

# OVER THE PARTY WALL

LOCAL ELECTIONS IN 2024:  
THE PROGRESSIVE MAJORITY  
AT A CROSSROADS

At the next election we must work together to #WinAsOne and change our politics and country for good.

[winasone.org.uk](https://winasone.org.uk)

WIN  
AS  
ONE

**#WinAsOne** is a campaign initiated by [Compass](#) to elect progressive MPs at the next general election who back Proportional Representation, and will work together to create and deliver the bold, radical change that our politics and country needs.

This report brings together our research on the councils and mayors up for election in 2024, the democratic deficit, the potential progressive tragedies and quotes from a series of interviews with progressive leaders.

For more information visit [winasone.org.uk](http://winasone.org.uk)

## **Acknowledgements**

This campaign has only been possible thanks to the kind generosity and support of Compass members, supporters and friends, and the ongoing work of our Board, staff team and volunteers. Whilst much of this dedication may not be seen, it is recognised and valued and makes the work of change possible.

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All research was done internally and any discrepancies Compass takes responsibility for.

## Introduction

After 14 years of Conservative dominance, the need is greater than ever for progressive parties to win power and build a politics that works in the interest of the common good.

Last year, our local elections campaign helped to deliver a huge electoral wipeout for the Tories. But this wasn't due to a huge drop in Conservative support, although the party's vote share did fall by six points. No, this was thanks to unofficial electoral alliances up and down the country between Labour, Greens and Liberal Democrats. Despite the diktat handed down by party leaderships, local branches of the three political parties forged covert campaigning agreements, and voters went to the ballot box with one clear priority: getting the Tories out.

Once the dust settled, one thing became clear: cooperation is the future of progressive politics. It's cooperation that can help unite the divided progressive vote and build an alliance that can truly challenge the Tory hegemony.

We need a politics that encourages this sort of sensible cooperation. But we can't just sit around waiting for it to happen. We need to continue to embody the change we want to see - and we need to encourage our parties to do the same.

We know that our First Past the Post (FPTP) voting system distorts the share of seats, and generally favours the Conservatives. It is the glue that holds our rotten politics together, locking out millions of voters and whole areas of the country. FPTP simply doesn't represent the views of the majority. That's why we need an entirely new voting system.

In some ways, the last 12 months have seen some important progress on this point: Labour's National Policy Forum document, published last summer, is the first time Labour's official policy documentation has explicitly criticised FPTP, acknowledging that "flaws in the current voting system contribute towards the distrust and alienation we see in politics". This, while far from sufficient, is a promising development. While we're still far from where we'd like to be, there is substantive cause for hope.

But in other ways, we've moved backwards: the mayoral elections this May will be the first to be held under FPTP, having previously taken place under the Supplementary Vote (SV) system. Although less proportional than it could be, SV was an improvement on FPTP. The Elections Act 2022 - also known for its controversial Voter ID requirements - has only served to shut more people out of our democratic processes, just when we should be encouraging greater participation.

This is where we stand right now - at a crossroads. We know where one path is going: with the Tories, we'll continue in the same direction, towards even greater democratic disengagement and disenfranchisement. But if we can build a coalition of progressive forces strong enough to challenge them, we could change track.

This starts at the local level. Across the country, activists and politicians are already working together to create the alliances we need to build a better, more representative politics. With Win As One, we're harnessing that energy to build a national movement that can deliver the change we need.

# COMPASS AT LOCAL ELECTIONS

At local elections, Compass has one goal: build progressive cooperation that is ready to take power.

We don't campaign to boost the seat share of any one party or increase the councils that Labour, the Liberal Democrats or the Greens are respectively in control of. We believe in cooperation among progressives, not just because it's the way to win – but because it's how we want to win. By working together we can deliver bigger answers, better government and a broader political reach than any one party alone can muster.

To that end, during local elections, we have previously organised deals to encourage races with a single progressive challenger, helped build relationships that become the basis of coalitions, organised locally to do voter engagement and registration, challenged coalitions on their decisions in order to keep them accountable, and released papers and research to shine a light on the reality of progressive cooperation on the UK's councils.

It's odd how often we hear that "British voters don't like coalitions", when Holyrood, the Senedd, over 10% of councils in England, more than 25% of councils in Wales, more than 28% in Scotland (over 40% if all coalitions are counted), and all but 1 of Northern Ireland's 11 councils are run without one party having overall control.

Working around the electoral system means peeking above party walls to work across all of the divides. In 2023, of the councils up for election that were controlled by a Conservative majority, 75% of them were held despite the fact the Conservatives did not win a majority of the popular vote. In East Hertfordshire, the Conservatives had 80% of the seats with 46% of the vote. After the election there last year, the Greens held the most seats and the council was run by a coalition of Green and Liberal Democrat councillors.

In 2022, Compass worked before and after local elections to analyse the effectiveness of only one progressive candidate standing against a Conservative. By accident, and under the radar by local design, progressive parties not competing had a stunning impact on party's votes:

- The Labour vote rose by 6.1% where it was the only progressive challenger to the Tories.
- The Lib Dem vote rose by 14.1% where it was the only progressive challenger to the Tories.
- The Greens vote rose by 20.2% where it was the only progressive challenger to the Tories.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, the same research estimated that the effect of this tactic on the Conservative vote share is an increase of 2.9 per cent. This implies that a

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<sup>1</sup> The Green figures are less robust because of the sample size but the impact of non-competition for the Green Party is very large.

significant majority of voters for progressive parties will transfer to other progressive parties if their preferred party does not stand a candidate. Given that many wards are won by narrow margins in local elections, the effect of sole progressive candidates affects the results of hundreds of races. This might be a widespread - and effective - practice. Yet, what party leaders say nationally and what they do are very different.

Keir Starmer and Ed Davey have *ad nauseam* insisted there are no deals to be done. That everyone, everywhere deserves a chance to put an 'X' next to their parties. On the ground, it's a different picture. In places where it makes no sense to stand, parties often don't.

That's because local activists, agents, and members *know* that their singular goal is not getting their party elected. Their goals are to fight for a just transition, to cut NHS waiting times, to reform public transport systems, or to end our shameful record of homelessness. Having another progressive party win seats often lends itself to that mission - and letting Conservatives into power on a minority vote through the middle of a divided progressive majority does not. This is the maths of compromise - getting 80% of what we want, or 100% of what we don't.

But this insistence that "we stand everywhere" is the hypocrisy of First-Past-the-Post in action - it is a system of electing representatives that, for most of us, precludes representation.

A lucky few seats – marginals and swing seats – will become places where voters will be pursued down the street by canvassers, prospective candidates and breathless journalists, desperate to hear their takes on the political priorities of the day. Meanwhile, voters in safe seats are left to languish in obscurity. For them, not even the taking part counts.

They will be asked to dutifully show up, go through the motions, cast their ballot and accept that they might as well have dropped it straight into the bin.

Our work asks people instead to recognise the electoral reality in which we operate, to acknowledge this cognitive dissonance. Compass offers a different option: game the system to beat the system. We know that when progressives work together, they can win together.

Single progressive wards, alliances, and other cross-party coordinated, targeted election campaigns might sound cold and instrumental - but this is the rough reality of FPTP, which serves to divide the vote and makes a mockery of democracy.

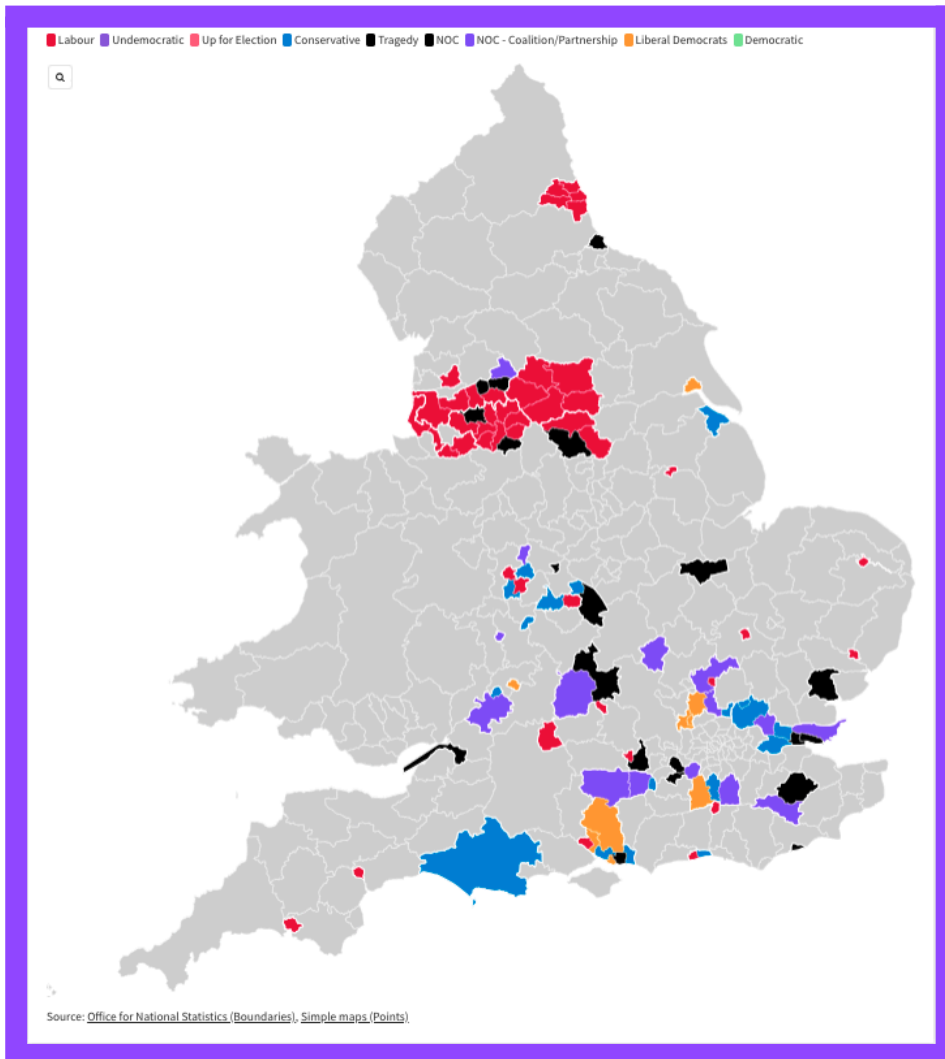
So, as determined as the national parties seem to be to set the mood music against progressive cooperation, Compass has been working to unite candidates and voters. And it works.

# TRAGEDY COUNCILS AND MAYORS



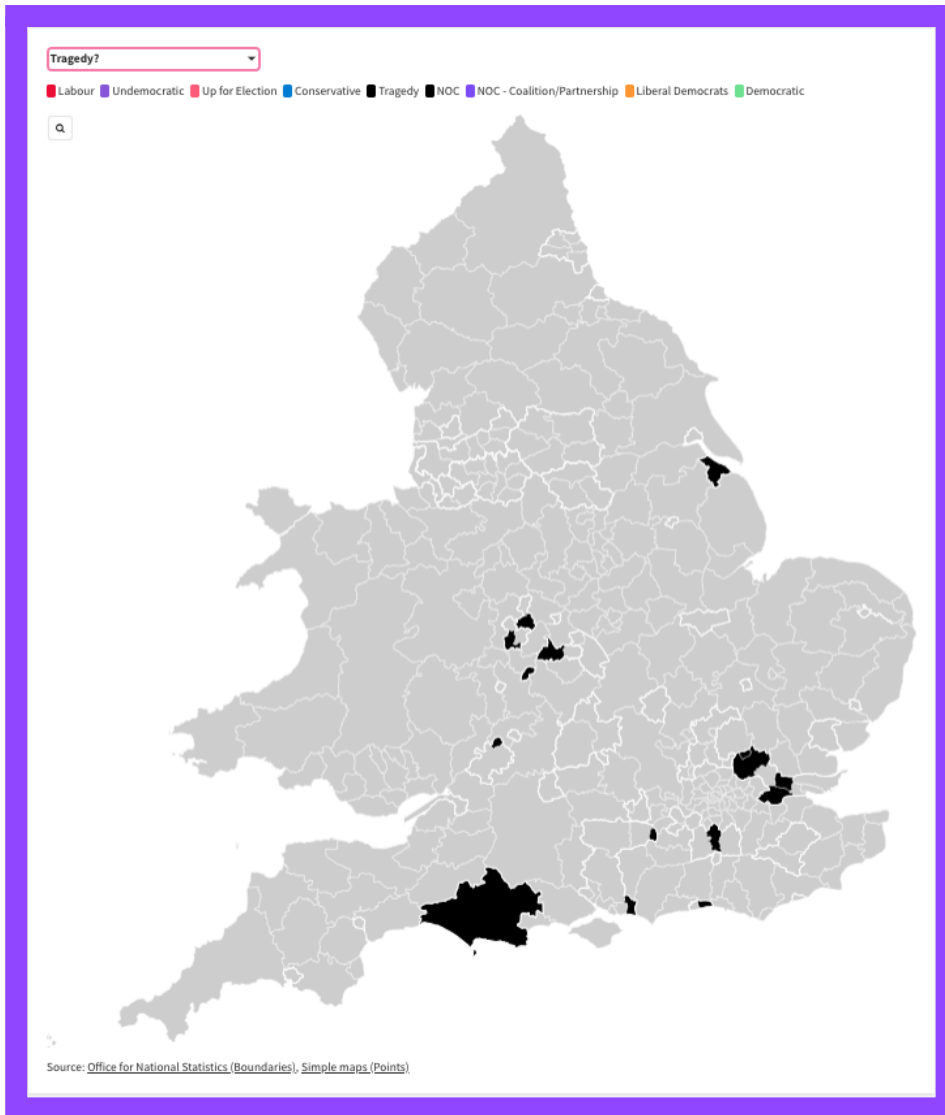
## Councils

The local elections this May will see voters head to the polls in 107 local authority areas, the majority of which last held elections in 2021. In those local elections, the Tories, riding high in the polls thanks to the success of the Covid-19 vaccine rollout, made significant gains. Now, three years and two Tory Prime Ministers later, the outlook appears quite different.



But this should not lull us into a false sense of security; our voting system works to the advantage of the Tories and could still massively limit the scale of any defeat they face this time around. We just need to look at the results from last time to see how this works.

Of the 107 councils facing re-election this year, 18 (16.8%) are Conservative majority controlled. Of these 18 councils, the Tories won 15 of them (83.3%) with a minority share of the popular vote. That means more than half of voters cast their ballots for parties other than the Conservatives, but the Tories still ended up taking all of the power. This is due to our voting system - where progressives are divided, the right is united and wins.



These councils are:

- North East Lincolnshire
- Thurrock
- Basildon
- Epping Forest
- Harlow
- Rushmoor
- Havant
- Reigate and Banstead
- Adur
- Dorset
- Gloucester
- Walsall
- Solihull
- Dudley
- Redditch

In these 15 'tragedy councils', the Conservatives won on average 59.9% of the seats with just 45.9% of the popular vote - an average democratic deficit of

14.1%. The worst deficits are in Gloucester where the Conservatives won 66.7% of seats with 47.1% of the vote, and Havant where the Conservatives won 78.9% of seats with 48.9% of the vote.

Compass calls these councils 'tragedy councils' because greater collaboration between progressive parties in these areas could have prevented the Conservatives from seizing control in a large number of them. This collaboration can take many shapes and sizes - but by resolutely refusing to cooperate at all, progressive parties only hand a greater chance of winning to the right. It also means that, as these councils face re-election this May, the Conservatives are highly vulnerable to coordinated tactical voting and campaigning agreements between progressive parties.

Thanks to FPTP, the majority of voters in these 15 councils are disenfranchised and locked out of meaningful involvement in decisions. They're forced to endure a 'tyranny of the minority,' where the Conservatives take all the power with as little as 39.3% of the vote, as was the case in Dorset.

There are also, it has to be said, councils where Labour and the Liberal Democrats enjoy majority control despite winning support from a minority of voters.

First Past the Post produces unrepresentative results across the board, which is why it's so crucial that we replace it with a fairer, more equitable system where people can make their voices heard.

We also welcome progressive parties joining together to consolidate their support among the electorate to ensure, where possible, that they represent the majority.

## Mayors

The upcoming mayoral elections are the first to take place under FPTP, with previous elections having previously taken place under the Supplementary Vote (SV) system.

While neither FPTP nor SV are proportional systems, the switch does risk reducing voter choice and ultimately may damage the position of mayor, [according to the Institute for Government](#). This is because FPTP concentrates power in the hands of the major parties and makes the political field even less welcoming to newcomers.

Under SV, candidates need to secure an absolute majority (more than 50%) of the vote to win. This means that SV tends to elect candidates who have broader support among voters. SV, unlike FPTP, allows for a limited degree of preference expression while maintaining the simplicity of a single-member district system. It also reduces the number of wasted votes by allowing voters to express a second preference, which can help ensure that more votes contribute to the final outcome.

In contrast, FPTP is a straightforward majoritarian system where voters choose a single candidate, and the candidate with the most votes wins, regardless of whether they have a majority or not.

Under SV, Ken Livingstone won the first ever London mayoral election in 2000 as an independent candidate. Such a result would be much more unlikely now. This is because under SV, voters could take a chance on an independent candidate without fear of wasting their vote.

But, whether under FPTP or SV, competition between progressives at mayoral elections can still have the unfortunate and unintended result of delivering a Conservative victory.

There are two types of mayors: Local & Metro (Combined Authority). The first Local Mayor election dates back to 2002, while the first Metro Mayor election was in 2017. In total, there have been 84 Local Mayor elections since 2002, and 17 Metro Mayor elections since 2017 - 101 in total.

Of the 101 mayoral elections held since 2002, 15 returned a Conservative, six of which were Metro Mayors and nine of which were Local Mayors. However, in 11 of these 15 cases (73%) more voters cast their first round ballots for progressive parties than for the Conservatives. **That means nearly three quarters of Conservative mayors ever elected in the UK won power against the wishes of the majority.**

There are two Conservative mayoral incumbents facing re-election this time around: West Midlands (Andy Street) and Tees Valley (Ben Houchen). When Andy Street last faced the electorate in the West Midlands in 2021, the combined progressive vote share narrowly outnumbered the Conservative

vote share. But because the progressive vote was divided between three parties - Labour, Lib Dems and Greens - the Tories snuck over the line first, taking with them all the representation and all the power.

The inequities of our voting system means that we risk the same happening this time around - not just in Conservative-led authorities of West Midlands and Tees Valley, but in the newly-created authorities of York & North Yorkshire, East Midlands and North East.

### **Key stats:**

Of the 107 councils facing re-election this year, 18 (16.8%) are Conservative majority controlled.

Of these 18 councils, the Tories won 15 of them (83.3%) with a minority share of the popular vote.

That means more than half of voters cast their ballots for parties other than the Conservatives, but the Tories still ended up taking all of the power. This is due to our voting system - where progressives are divided, the right is united and wins.

The most extreme democratic deficits were in Havant, where the Tories won 78.9% of the seats with only 48.9% of the vote, and Gloucester where the Tories won 66.7% of the seats with only 47.1% of the vote.

In these 15 Conservative-controlled 'Tragedy Councils', the Tories won an average of 59.9% of the seats with just 45.9% of the popular vote.

15 of the councils up for election this May are progressive coalitions/partnerships councils.

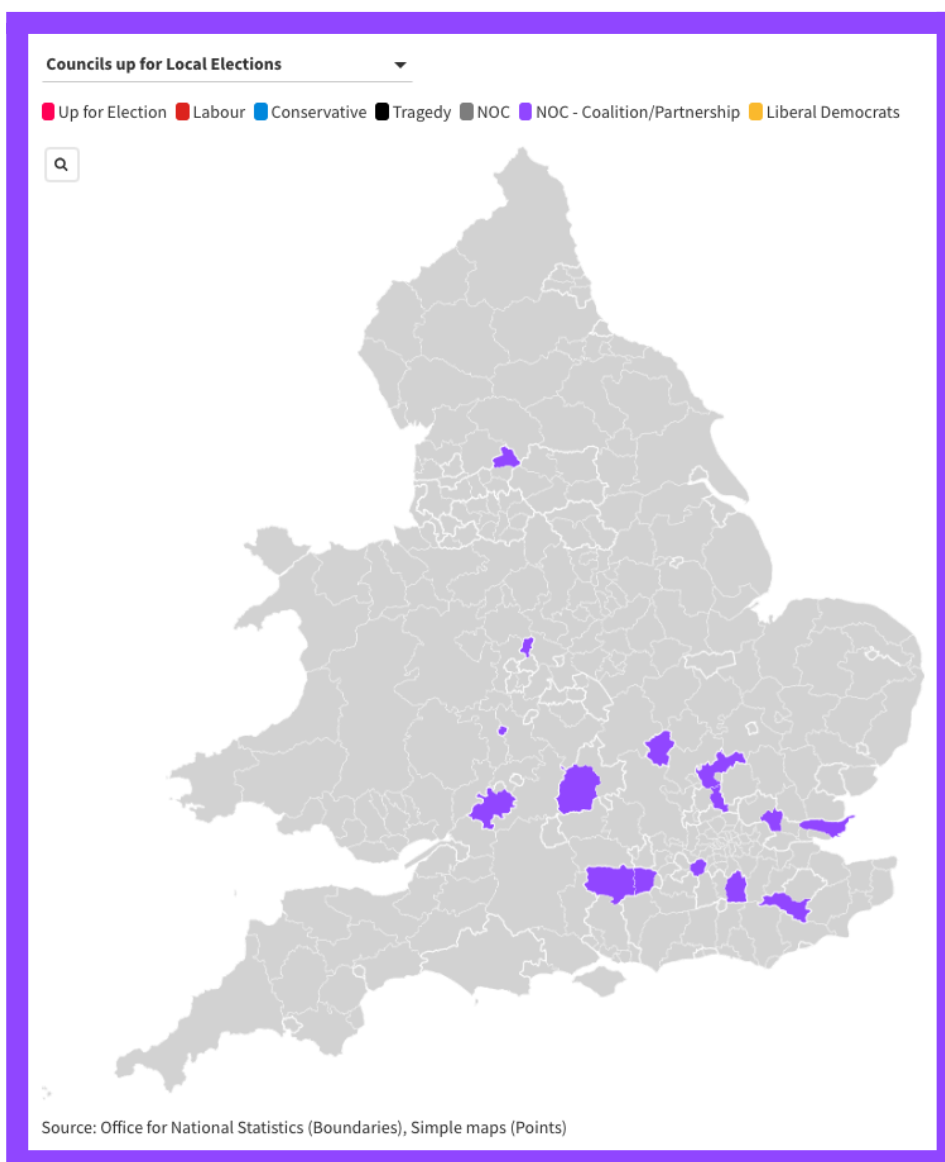
There have been 15 Conservative mayors elected since 2002 - but in 11 out of 15 (73%) of these races, more voters cast their first round ballots for progressive parties than for the Conservatives. That means nearly three quarters of Conservative mayors ever elected in the UK won power against the wishes of the majority.

# PROGRESSIVE PARTNERSHIP AND COALITIONS

To win and enact positive change requires us to mobilise the progressive majority that already exists in many parts of the UK.

Progressive parties standing aside in favour of the best-placed candidate to beat the Tories – or just campaigning more strategically – has already been shown to work in many councils across the country.

Of the councils facing re-election in May, 15 are progressive partnerships or coalitions. These councils are excellent examples of progressive cooperation in practice, and represent the pluralistic nature of communities across the country.



These councils are:

- Brentwood
- Rochford
- North Hertfordshire
- Welwyn Hatfield

- Pendle
- Milton Keynes
- Basingstoke and Deane
- Hart
- Tunbridge Wells
- West Oxfordshire
- Elmbridge
- Tandridge
- Stroud
- Cannock Chase
- Worcester

Progressives in these councils are collaborating with one another to keep the Conservatives out of power, and Compass activists are working tirelessly to make sure the local elections produce more of these vital cooperative arrangements. Compass has more than 30 active local groups across the country, many of which are performing critically important roles in bringing our progressive parties together.

## Cambridgeshire County Council

In May 2021 the Tories lost control of Cambridgeshire County Council. Labour, Liberal Democrats and Independents then came together to form a coalition. Since then, it has gone from strength to strength and has even increased its majority after the Liberal Democrats won a mid-term by-election and a Tory councillor defected to the party.

Lucy Nethsingha, the Liberal Democrat leader of the council, said the business of forming the coalition “from a timing point of view was pretty hard work”, but said the parties found a surprising amount of common ground once they got around the table.

“One of the first things we did was put the manifestos of the different groups next to each other to see how much overlap there was, and there was an extraordinarily large amount. So actually setting out a kind of direction of travel and a set of things that we wanted to achieve was not so difficult because actually there was an enormous amount that everybody agreed on. If we hadn’t put the coalition together we would not be setting the policy agenda for the council, and that policy agenda has been quite different because of our coalition and our joint administration than it would have been under the Conservatives. In our case we cover quite a broad geographic area and there are differences in the political makeup across that geography. By having a joint administration that contains a number of different groups, we have had much better representation across four of those districts than we would’ve done from any single one of those groups.”



She also talked about Labour and Lib Dem HQs becoming more concerned about parties striking deals with each other at the local level, but stressed such cooperative arrangements remain “a really useful space for discussion”.

“I think when we set up the joint administration in 2021, all of the parties were quite pleased to see that happening. I think politics at that point was in quite a different place, and the idea that progressive parties were going to have to work together in order to change the agenda was much more accepted, particularly after the pretty disastrous election of 2019. I think both Liberal Democrats and Labour have got a little bit more nervous about the way in which agreements happen at local level between different parties.

And I can sort of understand why the national parties are concerned about that. But I still think that there is a really useful space for discussion between progressive parties about how we campaign in a way which doesn't just let the right wing in.”

## West Oxfordshire District Council

After the 2022 local elections, the Conservatives lost control of West Oxfordshire District Council. However, as in West Oxfordshire, no single party gained an overall majority, the Liberal Democrat, Labour and Green groups agreed to form an administration known locally as the ‘West Oxfordshire Alliance’. This included an Executive made up of Lib Dem, Labour and Green councillors. The grouping was re-elected with an increased majority in 2023. A third of the council is up for election on May 2.

Cllr Andy Graham said the council “probably wouldn't have achieved as much” without a coalition and working with other parties had helped to promote “layered thinking” and a more pragmatic approach to politics.

“We have challenged and critically put each other on the spot. But it's also about getting real results. The advantages of an alliance is that you can have a good debate, but you come up with the best results and you come by a general consensus. If West Oxfordshire is a template, look how well we have worked together. I will defend my Labour colleagues and I will defend my Green colleagues equal to that of my Liberal Democrat colleagues in that alliance, because I genuinely believe that all of us, whatever the party, came together and showed our strength of purpose and focus and that we had the commonality of our residents at heart.”

## Milton Keynes City Council

Milton Keynes City Council has been under no overall control for the vast majority of its existence. Labour, the Tories and the Lib Dems have each spent time as the largest party. So when Labour councillor Peter Marland became leader of the council nearly 10 years ago, he said it was viewed as “a bit of a political basket case” by national government and by the local government community. From May 2014 to May 2021, the Labour Party held office as a minority administration, working with the Liberal Democrats to push things through. But since May 2021, Labour and the Liberal Democrats have been working together in a formal progressive alliance.

Reflecting on this, Cllr Marland said:

“The Labour Party in Milton Keynes and the Liberal Democrats in Milton Keynes share the very core objectives for our city. We agree on things like tackling the cost of living crisis, the need to do more on equality, diversity and inclusion and things like that. We say we put people before politics and so that's why we run the council together. Too many councils and too many administrations really burn the house down after every single administration. And really what you should be able to do is come in and paint the walls your own colour, decorate as you like, but you know, the house still stands. So it gave us that stability. It gave us a bit more drive and direction than being a minority administration because it just saves an inordinate amount of time and effort.”

## Conclusion

First Past the Post is at the root of the problem. Our winner-takes-all voting system is democratically unfair and gives power to minority parties. It punishes the fractured progressive vote, and too often hands victory to the Tories against the wishes of the majority.

We must make more people aware of the scale of the democratic deficit that exists, how the current system is stacked against meaningful citizen representation, and encourage them to lobby their MPs, councillors and parliamentary candidates for change. As long as FPTP remains in place, our democracy will remain unrepresentative and progressive parties will be permanently disadvantaged.

Compass, through Win As One, is campaigning to change both the government and the political system. We desperately need a progressive government, and tactical voting will no doubt be vital in both these local elections and at the next general election - but voting tactically without conditions only entrenches the pendulum politics that grinds us all down and alienates voters from the political process. When the pendulum swings our way, we must not let democratic reform fall down the list of priorities. Because make no mistake, the pendulum will swing away again - and, in this age of instability and volatility, it might happen sooner than we think.

Endlessly doing the same thing and expecting different results is the definition of insanity. Progressives can't go on splitting the vote and letting the Tories in by sheer virtue of their unity, but we also can't go on backing candidates who refuse to change the system. If we do, we'll remain trapped in the old cycle, which delivers long periods of stagnation interspersed with occasional transfers of power.

Win As One is asking candidates at the next general election to support wholesale reform of our democratic system - starting with PR. To get there, we now must build a movement of activists, donors, and voters across the country - a movement for change.

Locally, we have set up cross-party progressive groups covering every key seat to work together to back the candidates best placed to win and who want to change the political system.

After the election, whatever the result, Win as One locally and nationally will build the support and pressure outside Parliament and inside to change our politics and to change our country.

The case is clear.

The opportunity is now.

**Join us and help make change happen.**

## Notes

- This research does not take into account defections or by-elections since the last local elections.
- This is a campaign for England and Wales.
- In return for their cooperation, The Green Party and other smaller parties and their voters must be incentivised and rewarded.
- There will be more than one tactical vote recommendation site – what matters is that they are aligned and aware of local issues.
- No specific form of PR system is being advocated by #WinAsOne – but it must be PR.
- No method of legislating for PR is being advocated, other than winning a necessary Commons majority for change.
- The campaign strikes a balance between candidates backing change and those that can win.
- The more candidates back change, the more support they get.
- This is a campaign initiated by Compass, the pressure group for a good society, but is an ‘open source’ campaign that will encourage local groups to develop their own demands as well as the central demands of PR and cross-party cooperation.

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For activists and campaigners please sign up to #WinAsOne [here](#)  
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# LET'S WIN AS ONE TOGETHER.

[winasone.org.uk](https://winasone.org.uk)

Win As One is a movement initiated by Compass, open to everyone that wants to work together to secure a progressive majority for change at the next election.

Win As One Over the Party Wall: Local Elections in 2024

