

There's a small problem with Exeter Council's local elections on 7th May:

Our voting system's rubbish!

*“Last time **most** votes in Exeter were wasted, thanks to our Victorian voting system”*

So says the Supervote Project, a small campaign which, in the company of others, seeks to reform the voting system in the UK. While colleagues tend to concentrate on elections to Westminster, the Supervote Project focuses on council elections in the belief that far more damage is being done to the fabric of our democracy at the grassroots by the continued use of the First-past-the-post voting system in local government elections. Supervote's organiser, David Green, says: “Figures in the 2024 Local Elections Handbook published by Professors Rallings and Thrasher, show that, last time Exeter Council had elections in 2024:

- The Labour Party took 61% of the available seats with only 38% of the vote;
- The Conservatives had only 1 seat (8% of the total) to show for 18% of the vote;
- Of the 32,195 votes cast, 18,202 (56%) were unsuccessful in electing a councillor;
- 65% of those registered to vote in Exeter refrained from doing so.

“The fault lies with continued use of the Victorian First-past-the-post voting system, an outdated steam age device which wastes many, if not most, of the votes shovelled into it, while producing a distorted result with the remainder. Moreover, outcomes are neither consistent nor certain.”

It's not much better at ward level: Exeter has 13 wards, each returning 3 councillors, which in theory should allow for a variety of political representation in the wards but, the way our outdated voting system works, 4 of the wards are monopolised by Labour, 1 by the LibDems and 1 by the Greens. Moreover, in the 2024 election, 11 of the 13 ward councillors were elected on a minority of the vote, resulting in the ridiculous situation in Pinhoe Ward, for example, where 42% of the 2024 voters enjoyed 3 councillors of their political persuasion, while 58% had none.”

The home page of the Supervote website at www.supervote.org.uk has a link to an A-Z of 315 English councils, with a majority of those listed given an “X” rating according to how badly their election results compared with their voters' wishes. **Exeter's 2024 results were double-X rated, hardly surprising given that nearly two thirds of Exeter's voters did not vote and, of those who did, a majority failed to elect anybody.**

“There is something very wrong with a voting system that has the ability to award over 6 out of 10 seats to a party that has won under 4 out of 10 votes. The Labour Party walked off with a majority of the seats even though a majority of those who voted did not support them. This breeds a “what's the point?” attitude among the electorate, with distorted representation, low levels of participation in local politics, lamentable turnouts and voters of different political persuasions denied an adequate voice.”

There are countless examples of how First-past-the-post is wrecking our democracy. Here are two of them:-

1. In the last general election, 85% of MPs were elected on a minority of their constituency vote, enabling the Labour Party to take nearly two thirds of the seats and absolute power with just one third of the vote. There was no landslide; there was no mandate. Two thirds of those who voted did not support the election of a Labour Government and 58% of the votes cast in that election were ineffective. 40% of those registered to vote did not do so.
2. In last year's local elections, First-past-the-post catapulted Reform UK from relative obscurity into positions of absolute power on several councils even though they had not won an absolute majority of votes on a single council. For example, Reform UK seized control of Kent County Council, taking 70% of the seats with just 36% of the vote. The same may happen this year, giving Reform UK representation and power out of all proportion to the number of votes actually cast for them.

"First-past-the-post is past it. Continued use of this museum piece makes about as much sense as having Stephenson's Rocket haul trains on HS2."

"We need to replace First-past-the-post with a system of proportional representation which awards seats to parties in proportion to the votes cast for them so that, say, if Labour won 4 out of 10 votes, they would be awarded 4 out of 10 seats. First-past-the-post is not designed to achieve this."

"The Single Transferable Vote (STV) is the British system of proportional representation involving the sharing out of seats in every ward in proportion to votes cast as dictated by the stated preferences of each voter in the ward. Voters have more candidate choice and are free to vote based on what is important to them, whether it be according to party, gender, culture, independence of thought or issue. This system ensures that every vote would be keenly contested, that there would be no more safe seats, with greatly reduced levels of ineffective voting and everything for everyone everywhere to play for, whether they be voters, candidates or political associations. STV is the most powerful vote on the planet which is why a Financial Times journalist once described it as the Supervote."

"STV is already in use in Northern Irish and Scottish local elections, and the Welsh Senedd has recently passed legislation that allows Welsh councils to use STV if they so resolve. Exeter and other English Councils need to catch up and they should lobby the Government to introduce STV in time for the next round of local elections."

Could members of the press please keep an eye out for next May's voting figures to check whether percentage seats won match percentage votes cast.

More information is available on the project website at www.supervote.org.uk

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