

There's one small problem with the forthcoming local elections in May...

# The Voting System's Rubbish!

On May 7th next, the few voters who can be bothered will traipse off to their local polling stations to cast a vote in their council's elections. They will cheerfully sign away their democratic rights with an X - the mark of illiteracy - and, if they think about it at all, many will assume that the voting system they are using will ensure that the election result accurately reflects how they and their fellow residents had voted.

Unfortunately, our Victorian First-past-the-post voting system fails to do this.

**The Supervote Project\* has compiled an A-Z of English local election results which reveals the disastrous effect that our First-past-the-post voting system is having on English local government, where seats taken routinely fail to match votes cast.**

As we can see, many of the election results are horrendous. The trouble is, because the relevant statistics are not readily available at the time the votes are counted, these injustices are not published by the media, so go unnoticed by the electorate.

The mechanics of First-past-the-post malfunction in two ways:-

1. Firstly, the winning candidate does not need 50%+ of the vote to be elected. A relative majority is sufficient, however small. For example, last May's elections for Cornwall Council resulted in the election of the councillor for the Truro Moresk & Trehaverne Division with just 19% of the vote. An incredible 81% of the votes cast in that division were ineffective. In the last general election, 85% of MPs were elected on a minority of the vote in this way and this enabled the Labour Party to take nearly two thirds of the seats and absolute power with just one third of the vote. 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. In the case of local elections, this defect is amplified because multi-member wards are in general use and so the dominant ward party will, more often than not, take all the seats in the ward. This is best illustrated by reference to the 2022 results for Kingston upon Thames where the Liberal Democrats took all the seats with a minority of the vote in 14 out of the 19 wards, resulting in the ridiculous situation such as in New Malden Village Ward, where a minority of ward voters (33%) enjoyed 3 councillors of their political persuasion, while the majority of ward voters (67%) had none at all.
2. Secondly, the First-past-the-post voting system can over-represent support for dominant political parties across a council, while suppressing representation of other parties to the point of eliminating it altogether. While a candidate polling, say, 60% of the ward vote will rightfully expect a seat, there nevertheless remains 40% of that ward's voters who lack representation of their choice. So, if a party is dominant across most of the wards of a council, it is entirely possible for that party to take most, if not all, of the seats on the council, duly assisted by the aforementioned clean

sweeps that are commonplace when First-past-the-post is used in multi-member wards. There are many councils where this has happened: an extreme example is Lewisham Council where the Labour Party took every single council seat with just 52% of the vote in 2022, leaving the council with no opposition and 48% of those who voted without any councillors of their political persuasion.

The deficiencies of First-past-the-post are magnified at local level because, while there is at least some prospect of a change of administration at Westminster, local demographics conspire to ensure that there are many councils where a party can rule for decades without any meaningful opposition. 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 any say.

**Simply put, First-past-the-post is past it because seats won by a party under this system do not accurately reflect the level of support for that party. Additionally, First-past-the-post produces phenomenally high levels of ineffective votes cast and outcomes are neither consistent nor certain.**

Continued use of this museum piece makes about as much sense as using Stephenson’s Rocket to haul trains on HS2.

The problem is, English local governance is currently a hotchpotch of different types of administrations - Counties, Mets, Districts and Unitaries - , some electing all their councillors in every fourth year, while others have partial elections spread over a four year period. Come May every year, some voters have elections, while others in neighbouring councils and wards do not, creating confusion, indifference and a lack of focus on what should be a national event everybody feels involved in. The practice of holding local elections every year is also expensive.

The voting public seem to realise that all is not well with our democracy. Last July, a YouGov poll revealed that 74% of voters believe that our political system is wholly or partially broken. How to resolve it all?

Voting reform for our local elections would go a long way to repairing the fabric of our democracy and to restoring interest and participation in local governance. The aim is to achieve proportional representation, that is to say, if a party polls 4 out of 10 votes, the voting system will award that party 4 out of 10 seats. 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. 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.

Please give this issue as much coverage as you can.

Yours faithfully

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*\*The Supervote Project is a small campaign which, in the company of others, seeks to reform the voting system in the UK. While colleagues in the reform movement tend to concentrate on voting reform for elections to the House of Commons, the Supervote Project focuses on local 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.*

*\*\*The Single Transferable Vote works best in 4-6 multi member wards but the system can still operate, albeit at a reduced level of efficiency, in three, two or even single member situations. This would enable the UK Government to legislate for the holding of all local elections for all seats in every English council in one hit every four years starting, say, on May 4th 2028, using STV with the existing boundaries pro tem, allowing the Local Government Boundary Commission to introduce 4-6 member wards across all English councils over time during their routine boundary reviews.*