

5 May 2005

Worst.  
Election.  
Ever.



Electoral Reform Society

## INTRODUCTION

The 5 May 2005 election was the worst election in the history of democracy in Britain.

We believe this assertion to be justified by the evidence that follows. We examine in turn

- The national outcome. What level of support does the government that emerged from the election have from the people?
- Local representation. Do MPs offer a fair reflection of the views of their local electorates, as expressed through the ballot box?
- Did shifts in local opinion cause seats to change hands?
- Participation. How many people went out to vote? What effect did the safety or marginality of the constituency have on participation?
- Local representation. No area is monolithic in its voting behaviour. Is this diversity at national, regional and county level reflected in parliamentary representation?
- Did the electoral system help or hinder progress in Northern Ireland?
- How much progress has been made in the representation of women and ethnic minorities?

The conclusions are an indictment of the First Past the Post system used to elect the House of Commons.

This is a preliminary report on which comments are welcomed. We envisage publishing a longer report in the coming weeks covering other issues of interest such as:

- Analysis of the bias in the electoral system.
- Implications of the parliamentary boundary review.
- The role of the media in the 2005 election campaign.
- Election security and integrity in the light of concerns over postal voting.
- Modelling the 2005 election result under different electoral systems.
- The prospects for constitutional reform in the new parliament.

LSB/ ERS 10 May 2005.

## 1. THE NATIONAL RESULT

### 1.1. Government by a small minority – the worst election ever

Labour won an overall majority of 66 seats, or 55.1 per cent of seats, with 35.2 per cent of the vote.

No majority government in British history has ever rested on a flimsier base of public support. The table below gives the votes and seats for each of the majority governments in the last century which had less than 45 per cent of the vote at the outset.

		% votes (UK)	% seats
1964	Labour	44.1	50.3
1979	Conservative	43.9	53.4
1997	Labour	43.2	63.4
1983	Conservative	42.4	61.1
1987	Conservative	42.3	57.8
1992	Conservative	41.9	51.6
2001	Labour	40.7	62.5
1974 October	Labour	39.2	50.2
1922	Conservative	38.2	56.1
<b>2005</b>	<b>Labour</b>	<b>35.2</b>	<b>55.1</b>

The only remotely comparable election is 1922, although Labour in 2005 still polled 3 percentage points worse than the Conservatives did in 1922.<sup>1</sup>

It is notable that no election since 1970 has produced a government with 45 per cent of the vote, and that the trend in the most recent elections has been to produce significant majorities with ever lower shares of the popular vote. A Commons majority has enormous power, and this power has now been awarded on the basis of only 35.2 per cent of the vote. The case for electoral reform has become stronger with each successive election.

Labour's share of the vote in 2005 can also be compared unfavourably to the support enjoyed in past elections by losing parties. Attlee's share of the vote in 1955 when Eden's Conservatives won a majority of 58, comparable to Blair's majority in 2005, was an amazing 46.4 per cent. Blair's winning 35.2 per cent is scarcely higher than Neil Kinnock's share of the vote in 1992 (34.4 per cent) and less than Jim Callaghan scored in 1979 in his unsuccessful bid for a third Labour term (36.9 per cent).

The government's level of support among voters is therefore small. But taking the electorate as a whole, the proportion of eligible people who cast a vote to return the government is extremely small – only 21.6 per cent, or 9.6 million out of an electorate of 44.4 million. In terms of votes actually cast for Labour, this is the lowest total of any post-1945 election with the single exception of 1983.

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<sup>1</sup> However, the 1922 figures understate Conservative support because they ran in only 483 out of 615 constituencies. 42 Conservatives were unopposed, and where there was an opposed candidate the average Tory vote per candidate was 48.6 per cent. In constituencies where the Tories stood no candidate of their own their votes often went to "National Liberal" candidates.

The table shows the cases in the last century when a majority government has been returned with the votes of less than a third of the electorate. Again, the 1922 election (although note that this might be a misleading comparison) and the string of recent elections since October 1974 have seen record low shares of the electorate giving support to a government. Even among this company, 2005 stands out as producing a government with exceptionally few votes.

		% of electorate
1979	Conservative	33.3
1992	Conservative	32.6
1987	Conservative	31.8
1997	Labour	30.9
1983	Conservative	30.8
1974 October	Labour	28.6
1922	Conservative	26.0
2001	Labour	24.2
<b>2005</b>	<b>Labour</b>	<b>21.6</b>

The present electoral system may allow the government to carry on regardless for a 4-5 year term, despite its low poll in 2001 and the withdrawal of enthusiasm signified by the drop in the Labour Party share of the vote of 5.5 percentage points from 2001 to 2005.

## 1.2. A very low turnout

Turnout, at 61.3 per cent, recovered a little from the depths it had reached in 2001. But there is small consolation in this being the second worst since 1918. Turnout should have increased even more under the circumstances. The polls and the dynamic of the campaign suggested more of a contest than 2001, when opinion surveys found that a foregone conclusion turned many electors away from voting. There was a large increase in postal voting, which in theory should have helped turnout. The political temperature, in the new circumstances after the 2003 Iraq war, seemed higher than in sleepy June 2001, several months before the attack on the World Trade Center. And yet there was only an improvement of 2 percentage points.

In historical terms, 2005 is clearly in the relegation zone of the turnout league table of elections in the last century. The table below gives the turnout in all the elections in the last century in which turnout has fallen below 75 per cent. 1918 was affected by the war (the armistice came only a month before the poll) and disorganisation and the official turnout probably underestimates participation.

	% turnout
1974 October	72.8
1945	72.7
1983	72.7
1970	72.0
1997	71.5
1922	71.3
1935	71.2
1923	70.8
<b>2005</b>	<b>61.3</b>
2001	59.4
1918	58.9

Even in relatively recent elections turnout has been much higher – 77.7 per cent in 1992 for instance. 2005's turnout, like 2001, was about 60 per cent, in contrast to previous elections such as 1970 when a turnout of just over 70 per cent was regarded as poor. The problem of public disengagement from politics has clearly not been solved.

### 1.3. Unfair representation of parties

Labour's control of the 2005 parliament is somewhat less lopsided than its dominance in the parliaments elected in 1997 and 2001. But parliament is still a grossly distorted version of what Britain's voters chose in 2005.

	Votes (UK)	Seats	Votes per MP	Votes % (UK)	Seats %
Labour	9.57m	356	26,877	35.2	55.1
Conservative	8.77m	197*	44,521*	32.3	30.5*
Liberal Democrat	5.98m	62	96,378	22.0	9.6
UKIP	0.61m	0	N/A	2.1	0
SNP	0.41m	6	68,711	1.4	0.9
Green	0.28m	0	N/A	1.0	0
DUP	0.24m	9	26,872	0.8	1.4
BNP	0.19m	0	N/A	0.7	0
Plaid Cymru	0.17m	3	58,279	0.6	0.5
Sinn Fein	0.17m	5	34,906	0.6	0.8
UUP	0.13m	1	127,414	0.4	0.2
SDLP	0.13m	3	41,709	0.4	0.5
Respect/ SSP	0.11m	1	111,389	0.4	0.2
Veritas	0.04m	0	N/A	0.1	0

\*South Staffordshire result deferred: assuming a Conservative win in this seat the final number of Conservative seats will be 198, votes per MP about 44,400 and the share of seats 30.7%. In addition Independent candidates were elected in Blaenau Gwent and Wyre Forest.

Labour (and, in Northern Ireland, the Democratic Unionists) were the most successful at translating votes into seats – the First Past the Post (FPTP) electoral system gave a large 'winner's bonus' to the largest single party. Once again, the principal victims of the system were smaller parties with evenly spread support, namely the Liberal Democrats, UKIP and Ulster Unionists.

The Conservatives were slightly under-represented, in that if they had won seats exactly in proportion to their vote they would have won 208. The Liberal Democrats had many fewer seats than their share of the vote among the electorate justified – an exactly proportional distribution would have given them 142. Labour were massively over-represented: a proportional allocation would have given them 227 seats rather than 356.

Small parties with relatively evenly spread support are penalised under FPTP. UKIP was clearly the fourth party in terms of votes, but it failed to win or even come close in a single seat. Seven parties with fewer votes than UKIP, and two Independents, elected members of parliament. The Green Party stood many fewer candidates, conscious that the system was unfair to them, and many voters were deprived of the chance of choosing them. Small parties with concentrated support, like the SNP and Plaid Cymru, did better. The failure to represent small but significant points of view

contrasts the Westminster Parliament with the more proportional bodies in Northern Ireland and Scotland where minorities have a voice.

BNP support, as in the European election, was probably too small to elect a candidate under all but the most proportional list forms of PR, with very large regional seats, had another system been used in the general election. In no single area would they have gained enough votes to elect a candidate under the Single Transferable Vote, nor under the Jenkins Report's system of AV+, in 2005.

The Conservatives improved their position somewhat compared to 2001, when there were 50,347 votes per Conservative MP (and 26,000 per Labour MP). This was because their share of the vote did not increase much, while they won more seats thanks to a more favourable distribution of the vote and Labour votes going to the Liberal Democrats. The Lib Dems were a little less well rewarded for their vote than in 2001, when they had 92,583 votes per MP – their vote rose across the country but did not tip over many extra marginal seats.

#### 1.4 Wasted votes

FPTP means that a huge number of votes end up being wasted, in that they do not affect who is elected to Parliament either because they are cast for losing candidates or serve simply to swell the majority of the winning candidate. A majority of the votes in 2005 went to losing candidates, while a narrow majority went to the winners in 2001. The 2005 election saw a slight increase in wasted votes compared to 2001.

	Votes for losing candidates %	Surplus votes given to winners %	Votes required to win seats %
England	52.2	17.6	30.2
Scotland	54.2	22.2	23.6
Wales	52.2	21.6	26.2
Great Britain	52.4	18.2	29.4
<i>GB change since 01</i>	<i>+3.4</i>	<i>-3.1</i>	<i>-0.3</i>
Northern Ireland	53.6	20.8	25.6
UK	52.4	18.3	29.3

Over 70 per cent of votes were either for a losing candidate or were surplus to the winner's requirements.

This accounts for over 19 million votes.

#### 1.5 Electoral system bias

The electoral system is still heavily biased in favour of the Labour Party.

The extent of bias in the 2005 result is apparent from above, but the full scale of bias is exposed when one tries to estimate the effect of changes in the share of vote.

If the Conservatives had drawn level with Labour, with each party polling the same share of the vote (33.8 per cent), they would have gained an additional 19 seats from Labour and 3 from the Liberal Democrats, and one would flip from Labour to the Lib

Dems.<sup>2</sup> This would have meant 336 Labour seats to 220 Conservatives (assuming, for all the calculations that follow, that Staffordshire South counts as Conservative), an advantage of 116 seats despite equal numbers of votes. The Labour majority would have been 26 – not very comfortable, but more than the majority of 21 John Major achieved with a lead in share of the vote of 7.5%.

For Labour to lose their overall majority it would require a uniform 2.2% swing to the Conservatives (taking account of ‘collateral damage’ in terms of Labour losses to the Lib Dems), i.e. a Conservative lead of 1.4 per cent.

For the Conservatives to draw level with Labour in terms of seats, overcoming the deficit of 158 seats, they would need a swing of 5.2%, i.e. a lead of 7.5 per cent in share of the vote, if it took place entirely from Conservative gains from Labour. However, they would be helped by collateral effects which would reduce the required swing to only 4.6%, i.e. a vote share lead of 6.3%.

For the Conservatives to win outright with a majority of 2, with 324 seats, they would need 126 gains. If these were all to come from Labour this would require a swing of 8.3 per cent, i.e. a national lead of 13.7 per cent. Taking account of collateral Conservative gains from other parties, the target is a scarcely less daunting 7.3% swing, implying a national lead of 11.7 per cent.

The next election will of course not be fought on the same boundaries, except in Scotland. A further detailed analysis of the boundary changes is available, but in summary the changes will not amount to a substantial correction to bias – a reduction in the Labour majority from 66 to around 52. The swing required for Labour to lose their overall majority would therefore drop a little, maybe by enough to make it unlikely that Labour could poll fewer votes than the Conservatives and still have a majority. But the prospect of a Conservative majority government is pretty much as remote on the new boundaries as on the old – the swing required for them to accomplish this would be something like 7%, implying a national lead of 11 per cent.

The Conservatives may be suffering from the bias in the electoral system, but the Liberal Democrats are still more gravely disadvantaged. This can be illustrated simply by imagining a uniform change in votes across the whole country that gave the three main parties an equal share of the vote. The table illustrates this outcome.

	Vote share %	Seats	Share of seats %
Conservative	29.8	202	31.3
Labour	29.8	317	49.1
Liberal Democrat	29.8	94	14.6
Others	10.6	33	1.5

<sup>2</sup> The assumptions for this are as follows. There is a uniform national swing, composed entirely of a gain in the Conservative share of the vote of 1.45 percentage points and a corresponding Labour loss in share of the vote of 1.45 per cent, applied in every seat. Votes for other parties remain unchanged. Thus, every Labour seat with a majority of less than 2.9% over the Conservatives will go Conservative. The ‘collateral’ effect of the change is that the Conservatives end up gaining every Lib Dem seat with a majority over the Conservatives of less than 1.45%, and that Labour will lose every seat with a majority over the Lib Dems of less than 1.45%.

## 2: THE CONSTITUENCIES

### 2.1 Minority mandates – the worst election ever

Only 34% of MPs were elected with over half the vote in their own constituencies, the lowest proportion in British history.

	Majority winners	Minority winners	% with minority mandate
Conservative	55	142	72.1
Labour	140	216	60.7
Lib Dem	16	46	74.2
Others	8	22	73.3
Total	219	426	66.0

(counts Speaker as Labour and omits Staffordshire South)

This represents a marked decline since 2001, when half of MPs could claim support from a majority of their local voters. It is actually the lowest proportion of MPs with majority support ever, exceeding the previous record set in February 1974 (408 MPs out of 635, or 64.3%).

	Majority winners	Minority winners	% with minority mandate
England	180	338	65.3
Scotland	20	39	66.1
Wales	14	26	65.0
Northern Ireland	5	13	72.2

(omits Staffordshire South)

At 55, the number of MPs elected with less than 40% of the vote was also substantially up on 2001 (21 MPs). 30 were in England, 13 in Scotland, 7 in Wales and 5 in Northern Ireland; 8 were Conservative, 29 Labour and 7 Lib Dem.

Nine MPs were elected with less than 35% of the vote in their constituency.

Name	Constituency	Party	% of vote for MP
Gordon Banks	Ochil & South Perthshire	Labour	31.4
Alasdair McDonnell	Belfast South	SDLP	32.3
Nigel Griffiths	Edinburgh South	Labour	33.2
Claire Ward	Watford	Labour	33.6
Michael Weir	Angus	SNP	33.7
Pete Wishart	Perth & North Perthshire	SNP	33.7
Mark Lazarowicz	Edinburgh North & Leith	Labour	34.2
Albert Owen	Ynys Mon	Labour	34.6
Julia Goldsworthy	Falmouth & Camborne	Lib Dem	34.9

Because of the generally low turnout, as in 2001 no MPs polled a majority of the electorate in their own constituency or even came particularly close. Only three polled more than 4 voters out of every 10 registered.

Name	Constituency	Party	% of electorate for MP
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Gerry Adams	Belfast West	Sinn Fein	46.2
Chris Bryant	Rhondda	Labour	41.5
Bill Wiggin	Leominster	Conservative	40.3

At the other end of the scale, three MPs had less than 20 per cent of the electorate.

Name	Constituency	Party	% of electorate for MP
George Galloway	Bethnal Green & Bow	Respect	18.4
Roger Godsiff	Birmingham Sparkbrook & SH	Labour	18.7
Ann McKeichin	Glasgow North	Labour	19.9

Galloway was one of few MPs elected in 2001 to have enjoyed the positive support of fewer than one in five of his electorate (19.5% in Glasgow Kelvin) and he has done it again in 2005.

## 2.2 Marginality and turnout

People are more inclined to vote where their vote makes a difference. Turnout in 2005 was strongly influenced by the degree to which there was a genuine contest in the seat. This table compares the turnout in the 10 seats in England and Wales with the smallest percentage majorities in 2001 and the 10 with the largest percentage majorities in 2001.<sup>3</sup>

Turnout (%)	2001 turnout	2005 turnout	Change
Most marginal seats	66.0	68.8	+2.8
Safest seats	50.0	51.4	+1.4

Not only was there an enormous gap between turnout in the safe and marginal seats in 2001, but it actually became wider in 2005. Turnout in the 10 most marginal seats was 17.4 percentage points higher than in the 10 safest seats. Further, nearly a third of the entire rise among the 10 safest seats was because one of them, Blaenau Gwent, suddenly became competitive with the decision of the sitting Assembly Member Peter Law to challenge the new Labour candidate.

In some inner city seats turnout remained very low, although it generally lifted a little after the nadir of 2001. The constituency with the lowest turnout was once again Liverpool Riverside (41.5%, compared to only 34.1% in 2001), followed by Manchester Central (42.0%, up from 39.1% in 2001). In 32 constituencies, turnout in 2005 fell below 50 per cent, compared to 67 in the 2001 election – but none at all in 1997.

<sup>3</sup> Marginals: Cheadle, Dorset South, Taunton, Orpington, Braintree, Weston-super-Mare, Monmouth, Lancaster & Wyre, Norfolk North and Dorset Mid & Poole North. Safe seats: Bootle, Sheffield Brightside, Easington, Swansea East, Liverpool Walton, Blaenau Gwent, Brent South, Houghton & Washington East, Knowsley South and Birmingham Ladywood. Scottish seats were excluded because of the boundary changes, which made the degree of marginality uncertain in advance of the election.

### 2.3 Split votes and tactical votes

FPTP can make constituency contests a guessing game. During the 2005 election campaign various journalists and websites attempted to advise on how voters might accomplish what they considered a desirable overall result. The results were mixed. For some voters, the choice threw up a dilemma of whether to vote for the party they really preferred, or to cast a vote for the party with the best chance of keeping out the candidate they most disliked.

In the now highly marginal Harlow constituency, the result was:

	Vote share 2001 (%)	Vote share 2005 (%)	Change in vote share 2001-05
Labour	47.8	41.4	-6.4
Conservative	34.8	41.2	+6.4
Lib Dem	13.4	12.6	-0.8
UKIP	3.0	2.5	-0.5
Veritas	-	2.4	+2.4
Socialist Alliance	1.0	-	-1.0

Labour held Harlow, albeit by only 97 votes, even though there was a sharp swing to the Conservatives in particular and the right in general. The right wing vote increased from 37.8% in 2001 to 46.1% in 2005, while the left wing vote fell from 48.8% (or 62.2% including the Lib Dems) in 2001 to 41.4% (54.0% including Lib Dems) in 2005. A large part of the reason was the change in the minor parties standing – if a left-wing minor candidate had stood in 2005, or if one fewer right wing candidate had stood, it is likely that the Conservatives would have won.

But the Harlow situation was relatively unusual. More common was the situation in seats such as in Shrewsbury and Atcham where the Conservatives gained scarcely any more of the vote than they did in 2001 but still elected an MP because the Labour vote fragmented.

	Vote share 2001 (%)	Vote share 2005 (%)	Change in vote share 2001-05
Labour	44.6	34.1	-10.5
Conservative	37.4	37.7	+0.3
Lib Dem	12.4	22.8	+10.4
UKIP	3.2	2.7	-0.5
Green	1.9	2.3	+0.4
Others	0.5	0.4	-0.1

There was a small movement to Conservative, perhaps from UKIP, but the Conservative was elected thanks to a large swing from Labour to Lib Dem. Another extreme case was the result that unseated Chris Leslie in Shipley:

	Vote share 2001 (%)	Vote share 2005 (%)	Change in vote share 2001-05
Labour	44.0	38.2	-5.8
Conservative	40.9	39.0	-1.9
Lib Dem	10.9	14.7	+3.8
BNP	-	4.0	+4.0
Green	3.0	3.5	+0.5
UKIP	1.3	-	-1.3
Anti Iraq war	-	0.4	+0.4

The Conservatives polled rather under what they managed in 2001, but still gained the seat by default.

The fact that Shrewsbury & Atcham and Shipley are written up as Conservative gains (despite no real increase in Conservative support) while Harlow is a Labour hold despite the Conservatives achieving a real swing in their favour is a telling indication of how little FPTP results can have to do with movements of opinion.

The pattern of 1997 and 2001 was that of tactical votes coalescing about the candidate most able to defeat the Conservatives. The partial unwinding of this effect has led to an increase in minority winners and smaller majorities. Seats such as Shrewsbury (and others like St Albans) end up changing hands less because of changes in opinion than because of the shifting pattern of tactical voting.

### 3. THE NATIONS OF THE UNITED KINGDOM

#### 3.1 England

	Share of vote %	Number of seats	Votes per MP	Share of seats %
Conservative	35.8	193*	41,987	36.6*
Labour	35.5	286	28,151	54.1
Lib Dem	22.9	47	110,449	8.9
UKIP	2.6	0	N/A	0
Others		2		

\* Not including Staffordshire South. Conservative share of seats 36.7% if they win in Staffordshire South.

Labour have a majority of 43 (assuming that there is not a spectacular upset in Staffordshire) among the English seats, and 92 seats more than the Conservatives, despite polling slightly over 50,000 fewer votes than the Conservatives.

The reason for Labour's artificial majority is not so much that the Conservatives are under-represented; more that Labour have vastly more seats than their proportional entitlement while the Lib Dems are under-represented.

The result in England does pose some problems for the future. The Conservatives have something of a claim to 'Speak for England', but this must be heavily qualified. That claim rests on only 35.8% of those voting, and unless a Conservative making that claim concedes the case for electoral reform it is nothing more than a debating point.

Nevertheless, the reduced English majority for Labour (43 rather than the 117 English majority the party enjoyed in 2001) could mean more occasions when Scottish and Welsh Labour MPs are called upon to vote down English rebels on English legislation.

#### 3.2 Northern Ireland: Helping the extremes to victory

The main story of the election in Northern Ireland was the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) landslide against the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP). The UUP was reduced to a single seat, while the DUP ended up with nine, half Northern Ireland's Westminster MPs.

The electoral system magnified the victory of the DUP and the fall of the UUP. It also, to a much lesser extent, helped Sinn Fein in its contest against the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP).

	Number of seats	Percentage of seats	Change since 2001 (% point)	Percentage of votes	Change since 2001 (% point)
DUP	9	50.0	+22.2	33.7	+11.2
UUP	1	5.6	-27.8	17.8	-9.0
Alliance	0	0.0	0	3.9	+0.3
SDLP	3	16.7	0	17.5	-3.5
Sinn Fein	5	27.8	+5.6	24.3	+2.6

The DUP's victory in half the Northern Ireland seats rests on only a little over a third of the votes. While the result ended up roughly proportional on the nationalist side, it gravely distorted the voice with which the unionist electorate of Northern Ireland spoke. For every 2 DUP voters, there was one UUP voter, but this 2:1 ratio of votes became a 9:1 ratio of seats. First Past the Post, not for the first time, has flattened the middle ground of Northern Ireland politics – a distorted election result in February 1974 killed off the Sunningdale agreement. We shall see whether the consequences of this election are as far-reaching.

The result in individual seats was sometimes peculiar. The SDLP's victory in Belfast South was caused by a split in the Unionist vote between the UUP and DUP (who stood for the first time here in a recent Westminster election); a nationalist now represents a majority unionist constituency. This is the reverse of what happened in West Tyrone in the 1997 parliament, when a UUP MP represented a constituency with a heavy nationalist majority split between SDLP and Sinn Fein. There was some evidence in this election of tactical voting among unionists to support threatened SDLP candidates against Sinn Fein in Foyle and South Down.

**The Northern Ireland local council elections** were held on the same day as the Westminster election but under a different electoral system. Local authority elections, and the other non-Westminster elections in Northern Ireland, use the Single Transferable Vote (STV) system. Although there are strong similarities in share of the vote, the results in terms of seats look very different from the Westminster result.

	Number of Seats	Percentage of Seats	Percentage of votes	Change since 2001
DUP	182	31.3	29.6	+8.2
UUP	115	19.8	18.0	-5.2
Alliance	30	5.2	5.0	-0.2
SDLP	101	17.4	17.4	-1.9
Sinn Fein	126	21.6	23.2	+2.7
Other	8	1.4	2.9	-1.7

While the trend towards polarisation is still present, it is clearly less pronounced under Single Transferable Vote. The STV results do not magnify the DUP victory over the UUP, the 3:2 share of seats reflecting the share of the votes between the two unionist parties much more accurately.

Sinn Fein was the only party to win a smaller share of seats than votes, probably due to hostility from supporters of other parties, making them less likely to transfer their vote to Sinn Fein.

What is also clear is that the public used their vote differently in the Single Transferable Vote election. Voters were more inclined to support Alliance and other smaller parties, receiving between them 7.9% of first preference votes and winning 6.6% of seats, knowing that their votes would not be wasted. Indeed, turnout in the local election was 1% higher than the Westminster poll, despite being held on the same day and for what is perceived as a less important public office.

### 3.3 Scotland

	Share of vote %	Number of seats	Votes per MP	Share of seats %
Labour	39.5	42*	21,962	71.2*
Lib Dem	22.6	11	48,007	18.6
SNP	17.7	6	68,711	10.2
Conservative	15.8	1	369,388	1.7
SSP	1.9	0	N/A	0

\*Including Speaker.

The Conservatives suffered even worse treatment by the electoral system in Scotland than they did in England. They polled nearly a sixth of the vote but had only one MP out of 59 to show for their pains. With a very similar share of the vote in the 2003 Scottish Parliament elections, Scottish Conservatives gained an appropriate amount of representation (18 seats out of 129). This was because of the proportional system employed for elections to the Parliament.

Labour's domination of Scottish representation at Westminster relies on a little under 40 per cent of the vote.

### 3.4 Wales

	Share of vote %	Number of seats	Votes per MP	Share of seats %
Labour	42.7	29	20,511	72.5
Conservative	21.4	3	99,276	7.5
Lib Dem	18.4	4	64,062	10.0
Plaid Cymru	12.6	3	58,279	7.5
Others		1		

Like Scotland, Wales's representation in Westminster is dominated by the Labour Party, to a much greater extent than merited by the party's lead in share of the vote. The Conservatives were once again severely under-represented, although they managed to gain 3 seats in contrast to being wiped out in 1997 and 2001. Two particularly narrow gains (in Clwyd West and Preseli Pembrokeshire, by majorities of 133 and 607 respectively) were important in getting the meagre level of representation they won in 2005. It was not that Conservative MPs were wiped out in Wales for eight years, it was just that their voters (over a quarter of a million of them in 2001) were not represented by anyone of their choice.

#### 4. UNFAIR LOCAL REPRESENTATION

There are many examples of areas within Britain where the outcome in terms of seats bears little relation to the votes that were cast.

In **East Sussex** (including Brighton and Hove) the Labour Party astonishingly managed to win 4 out of the 8 seats in the county despite being third with just over a quarter of the vote (25.4%). The Conservatives were well ahead in votes, with 39.8%, but won only three seats, while the Lib Dems had one seat for 26.2% of the vote.

In **Cumbria**, the result was extremely unrepresentative. The Conservatives were the most popular party in the county, with 38.2 per cent of the vote, but they have only one MP out of six to show for it. Labour came second, with 34.6%, and won four seats, a majority of the county's representation. The Lib Dems had 23.1% and one seat.

At least in these areas all parties have at least one local voice in parliament. In some places FPTP can exclude parties with substantial but evenly spread local support from getting a voice at all, and award monopolies to parties in places where there are significant opposing votes. This makes it difficult for opposing parties to secure enough local media coverage and maintain adequate organisation to maintain a challenge; the perception that a minority party does not matter in the area is self-reinforcing.

Each main party enjoyed areas where it had a monopoly in seats but far from a monopoly in votes. In **Cornwall**, the Liberal Democrats won all five parliamentary seats with 44.4 per cent of the vote. The Conservatives with 31.8% and Labour with 15.9% won nothing. In **Surrey** the Conservatives picked up 11 out of 11 with 50.5%; the Lib Dems with 28.4% and Labour with 16.7% had nothing. In **Tyne and Wear** Labour won 13 out of 13 with 55.8%, compared to nothing for the Lib Dems and Conservatives on 23.2% and 17.4% respectively.

There are examples of large minorities in several areas with no representation for their parties.

		Number of votes	% of votes	Number of seats
Cambridgeshire	Labour	74,521	24.7	0
Surrey	Labour	87,469	16.7	0
Cornwall	Conservative	82,543	31.8	0
Cleveland	Conservative	53,136	23.1	0
Merseyside	Conservative	108,038	19.4	0
South Yorkshire	Conservative	93,223	18.1	0
Surrey	Lib Dem	148,620	28.4	0
Tyne and Wear	Lib Dem	103,002	23.2	0
Kent	Lib Dem	132,319	17.3	0
Lancashire	Lib Dem	110,620	17.0	0

There are other areas in which parties have only won token numbers of seats despite polling large numbers of votes. The Conservatives once again won extremely few seats in the metropolitan counties outside London, a total of 5 out of 124 of these

urban seats, unchanged since 2001 and one fewer than in 1997. These 5 MPs were all that the 1.1 million Conservative voters in the metropolitan counties managed to elect. If the number of MPs reflected the proportion of votes cast, there would have been 30 Conservatives representing these regions.

	Conservative votes	Conservative votes %	Conservative seats	Con seats if proportionate
Greater Manchester	245,820	23.8	1	7
Merseyside	108,038	19.4	0	3
South Yorkshire	93,223	18.1	0	3
Tyne and Wear	77,484	17.4	0	2
West Midlands	320,802	29.5	3	9
West Yorkshire	254,779	27.8	1	6
Total Metro	1,100,146	24.2	5	30

FPTP has not only weakened the voice of the Conservatives in the big cities, it has also weakened the voice of the big cities within the Conservative Party. Its task in reconnecting with these areas is made even more difficult.

Labour have not been penalised to the same extent in any broad category of seat such as the Conservative under-representation in the metropolitan areas. Even in counties where Labour's share of the vote is low there are often urban seats capable of voting Labour. However, Labour's rural support is under-represented in the House of Commons despite Labour's victories in seats such as Stroud and Ynys Mon. In the Eastern region all the Labour seats are predominantly urban, despite well over 100,000 people voting Labour in the rural East Anglian seats.

FPTP makes it more difficult for both main parties to adopt a truly national viewpoint, or even represent all the people who support them.

There was considerable discussion during the campaign of the fact that both main parties were focusing all their campaigning efforts on 800,000 voters in the key marginal constituencies who might swing the election. The number is likely to be even smaller at the next election, because the overall result was closer, there are a larger number of highly marginal seats, and campaign techniques will no doubt have become even more sophisticated. The agenda of these swing voters in marginal seats has a disproportionate impact on election campaigns and on British politics in general, and has encouraged a simplistic and sloganising emphasis on issues such as crime, immigration and interest rates from the parties.

## 5. GENDER AND ETHNIC REPRESENTATION

### 5.1 Women: party representation

The overall number of women in the Commons will rise from 119 (out of 659 seats, 18.0%) to 128 (out of a reduced 646 seats), though it remains a shade under 20% and one of the worst records in Europe. With three quarters of all female MPs representing the Labour party, even the current poor rate of women's representation in the Commons is potentially dependent only on Labour's majority. Should another party come to dominate at a future election, unless they radically improve the number of women in their ranks, we could witness a decline in the representation of women.

Of the 119 women in the previous parliament, 83 were successful in seeking re-election, 10 lost their seats and 15 retired. 36 of the female MPs elected on 5<sup>th</sup> May are therefore new MPs. At the next general election, twenty women will be defending majorities of less than 2,000.

The Liberal Democrats and Labour each increased their number of women by four, while the Conservatives added three female MPs to their ranks. However, the impact of these gains on the composition of the party groups is not uniform.

Party	Number of women MPs	Increase/Decrease	Proportion of parliamentary party %
Labour	98	+4	27.5
Conservative	17	+3	8.6
Liberal Democrat	10	+4	16.1
Other	3	-	

While the total number of **Labour** MPs fell from 412 to 355, the number of women rose from 94 to 98. At 27.5%, Labour remains far ahead of the other parties. Labour again used all-women shortlists to select women in many seats where both male and female incumbents were retiring. All of the new women elected in England were selected by all-women shortlists. The policy put the party much further ahead of the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives, who are ideologically opposed, in addressing the gender balance on the green benches.

The **Liberal Democrats** increased their female representation by 5%, proportionally a greater increase than Labour, though from a lower starting point. Despite not using quotas to increase the number of women selected, the Fawcett Society calculated that 32% of candidates in key target seats were women. One sitting female MP lost her seat, Sue Doughty losing out to Conservative Anne Milton in Guildford. The five seats in which a women candidate won the seat for the Lib Dems saw large swings and gains in Falmouth and Camborne and Solihull were particularly unexpected. The number of Liberal Democrat women in the Commons has doubled since 2001, though it was by no means certain that the party would see a rise in the number of women elected in 2005. To ensure the positive trend continues, the party needs to ensure it selects more women in winnable seats.

When Justine Greening took the Putney seat early in the evening, it seemed that victory had a female face for the **Conservatives**. Yet despite increasing their number of women MPs by three, the proportion of women in their Commons team was virtually unchanged. The three women who gained seats for the Conservatives all

have slim majorities, including a wafer thin 347 for Anne Milton in Guildford. Like the Liberal Democrats, the Conservatives can not afford to leave it to chance to increase their proportion of women in parliament.

## **5.2 Women: regional variations**

With the boundary changes in Scotland, both the number and the proportion of women returned fell. In the last parliament, 12 out of 72 constituencies (16.7%) were represented by a woman MP. Only 9 of the 59 new Scottish constituencies returned a woman MP in the new Commons, a rate of 15.3%. The proportion was already behind England and now slips behind Northern Ireland and Wales. With fewer seats to go around, women candidates perhaps suffered in tighter competition for selections.

The number of women returned by Scottish voters to Westminster is in stark contrast to the 40 per cent representation of women in the Scottish Parliament, achieved through a combination of proactive measures by the parties and a more proportional electoral system. The SNP did not return any women in their six seats and lost Annabelle Ewing, MP for Perth in the previous parliament but displaced to a less winnable seat (Ochil and South Perthshire) in the boundary changes.

Wales, on the other, more than doubled the number of women, from 3 in the last Parliament to 7 out of 40 seats. However, this still only represents 17.5% of Welsh MPs, and again is far behind the 50% rate in the Welsh Assembly.

All-women shortlists became a heated and divisive issue in the Welsh constituency of Blaenau Gwent. Welsh Assembly Member for the constituency Peter Law resigned from the party over its imposition of an all women shortlist on the local Labour party, blocking his candidacy. He took on the official candidate, Maggie Jones and won with 58 per cent of the vote. While his victory can be read as a blow to the principle of positive discrimination, it perhaps has as much to do with the wider issue of central party control over local constituency associations. We can expect the debate about quotas in Wales to rumble on.

Northern Ireland again returned three women, with the Ulster Unionist Sylvia Hermon being the only candidate from that party to hold her seat. While this is a step forward from Northern Ireland's pre-2001 record of not returning a single woman for the province in 30 years, it is difficult to see how the number of women in Westminster could be increased. In no other constituency was a woman close to being elected. While the proportion of women returned to the Northern Ireland Assembly (elected under PR – Single Transferable Vote) is only slightly higher, 13 of the 18 constituencies are represented by at least one female MLA.

## **5.3 Ethnic minority representation**

The 2005 election saw a small increase in the number of Black and Minority Ethnic MPs from 13 to 15. If the make up of MPs was to reflect the population in the country (7.9% BME), there should be 51 MPs from minority ethnic backgrounds, demonstrating that the current level of representation is still seriously inequitable.

Ten sitting candidates successfully defended their seats, one retired and was replaced by another black MP and two sitting MPs were unsuccessful in seeking re-election.

Party	Number of BME MPs	Increase/Decrease	Proportion of party
Labour	13	+1	3.7%
Conservatives	2	+2	1%
Liberal Democrats	0	-1	0%
Other	0		

**The Conservatives** elected their first black MP (Adam Afriyie in Windsor) and an Asian MP (Shailesh Vara in Cambridgeshire North West). Both were selected as candidates in safe seats where the incumbent was retiring, without using positive discrimination. **The Liberal Democrats** have lost their only ethnic minority MP. Parmijt Singh Gill, who won the Leicester South by-election in 2004, saw the seat pass back to the Labour Party after just ten months in parliament. **The Labour Party** has increased its total number of ethnic minority MPs by one to 13. Three new candidates were elected: Sadiq Khan, Shahid Malik and Dawn Butler, who was replaced retiring MP Paul Boateng. Oona King was unsuccessful in her bid to hold her Bethnal Green and Bow seat.

Labour still has the only two black women MPs – Diane Abbot and Dawn Butler. The party will also be justifiably disappointed at the failure of Yasmin Qureshi to re-take Brent East, lost to the Liberal Democrats in a 2003 by-election. Had she been returned, she would have been Britain’s first Muslim woman MP. The policy of all-women shortlists has come under fire from some ethnic minority activists who argue that it does not help ethnic minority MPs to get elected, although there is no reason in principle why ethnic minority women as well as white women should not be favoured by the policy.

One third of ethnic minority MPs represent London constituencies. Most others are in large towns and cities, all with minority ethnic populations above the UK average. The two Conservative ethnic minority MPs, and Labour’s Parmjit Dhandra (Gloucester) and Ashok Kumar (Middlesbrough South and Cleveland East) are exceptions. Scotland has only one Asian MP while Wales has none.

## CONCLUSION

The 2005 election result was demonstrably unfair.

- It awarded the immense powers of a government with a majority in the House of Commons to a party which enjoyed the support of scarcely one in three of those voting and a little over one in five of the total electorate. These figures are the worst ever.
- It resulted in only one in three MPs having majority support among their local voters, and no MP commanding a majority of the local electorate. This is the lowest proportion of majority mandates ever.
- The British people remain disengaged from electoral politics, as demonstrated by the very low turnout – the second or third worst in history.
- Constituencies changed hands for reasons more to do with tactical voting and split votes than actual changes in opinion.
- Despite the Conservatives gaining the most votes in England, Labour still have a majority of MPs from England.
- The decision of the voters of Northern Ireland, particularly unionist voters, was misrepresented.
- Voters in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland use different systems for other elections, which allow fairer representation to all significant parties, and are short-changed in Westminster elections.
- In several regions of England the results were extremely unrepresentative. The worst case is probably the 1.1 million Conservative voters in the metropolitan counties outside London, who elected only 5 MPs.
- First Past the Post remains an obstacle to fairer representation of women and ethnic minorities.

Some may imagine that quick fixes like extending postal voting, or changing parliamentary boundaries, will solve these problems but they will not.

**We consider the 2005 election to have conclusively demonstrated that FPTP is a discredited system.**

**We call upon the government's review of electoral systems to consider the implications of the 2005 election result, and the scandalous way in which FPTP has misrepresented the votes people cast.**

**We believe that 2005 should be the last unjust election in British history.**