

**Local elections  
4 May 2006**

# A failed system which must go

## Wrong winners

In the **London Borough of Kingston**, the Conservatives were the party with the highest share of the vote – 40.8% to the Liberal Democrats 38.5%. But the Liberal Democrats retained control of the council, winning 25 of the 48 seats to the Conservatives' 21.

In **Camden**, Labour won more votes than the Liberal Democrats, but the Liberal Democrats won four more seats than Labour.

In **Birmingham**, Labour had the largest share of the vote, but the Conservatives had the largest share of the seats.

## Electoral deserts

There are whole councils where a party wins many votes but not a single seat such as Conservatives in Cambridge, Lib Dems in Croydon and Labour in Richmond.

## Volatility in representation

With First-Past-the-Post, a small change in a party's share of the votes can result in an exaggerated power shift in the council. In Richmond, for example, a 5% swing from Conservative to Liberal Democrat changed a 2:1 Conservative majority into a 2:1 Liberal Democrat majority.

True to form, our First-Past-the-Post, winner-takes-all voting system has cheated voters of proper council representation in many parts of the UK. The case for abandoning the current voting system and replacing it with a fair votes system is now overwhelming.

First-Past-the-Post has again produced bizarre election results and councils that do not adequately represent the views of their electorates. In this preliminary report on the 2006 local elections, we give just some examples of the way in which First-Past-the-Post distorts representation.

## A multi-party democracy requires a different voting system

Thursday's election results demonstrated that the days of two-party politics are long gone. Labour was pushed into third place behind the Liberal Democrats in share of the vote, while around the country there were serious challenges - some of them successful - by candidates of smaller parties of both the left and far right.

Our winner-takes-all voting system can produce some strange results even when only two parties are involved. But reform is even more necessary with our multi-party democracy. We need something better to reflect the choices people want to make in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

For more information about the Electoral Reform Society and for a copy of our full elections report:

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Electoral Reform Society



## 'Wasted' votes

With First-Past-the-Post, a large number of votes are wasted. In Birmingham for example, 54.8% of votes were cast for losing candidates, and a further 18.2% of votes contributed to excess majorities of the winners. Only 27.0% of the votes were effectively used.

## Distorted results

First-Past-the-Post can lead to exaggerated majorities. In Eastleigh, for example, the Liberal Democrats won 80% of the seats with only 49% of the votes.

In Birmingham, Labour slightly increased its lead over the Conservatives in terms of vote share, but Labour lost 4 seats while the Conservatives gained 5.

## Minority control

While the use of multi-member wards should allow wider representation, First-Past-the-Post often results in one party holding all the seats in a ward on a minority of the votes. In Birmingham, for example, the Liberal Democrats held all three seats in the Moseley and Kings Heath ward despite having only 33.2% of the votes, while Labour held all three in Hodge Hill ward with the support of only 34.5% of voters.

## Non-competitive elections

In some wards elections are not competitive because seats are very safe for one party or another. In Birmingham, for example, in about 70% of wards the majority of the winning candidate is over 10% of the votes cast, and in 44% of wards the majority is over 20% of votes cast.

# The clock ticks for First-Past-the-Post

The local election results show that we may be heading towards a hung parliament, and that would almost inevitably mean the scrapping of our 'winner takes all' voting system.

Labour's estimated share of the vote was a mere 26% - barely more than one voter in four. If Labour were to perform no better in the next general election, not only would they lose their majority, but also the swing might even be enough to give the Conservatives an outright majority.

Labour would be foolish to dismiss these results as a consequence of the Government's recent problems. While it is possible that many electors have decided to use the local elections to punish Labour, there is no guarantee that past Labour voters will return to the fold when the next general election arrives. Even if some of them do, at this stage the chances of them doing so in sufficient numbers to give Labour a clear majority appear to be slight. Moreover, while Labour has been helped in recent elections by tactical voting, it now appears that a growing number of people will want to vote tactically *against* Labour.

However, Thursday's results do not suggest the next general election will be plain sailing for the Conservatives. Our voting system makes it harder for them to win seats because of the way their votes are distributed around the country. As a consequence, to get an outright majority of seats at Westminster, in terms of votes they might need to be ahead of Labour by as much as 12%. While they can be well satisfied with the outcome of Thursday's elections, they cannot assume that it will be enough to make them the next government.

After the next general election we may therefore face a situation in which neither Labour nor the Conservatives can form a government on their own. In such circumstances the Liberal Democrats, or any other minor party for that matter, would be foolish not to demand a change to the voting system – or at least a referendum on the issue - as part of any coalition agreement. The message from Thursday's elections is that electoral reform is coming: now is the time for electoral reformers to return to their constituencies and prepare for PR.

