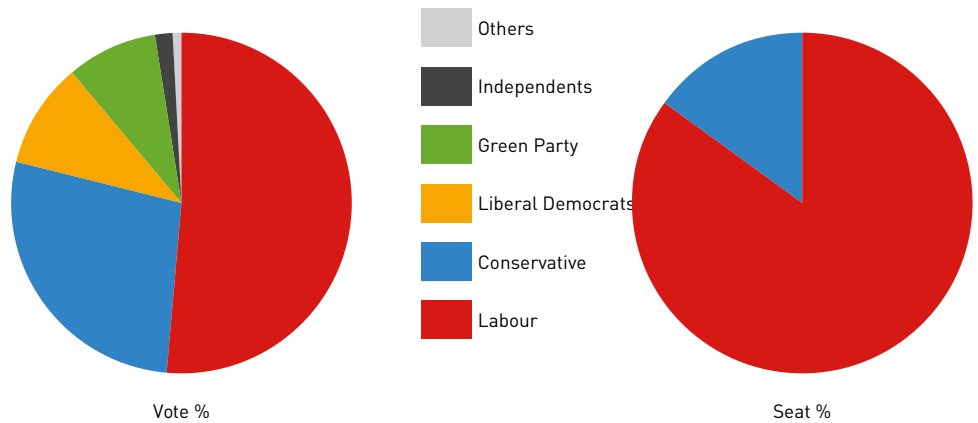
The above data highlight the disproportional nature of the 2018 local election outcome in Bromley. Despite a vote share below 50%, the Conservatives received over four-fifths of council seats, leaving all other parties badly under-represented.

The Bromley ward level data, below, shows how every ward in the borough saw candidates from only one party elected. This left thousands of supporters of other parties in each ward unrepresented. Across the borough, over half (51.4%) of votes went to parties that had no representatives elected in that ward.

Ward level results

WARD	COUNCILLORS ELECTED	VOTES FOR BEST PLACED CANDIDATE OF NON-REPRESENTED PARTIES	VOTES FOR BEST PLACED CANDIDATE OF NON-REPRESENTED PARTIES (%)
Bickley	●●● CON x3	2774	48.6
Biggin Hill	●● IND x2	2072	63.8
Bromley Common & Keston	●●● CON x3	2153	43.6
Bromley Town	●●● CON x3	3759	63.8
Chelsfield & Pratts Bottom	●●● CON x3	2345	44.5
Chislehurst	●●● CON x3	2150	41.0
Clock House	●●● LAB x3	4343	72.0
Copers Cope	●●● CON x3	3893	63.0
Cray Valley East	●●● CON x3	2399	59.7
Cray Valley West	●●● CON x3	3104	67.9
Crystal Palace	●● LAB x2	1505	43.1
Darwin	● CON x1	448	27.2
Farnborough & Crofton	●●● CON x3	2485	43.1
Hayes & Coney Hall	●●● CON x3	2565	45.3
Kelsey & Eden Park	●●● CON x3	3205	55.6
Mottingham & Chislehurst North	●● CON x2	1380	55.4
Orpington	●●● CON x3	2130	42.7
Penge & Cator	●●● LAB x3	2606	44.4
Petts Wood & Knoll	●●● CON x3	2233	39.5
Plaistow & Sundridge	●●● CON x3	3521	63.9
Shortlands	●● CON x2	1423	40.6
West Wickham	●●● CON x3	2634	46.2
OVERALL		55127	51.4

Hounslow



Council level results

Party	Votes	Vote %	Seats	Seat %
Labour	37835	51.5	51	85
Conservative	20270	27.6	9	15
Liberal Democrats	7208	9.8	0	0
Green Party	6344	8.6	0	0
Independents	1288	1.8	0	0
Others	455	0.6	0	0
TOTAL	73400	100	60	100

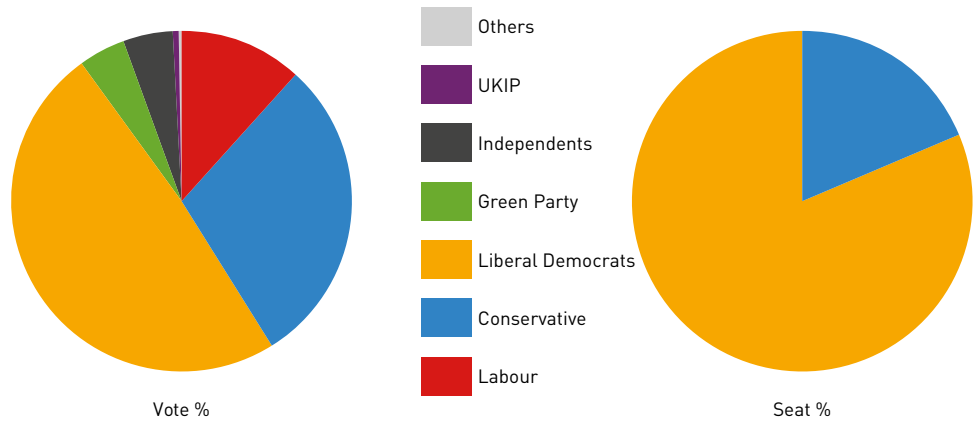
In Hounslow, the winning party, Labour, received a similar seat share (85%) as the Conservatives did in Bromley, this time with just over half the vote share.

The ward level data is also almost a mirror image of Bromley. Again, every multi-member ward is represented by only one party, with 46.8% of votes going to parties that did not succeed in having a representative elected in a particular ward.

Ward level results

WARD	COUNCILLORS ELECTED	VOTES FOR BEST PLACED CANDIDATE OF NON-REPRESENTED PARTIES	VOTES FOR BEST PLACED CANDIDATE OF NON-REPRESENTED PARTIES [%]
Bedfont	●●● LAB x3	1730	51.1
Brentford	●●● LAB x3	1982	46.1
Chiswick Homefields	●●● CON x3	2327	57.3
Chiswick Riverside	●●● CON x3	2463	59.1
Cranford	●●● LAB x3	1105	34.3
Feltham North	●●● LAB x3	1872	56.1
Feltham West	●●● LAB x3	1935	51.0
Hanworth Park	●●● LAB x3	2177	62.3
Hanworth	●●● LAB x3	1547	50.4
Heston Central	●●● LAB x3	1077	34.5
Heston East	●●● LAB x3	1046	34.9
Heston West	●●● LAB x3	874	26.0
Hounslow Central	●●● LAB x3	1629	40.4
Hounslow Heath	●●● LAB x3	1414	36.8
Hounslow South	●●● LAB x3	1936	47.1
Hounslow West	●●● LAB x3	1275	36.6
Isleworth	●●● LAB x3	1863	49.3
Osterley & Spring Grove	●●● LAB x3	1998	47.6
Syon	●●● LAB x3	1962	50.0
Turnham Green	●●● CON x3	2111	56.7
OVERALL		34323	46.8

Kingston upon Thames



Council level results

Party	Votes	Vote %	Seats	Seats %
Labour	6949	11.7	0	0.0
Conservative	17478	29.5	9	18.8
Liberal Democrats	28989	48.9	39	81.3
Green Party	2641	4.5	0	0.0
Independent	2863	4.8	0	0.0
UKIP	267	0.5	0	0.0
Others	82	0.1	0	0.0
TOTAL	59269	100.0	48	

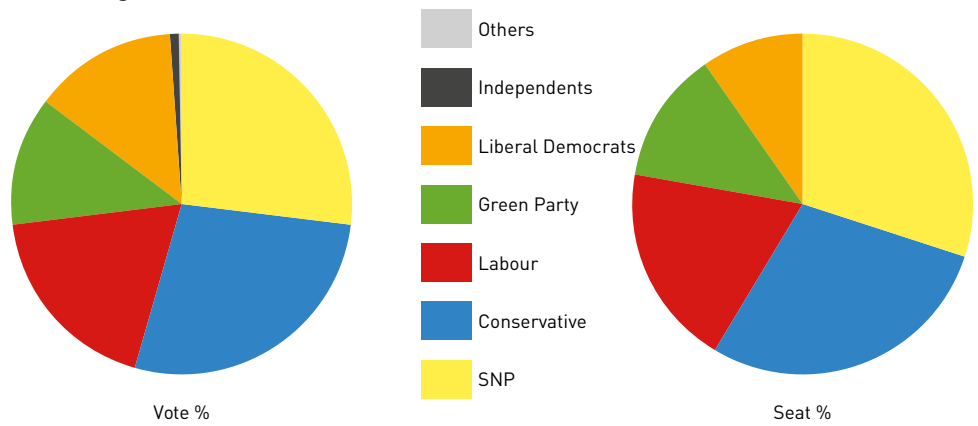
Kingston upon Thames is another example of one party getting over four-fifths of the seats, based on around half of the votes. In this borough it is the Liberal Democrats that benefit.

At ward level, although there are two wards with split representation, the vast majority of these multi-member wards are again represented by one party, meaning that over forty percent of votes went to parties who did not secure representation in a ward.

Ward level results

WARD	COUNCILLORS ELECTED	VOTES FOR BEST PLACED CANDIDATE OF NON-REPRESENTED PARTIES	VOTES FOR BEST PLACED CANDIDATE OF NON-REPRESENTED PARTIES (%)
Alexandra	●●● LIB DEM x3	1640	45.0
Berrylands	●●● LIB DEM x3	1767	46.2
Beverley	●●● LIB DEM x3	2139	51.9
Canbury	●●● LIB DEM x3	2847	56.1
Chessington North & Hook	●●● LIB DEM x3	1554	47.6
Chessington South	●●● LIB DEM x3	1719	47.0
Coombe Hill	●●● CON x3	1686	53.7
Coombe Vale	●●● LIB DEM x2; CON x1	809	18.6
Grove	●●● LIB DEM x3	1546	43.5
Norbiton	●●● LIB DEM x3	1523	44.4
Old Malden	●●● CON x3	1912	57.9
St James	●●● LIB DEM x3	1926	52.8
St Mark's	●●● LIB DEM x3	1382	41.7
Surbiton Hill	●●● LIB DEM x3	1504	39.7
Tolworth & Hook Rise	●●● LIB DEM x3	1319	38.8
Tudor	●●● CON x2; LIB DEM x1	694	18.5
OVERALL		25967	43.8

Edinburgh



Council level results

(First preference votes)

Party	Votes	Vote %	Seats	Seat %
SNP	49798	27.0	19	30.2
Conservative	51212	27.7	18	28.6
Labour	33916	18.4	12	19.0
Green Party	22907	12.4	8	12.7
Liberal Democrats	25154	13.6	6	9.5
Independents	1239	0.7	0	0.0
Others	401	0.2	0	0.0
TOTAL	184627	100.0	63	100.0

The data for Edinburgh, Scotland's capital city, are in stark contrast to the three London borough examples. These data are from the last Scottish council elections in 2017 and the chart above shows a highly proportional result, with first preference vote shares closely matching seat share. As described above, STV gives voters the opportunity to select multiple preferences, so first preference vote share is not the only consideration when looking at the 'fairness' of an election outcome under STV. This at least partly explains why parties can sometimes get slightly more seats than another party while having slightly fewer first preference votes, as happened twice in Edinburgh in 2017. However, the fact that first preference vote share and seat share match so closely indicates a far more representative outcome for voters than we saw in London.

Ward level results

WARD	COUNCILLORS ELECTED	FIRST PREFERENCE VOTES FOR CANDIDATES OF NON-REPRESENTED PARTIES	FIRST PREFERENCE VOTES FOR CANDIDATES OF NON-REPRESENTED PARTIES (%)
Almond	●●●● SNP; CON; LD x2	1384	9.7
Pentlands Hill	●●●● SNP; CON x2; LAB	1049	9.3
Drum Brae/Gyle	●●●● SNP; CON; LD	1673	17.7
Forth	●●●● SNP x2; CON; LAB;	2036	19.6
Inverleith	●●●● SNP; CON x2; LD	3736	27.5
Corstorphine/Murrayfield	●●●● SNP; CON; LD	1634	14.3
Sighthill/Gorgie	●●●● SNP x2; CON; LAB	1623	19.1
Colinton/Fairmilehead	●●●● CON x2; LAB	3374	29.7
Fountainbridge/Craiglockhart	●●●● SNP; CON; GREEN	1789	19.6
Morningside	●●●● CON; LAB; GREEN; LD;	2427	17.9
City Centre	●●●● SNP; CON; LAB; GREEN	754	8.5
Leith Walk	●●●● SNP x2; LAB; GREEN	2487	23.4
Leith	●●●● SNP; LAB; GREEN	1616	21.2
Craigtinny/Duddingston	●●●● SNP; CON; LAB; GREEN	448	4.2
Southside/Newington	●●●● SNP; CON; LAB; GREEN	1410	12.1
Liberton/Gilmerton	●●●● SNP x2; CON; LAB	1254	10.7
Portobello/Graigmillar	●●●● SNP; CON; LAB; GREEN	258	2.5
OVERALL		28952	15.7

The Edinburgh ward level data again contrasts with the London examples. In no ward were all of the seats taken by one party, in fact in some wards four different parties saw candidates elected. The overall percentage of first preference votes for parties with no representation in a ward was 15.7%, much lower than the percentage of votes for the 'top candidate' of parties who failed to get elected in particular wards, in the three London boroughs.