

Local elections 2019: Uncontested seats mean thousands of voters will be denied their democratic rights

Uncontested and under-contested council seats in English local elections mean that in areas where one party dominates, many voters face little or no choice about who their councillors are. Ian Simpson from the Electoral Reform Society argues that the solution to this democratic deficit is to reform the electoral system.



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In two weeks' time, on Thursday, 2 May, voters in many parts of England will go to the polls to elect their local representatives. Elections will take place in urban metropolitan boroughs, unitary authorities and district councils, which tend to be more suburban and rural in nature. In all regions of England apart from London there are some elections taking place.

Come polling day, however, there are around 280,000 would-be voters who will be disenfranchised. These people live in wards where councillors will be chosen [without a single vote being cast](#). In these wards not enough candidates have been nominated, so no election is necessary. This means candidates will be appointed as members of local authorities without facing any electoral challenge.

There may well be fine individuals amongst the 148 councillors who will take up their role without facing scrutiny at the ballot box. However, it cannot be good for local residents to have representatives imposed on them without the opportunity to express a preference for an alternative.

In addition to these 148 uncontested seats, a further 152 council seats are guaranteed for one party or another before any voting has taken place. This is because of a lack of competition in some multi-member wards, where more than one councillor is up for election. For example, in a ward where three councillors will be elected, if one party puts up three candidates but two other parties put up only one candidate each, the first party is guaranteed to win at least one of the seats in the ward. Around 580,000 potential voters live in wards such as these, where their democratic choices will be restricted.

Overall, before a single vote has been cast, 300 council seats across England are guaranteed to particular candidates or parties, with around 850,000 would-be voters living in wards where they are either denied a vote completely or where their choice will be constrained by a lack of candidates (see Figure 1). This does not look much like democracy and especially not a vibrant one.

Figure 1: Total uncontested and guaranteed seats by region

Region	Total uncontested and guaranteed seats (where there will be no voting in a ward or where a party or independent candidate is guaranteed at least one seat in a ward)	Electorate affected (number of potential voters in wards where there is at least one uncontested or guaranteed seat for a party or independent candidate)
East Midlands	90	237,171
East of England	56	162,150
South East	45	134,798
West Midlands	45	117,081
North West	26	65,951
Yorkshire & Humber	16	63,027
South West	16	33,882
North East	6	31,988
TOTAL	300	846,048

Note: Electorate sizes should be treated as estimates. For most of the wards, ERS researchers used [Boundary Commission for England data from 2015](#). Where there was evidence that there have been boundary changes in a council since 2015, we have used figures from the most recent [Local Government Boundary Commission for England review](#) for that local authority.

This democratic deficit is a long-running sore at the heart of local government in England, where these uncontested and under-contested seats have been a feature of local elections for decades. A key reason for this lack of competition is the voting system. As in UK general elections, the [first-past-the-post \(FPTP\)](#), winner-takes-all system is used and, as with parliamentary constituencies, this means many council wards are seen as 'safe' for one party or another. In some places, parties or candidates conclude there is little incentive to invest time and money contesting wards where their chances of winning are perceived to be very small. It is important to note that in these 'safe' wards there is highly likely to be substantial support for parties and candidates not belonging to the dominant party, just not enough support to make victory likely under FPTP.

Evidence from other parts of the UK indicates that there is a very simple solution to the problem of local representatives being appointed without election. In Scotland, the single transferrable vote (STV) electoral system was introduced for local elections in 2007 and since then uncontested seats have been virtually eliminated at a local level. STV is used to elect councils in Northern Ireland as well, where local elections will also take place on 2 May. Here voters do not face uncontested seats in any of the 11 local councils.

[STV](#) is a system where a small team of representatives (3–5 councillors is ideal for local elections) are elected to represent an area. Voters number candidates in order of preference on the ballot and can rank as many or as few candidates as they wish. To get elected, a candidate needs to win a set amount of votes, known as the quota, which is based on the number of seats available and the number of votes cast. Any candidate who reaches the quota is elected. However, rather than ignore extra votes a candidate receives above the amount they need to win, these votes are re-allocated to these voters' second-preference candidates. If no candidate reaches the winning quota, then the least popular candidate is eliminated, and their votes are re-allocated to voters' second-preference candidates. This process continues until every vacancy is filled.

This approach drastically reduces the number of wasted votes, which in turn increases voter choice by making it worthwhile for a wider range of parties and candidates to stand in all areas because the votes they receive are much more likely to be turned into the tangible reward of elected representatives, rather than being wasted if the party doesn't come first. The system is also fairer, in that it ensures that local council representation more closely matches the support that parties and candidates receive at the ballot box than is the case under the FPTP system.

Wales is also considering introducing [STV for its council elections, which means](#) there is a real possibility that England will soon be the only part of the UK where uncontested seats continue to plague local democracy. Such a change to the voting system for English local elections would go a long way to ensuring that no voters are denied a genuine choice at the local ballot box and would provide a boost to democratic engagement at a local level.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit.

It draws on new research by the Electoral Reform Society, published [here](#).

About the author

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