

Funding the Future

The winner is clear. As is the biggest loser.

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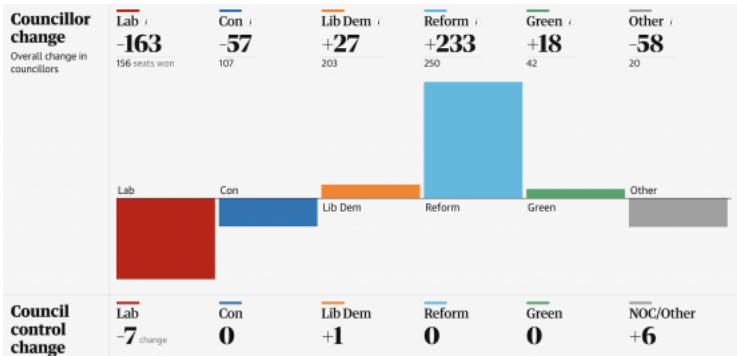
Starting writing at what is, quite literally, the crack of dawn this morning, it is apparent that all the forecasts about the local elections in England were broadly accurate.

Whichever version of the charts being produced on gains and losses you look at, and there are variations between them depending upon which baseline they use for comparison, Reform is doing very well in the election, both Labour and the Conservatives are doing very badly, the Liberal Democrats are doing better than they might have dared hope, and so far, the Greens are probably underperforming against expectation.

A chart from the BBC puts the gains and losses like this:



The Guardian presents it slightly differently:



The results will never be the same. The BBC is comparing declared results to the last time seats were contested, whereas The Guardian is comparing to who held seats prior to this election, meaning that by-elections and defections since the last time seats were generally contested are taken into account in their reporting. There will also be timing differences.

This being said, there are obvious trends that are unavoidable.

In northern seats, Reform is doing very well indeed.

In Hartlepool, Reform won 11 seats, with the losses being split between Labour, independents and the Conservatives, with Labour being the biggest loser.

The same trend was seen in Hull, although there the Liberal Democrats also lost to Reform and lost overall control of the council.

This pattern was repeated in North East Lincolnshire, where Reform won 13 seats, but on this occasion the Conservatives were the biggest losers by far.

This was an exception because, generally, the swing was from Labour to Reform, as was also seen in Plymouth and Redditch, although in both cases losses to Reform were right across the board by party. In Plymouth, the Greens also succeeded in taking a seat.

Similar patterns were found in Essex, where Rochford Council saw Reform take all the available seats, with losses being spread amongst all other parties standing, although Labour had nothing to lose there and did not do so as a result. Notably, though, half the gains came from independents and the local residents' association.

In nearby Southend-on-Sea, Reform were once again the winners, with losses being shared amongst Labour, Conservatives, independents and the Lib Dems, but the Greens won two seats.

Moving away from coastal areas, Salford in Manchester saw a massive swing, with Labour losing 13 seats and Reform winning the same number, but the Greens also had gains. They took three seats, with the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats and Your Party losing one apiece.

In contrast, in nearby Stockport, the Liberal Democrats took seats to gain overall control of the council, doing so at the expense of Labour and independents, whilst Reform won just two seats and the Greens one.

One of the biggest swings of the night, however, was seen in the north-west, where in Wigan Labour lost 20 seats, with Reform winning 23; the other losers were independents and Conservatives. This was a pattern also seen in Tameside in Manchester, where Reform made heavy gains at Labour's expense.

As yet, results from London are limited, but notably, in Richmond upon Thames, the quite extraordinary result was that all 54 seats on the council were won by the Liberal Democrats, with the Greens losing the five seats that they had previously held.

This was not the only exceptional result for the Liberal Democrats on the night. In Sutton, in South London, they took 23 seats, with the Conservatives losing 20, independents losing four and Labour losing one, with Reform taking two. They now hold all but four seats on the council.

The Liberal Democrats also gained in Portsmouth, where they now control the council, mainly at Labour's expense. Reform also made small gains there.

Looking at more inland, and maybe larger, locations, the trends are slightly different. Oxford, with half the seats up for election, saw no Reform gains, but the Greens won four seats at the cost of Labour and independents, whilst in Lincoln, which I had expected to be a Reform stronghold, they won just four seats, with the losses being suffered by Labour and the Conservatives, with the Liberal Democrats and the Greens also winning a seat apiece.

The same broad situation was found in Peterborough, where, again, I would have expected wins for Reform, and although they did win four seats, mainly at the cost of independents, the other odd pattern on display there was a swing from Labour to the Conservatives, with Labour losing three seats and the Conservatives gaining the same number.

This pattern of Conservatives gaining at Labour's expense was also seen in Harlow, Essex, where Conservatives won all their gains from Labour.

Reading provided an odd exception for the night. Labour lost three seats, the same number that the Greens gained, whilst the Conservatives won two seats and Reform and independents lost one apiece, the Reform representation on the council being eliminated as a result.

And, as I move towards concluding this early morning review, a flurry of results have come in, mainly from London. These deliver a totally different perspective on the night. The trend is for Reform to take no seats at all. This is, for example, the case in Ealing, Merton, Wadsworth and Hammersmith and Fulham. Across all these bars, the trend is for small patterns to have changed to emerge, with liberal Democrats consolidating where they are already strong, the Greens making small gains, and, in Wandsworth, the Conservatives making a small revival at Labour's expense. The Reform influence is, however, completely absent, suggesting that in the parts of the country where immigration has had its greatest impact, Reform has nothing to say to populations who reject its message of hate. Overall, Labour will take some comfort from these results.

So, what is the trend being seen so far, with a note of caution being added that many

results across England have still to be counted, including most of those in London?

The trend is obvious. As expected, Reform has won heavily overall, and most especially in seats in the north, north west and on the coast. In many of these councils, they came from a standing start, as they previously held no seats. Despite this, Reform has not won control of any councils as a consequence, and so far it looks unlikely that they will.

Labour has done little better than disastrously, most especially outside London, having lost many more seats than they won, meaning that they have also lost control of councils as a consequence, although of the 17 council results available at the time of writing, they retain control of eight because not all seats on all councils were up for election.

The night was a little better for the Conservatives, and their rate of loss was not as bad as that suffered by Labour. However, they started from a weaker position. So far, they have kept every council they were defending.

The Liberal Democrats have net overall gains of seats. They have also translated these into real gains, having won two councils, but having lost one. What they have, however, clearly displayed is a resilience in the face of the Reform onslaught which stands them far apart from Labour and the Conservatives. Whilst those two parties look down and out, the Liberal Democrats do not.

For the Greens, so far, the night has been disappointing. They have won seats, but there is no sign of a major breakthrough here, including in the few London areas announced so far, and at this moment, there is no hint of them taking control of a council.

The same is also true for Reform. They might have won heavily, but so far this has not delivered them major influence. That they might have been the beneficiaries of a major protest vote is, then, an unavoidable conclusion at this moment. That their gains are limited also means that they will avoid accountability. That, in a sense, is unfortunate. There is a need for a Reform track record in council office to prove just how bad they are.

But there is one overwhelming conclusion to reach so far on the night. That is, the overall winner here is first-past-the-post, at cost to all of us and the whole idea of democracy. Reform is not nearly as popular as these election results would make them appear, and there are supporters of other political parties in places like Richmond upon Thames and Sutton in South London. The use of an electoral system that produces outcomes unrepresentative of the people's opinions, deliberately chosen by politicians in power, is not an exercise in democracy, and unsurprisingly, turnout reflects this. As is usual in council elections, turnout was generally low, though the trend seems to be a little up from the last time these seats were contested. No one should be surprised at

that when the councils being elected cannot, and do not, truly represent local opinion.

The loser last night was, then, democracy, and I expect to see that trend continue in today's English council election results.

As a result, I am looking forward to outcomes in Wales and Scotland, where proportional representation might yield more representative results. If that is possible in both those countries, why it is not in England is something that must now be open to challenge. Amongst the many things in need of urgent reform in England, in particular, is our electoral system. It is well past its use-by date.