

# Local elections: diverse voices are being drowned out by the undemocratic voting system in England and Wales

England's local councillors are elected under a First Past the Post electoral system with multi-member wards. As a result, **Chris Terry** argues, the results will be strongly non-proportional and so the system needs to be reformed.



Protest for electoral reform. Picture: [Paul Graham Morris](#), via a [\(CC BY-SA 2.0\)](#) licence

If you live in London you will have the chance to elect councillors for the first time since 2014. If you reside in the metropolitan counties of the urban North and Midlands, or in the larger Southern cities and towns, you may also be going to the polls.

Across England, local elections are non-proportionate, that is the diverse way in which people vote is not accurately reflected in the results. Many council wards elect multiple councillors – but the opportunity this presents to increase the level of proportionality isn't being taken. Instead, councillors in such wards are generally elected in one of two ways: all-up or by thirds.

In Newham, East London, for example, the council elects all at the same time. There are 20 wards each electing three councillors. When voters there go to the polls, they can vote for up to three candidates. Parties will typically put forward three candidates each and the three candidates with the most votes win.

Electing councillors in this way can be even less proportionate than in single-member wards using the same 'First Past the Post' style system, because a ward may have, for instance, two bits that are supportive of one party and one bit that is supportive of another – and the two bits will always overpower the third. Newham has seen one party (Labour) hold every single seat on the council since 2010, last time winning 60% of the vote. While this is clearly deserving of a majority, it should not be without opposition.

The other way councillors in multi-member wards are elected are in staggered ballots, which will take place in 107 councils this year. Typically, this sees a portion of members up for election, usually in three years out of every four. So a ward will often have councillors elected in different years. This not only creates disproportionality, but the constant cycle of elections tends to reduce turnout, from a combination of electoral fatigue and because of the reduced power of the ballot box. If a council is say 85% controlled by one party, and a third of seats go up for election, then even if the opposition take every seat that party will still control 52% of seats.

The situation could not be more different North of Hadrian's Wall, however. Until 2007 Scotland was very familiar with the problems of majoritarian voting in local government. Councils were distant and unaccountable. And there were one-party states with just a handful of opposition councillors, or none at all. But a change to the Single Transferable Vote (STV) brought proportional representation to Scottish local government. Overnight every council and ward in Scotland became competitive, forcing a renewal of local democracy.

Scottish local government is now not only more competitive, it is better functioning. In 2003 (before the reform) 52.3% of voters saw their vote elect their chosen candidate. By 2012 (after the reform) 76.7% saw their first preference elected. Councils have since been governed by coalitions, minorities and parties with absolute control. And turnout in 2017 was strong by local council standards at 46.9% – which compares favourably to the 38.9% in the last locals in London. There are now moves towards giving Welsh councils the chance to choose to change to the system.

So while the Electoral Reform Society and other civil society groups are rightly campaigning for people to cast their votes on May 3, it is also recognised that change is desperately needed to spread the use of a proportional system across the United Kingdom. This democratic reform must be extended to England too so that its local government be revitalised in the same way.

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*This post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit. It originally appeared on the [Electoral Reform Society](#) blog.*

### About the author



[Chris Terry](#) is a Research Officer at the Electoral Reform Society.

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