

# In Britain's first past the post electoral system, some votes are worth 22 times more than others

By Democratic Audit

*Britain's electoral landscape is dominated by safe seats, with very little competition for votes taking place within them. New research, presented here by **Chris Terry** of the Electoral Reform society, shows the enormous differences between the 'cost' of votes in different constituencies, calling into question the premise that all votes are equal.*

A well-known feature of Britain's [First Past the Post](#) electoral system that it divides the country into safe and marginal constituencies. Safe seats have almost no chance of switching hands and while they are occasionally lost, such events are notable for their rarity. It is also well known that parties target their resources



*London Buses on route to Hampstead, one of Britain's 'most expensive' constituencies (Credit: Lawrence Abel, Wikimedia Commons)*

on the most marginal constituencies, a logical practice given the twin pressures of limited resources and an electoral system that creates such a large number of safe seats.

It is possible to establish the degree of difference between marginal seats and safe, with regards to how much value is placed on them by parties. A solid measure for this is how much money parties spend campaigning in them. How much do political campaigns value a vote in each of the 650 constituencies which make up the United Kingdom? The Electoral Reform Society's new report "[Penny for your vote? Counting the cost of an unfair electoral system](#)" calculates the answer through an in-depth analysis of Electoral Commission data on campaign expenditure in 2010.

Our research found that votes in the most valued seat, Luton South, where worth £3.07 each – 22 times that of the least valued seat, Bootle, where votes were valued at just 14p. The seats with the highest spending per vote – constituencies like Hampstead and Kilburn, Brighton Pavilion, and Norwich South – were contested by a multitude of parties, with strong campaigns from minor party or independent candidates. Those seats with the smallest amount of spending per vote – for example Halton, Ruislip Northwood and Pinner and Sheffield Heeley – were all ultra-safe.

The table below demonstrates the disparity between campaigning in the 50 least and most marginal seats.

	Average 2010 Majority	Average Spending Per Vote	Spending on Advertising per Vote	Spending on Leaflets per Vote	Average Spending on Public Meetings
Top 50 closest	1.3%	£ 1.31	£ 0.10	£0.95	£ 324.53
Top 50 least close	41.9%	£ 0.50	£ 0.06	£0.33	£ 175.40

The top 50 closest seats ended up with an average majority of only 1.3%, while the bottom 50 had a majority of 41.9%. Average spending per vote in the top 50 was 162% higher than in the bottom 50. Spending on advertising per vote was two thirds higher, and spending on public meetings was 85% higher. Average spending per vote on leaflets was 188% higher in the closest 50.

We found that in 195 seats (30% of the total) no money was spent on public meetings by any candidate. In those seats the average majority was four points higher. In five seats nothing was spent on advertising. Of these five seats only one, Knowsley, had any money (£40) spent on public meetings at all.

These figures reflect the reality of a system where your vote counts more depending on where you live. As the loss of safe seats is rare, parties target resources on a small number of floating voters in marginal seats. This means that some voters are much more valued by the parties than others, calling into question the fundamental principle of democracy – that all votes are created equal.

There is much evidence that suggests marginal seats experience higher turnouts at elections. For instance, [Democratic Audit](#) demonstrated that turnout was 9.2% higher in the most marginal seats when [compared](#) to the safest seats. Political scientists such as [Alan Gerber](#) in the US and [David Cutts](#) here have also demonstrated a link between voter contact and turnout. A leaflet, a poster, or a knock on the door from an activist not only acts to persuade voters to vote for a particular party – it also reminds them to vote at all.

Using our data we were able to show a correlation between the money spent by candidates in a constituency, and the voter turnout in that seat. Indeed, the correlation was remarkably strong. This link suggests that one of the results of our first-past-the-post system is that it lowers voter turnouts. By creating safe seats where parties (whether incumbent in the seat or not) do not bother to campaign, the system creates voters who consequently do not bother to vote.

It is no wonder that voters feel disengaged from politics when the electoral system causes parties to behave in this way. The number of marginal seats is shrinking, from more than 150 before 1974 to 85 in 2010. Combine this with falling membership of parties and an increasingly volatile party funding base, and it suggests that targeting of marginal seats will become even more prolific in the future. After all, political party resources are increasingly scant, and they cannot afford to ‘waste’ them in areas in which the result is a foregone conclusion.

Our electoral system creates the ultimate postcode lottery, where your votes could count more or less depending on where you happen to live. We need to change our party funding system so that we have properly funded parties able to campaign for votes across the country. And we need to change our voting system so that ultra-safe seats can be made a thing of the past.

*Note: This post represents the views of the author and not of Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our comments policy before posting.*

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