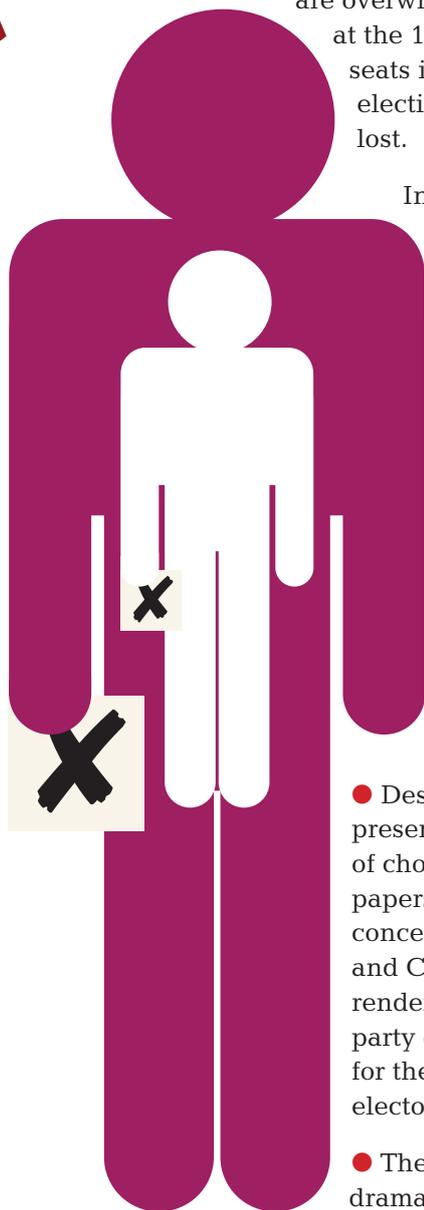
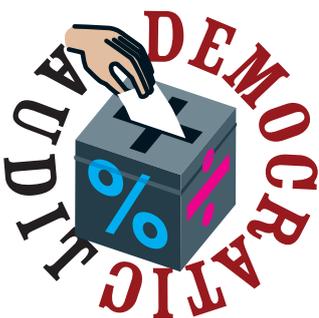


A tale of two electorates:

Why some voters are more equal than others

Stuart Wilks-Heeg



Summary

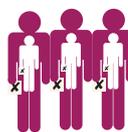
THE PROSPECT OF A 'HUNG Parliament' has created a widespread impression of the 2010 General Election as a tightly-contested three-horse race. Yet, even before the votes are counted, it is evident that the outcome will hinge on the choices made by voters in a small minority of 'marginal' seats. The notion of the three main political parties running 'national' campaigns is, in truth, a misnomer. As the three political leaders criss-cross the country, and local candidates and party representatives approach voters on the doorstep, by telephone or email, their efforts are overwhelmingly directed at the 10-15 per cent of seats in which the entire election will be won or lost.

In our second Democratic Audit election briefing, we highlight that:

- At most general elections, 50-75 per cent of seats can be considered 'safe' for one or other of the largest two parties and are virtually certain not to change hands without dramatic swings in the vote.
- Despite voters being presented with a range of choices on their ballot papers, the geographical concentrations of Labour and Conservative support render this semblance of party competition illusory for the great majority of electors.
- The electoral system dramatically empowers

a small minority of voters by geographical accident – voters in marginal seats have a more genuine choice of local candidates with a realistic chance of winning, and exert much greater influence over the overall outcome of the general election.

- Political parties reinforce political inequality by directing their campaigns at the most powerful voters and neglecting safe seats. In 2005, candidates contesting the three-way marginal of Falmouth and Camborne spent eight times more trying to win over local voters than their counterparts did in the ultra-safe Labour seat of Barnsley East and Mexborough.
- Voters also respond rationally to the geographical biases in the electoral system and party campaigning – turnout in 324 ultra safe seats in 2005 averaged 57.4 per cent, compared to 66.6 per cent in 51 ultra marginals.
- The tendency for safe seats to become virtually 'campaign free zones' is most evident in Labour strongholds in Northern England – the 10 seats in which combined candidate spend per elector was lowest in 2005 were all safe Labour seats in the North of England.
- There is an increasingly obvious relationship between political inequality and other forms of inequality. Almost two-thirds of seats with turnouts below 50 per cent in 2005 had 'worklessness' levels of 25 per cent or more.
- Initial data for the 2010 campaign confirms the continuation of these trends, with voters in key marginals 2-3 times more likely to receive any form of contact from the political parties, and party leaders choosing overwhelmingly to visit marginal seats on the campaign trail.



A paradoxical election

THE 2010 GENERAL ELECTION is widely expected to produce the closest result for well over a decade. Following a surge of support for the Liberal Democrats, the tightening of the opinion polls around a roughly 30/30/30 split for the three main parties suggests the UK may be facing the first 'hung parliament' since 1974. Yet, while the emergence of a genuine three-party contest has generated substantial media interest, both the campaign itself, and the likely election outcome, serve to highlight two enormous paradoxes about this impression of a closely-fought, three-way contest:

1 The intense election campaign which dominates national media interest is, in reality, being played out across a minority of the constituencies which will return MPs, and is barely discernable in most other constituency contests.

2 If opinion poll-based projections prove correct, the closest three-way election split in any election since 1983 risks producing a result so disproportional that it will seriously undermine the House of Commons' claims to democratic legitimacy.

At the root of both these paradoxes is the fundamental problem of how the electoral system used for UK General Elections renders votes unequal. The notion of the equality of the ballot is one of the most fundamental and widely-accepted democratic principles.¹ In the UK, as in all modern democracies, each elector is entitled to a single vote, regardless of their income or status. Yet, while UK electors notionally cast their votes as equals, the way in which votes are counted under 'first-past-the-post' (FPTP) elections serves to produce the very opposite effect.

1 See, for example, Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Declaration on Criteria for Free and Fair Elections*, (Geneva: Inter-Parliamentary Union).

This briefing considers the broader implications of the electoral system for the way in which election campaigns are run by parties, and experienced by voters. It focuses on the four key issues of how:

- the distinction between safe and marginal seats under 'first-past-the-post' influences the campaign strategies of the political parties;
- individual electors' experience of an election campaign varies according to where they live;
- voters in different areas respond to such variations in campaigning, as measured by turnout;
- inequalities in voter power relate to wider patterns of socio-economic inequality in Great Britain.

The limitations of first-past-the-post

LONG BEFORE THE 2010 General Election campaign was officially announced, there was general agreement that the Conservatives would need to win at least 40 per cent of the popular vote in order to secure a small majority in the House of Commons. By contrast, most experts predicted that a vote share of around 35 per cent for Labour could be sufficient to return a Labour majority. In the run-up to the election, few mainstream political commentators took issue with how the electoral system appeared to provide Labour with such in-built advantage. To supporters of first-past-the-post, the structural bias in the electoral system is essentially part and parcel of how the pendulum swings between the two main parties.²

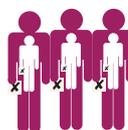
2 The electoral system has worked to the advantage of Labour since 1997, while the Conservatives had been the clear beneficiaries in other periods, most notably the 1950s and 1980s. Prior to the 'Lib Dem surge', the Conservatives could reasonably assume that the bias in the system would swing back their way, particularly if they could overturn Labour's majority in 2010.

The General Election campaign, or perhaps more accurately the opinion polls, has shifted the terms of the debate dramatically. Following the sustained surge in Liberal Democrat support shown in the polls, numerous projections have highlighted the possibility that the Labour Party could come third, as measured by its share of the popular vote, but still secure more seats in the Commons than any other party. Meanwhile, a handful of polls have suggested that it is even possible that the Liberal Democrats could have the highest share of the votes cast, yet come a distant third in seats in Parliament. Just how could the electoral system produce such an outcome, recently described in one Sunday newspaper as 'grotesque'?³ The causes are complex, but are essentially rooted in the interaction between the electoral system and the socio-geography of support for the main three parties.

Under FPTP, each elector is entitled to cast a single vote for one of the candidates standing in the constituency in which they live, with the winning candidate elected on a simple plurality of the votes cast. Each of the three main parties contests every seat in Great Britain, while further electoral competition is provided in Wales by Plaid Cymru, in Scotland by the Scottish National Party and, in a substantial number of seats across Great Britain, by the Green Party, the UK Independence Party and others.

However, this semblance of party competition is largely illusory. In reality, geographical concentrations of Labour and Conservative support render the outcome of anywhere between half and two-thirds of local constituency contests easy to predict in advance. At most General Elections, the great bulk of seats are retained by the incumbent,

3 Will Hutton, 'A grotesque voting system that makes for an unfair Britain', *The Observer*, 25 April 2010.



while the outcome of the election is determined almost entirely by any shifts in the patterns of voting in a handful of seats where party competition is most intense.

Electoral deserts and safe seats

THE LABOUR VOTE IS heavily concentrated in densely-populated urban areas with high majorities but low turnouts. It is largely as a result of the specific concentration of safe Labour seats in its traditional strongholds that it would be notionally possible for Labour to retain as many as 262 seats (40 per cent of the total) on a share of the vote as low as 27 per cent. While the Conservatives also benefit from having a significant number of 'safe' seats, albeit significantly fewer than Labour, their votes tend to accumulate in seats with high turnouts and larger electorates.

Meanwhile, the position of the Liberal Democrats is almost the direct inverse of the other two main parties. With only a handful of 'safe' seats to their name, and their electoral support spread relatively evenly across Great Britain, a small drop in Liberal Democrat support could easily halve the party's current Parliamentary representation of 63 seats, while it would take an enormous increase in the Liberal Democrat vote to double the party's share of MPs. The figures for the ratio of votes to seats for each party in 2005 say it all: an average 26,908 votes were required to return a Labour MP, compared to 44,335 for the Conservatives and 96,539 for the Liberal Democrats.⁴

These patterns of electoral support and their implications for party representation in the Commons have a propensity to create 'electoral deserts' across large parts of Great Britain – entire

⁴ C. Rallings and M. Thrasher, *British Electoral Facts* (London: Total Politics, 2010), p.65.

Table 1: Spread of Parliamentary Seats by Marginality after the 2005 General Election (Great Britain)

Category	Size of majority	No. of seats	% of seats
Ultra safe	20% plus	281	44.7
Very safe	15-20%	92	14.6
Fairly safe	10-15%	88	14.0
Fairly marginal	5-10%	80	12.7
Ultra marginal	0-5%	87	13.9
Total		628	100

Source: Data derived from Pippa Norris' British Parliamentary Constituency Database 1992-2005, release 1.3: <http://www.hks.harvard.edu/fs/pnorris/Data/Data.htm>

regions in which particular parties have little or no parliamentary representation, despite receiving a significant proportion of the votes cast. Such regions tend to be dominated by large clusters of either Labour or Conservative seats.

A glance at any colour-coded electoral map of Britain will confirm this picture. Huge stretches of blue dominate much of the South and East of England, while great swathes of red dominate the former industrial heartlands of Northern England, parts of the Midlands, South Wales and central Scotland. The only other obvious additions to the colour scheme are streaks of yellow, mostly towards the periphery, notably the far South West of England, West Wales and the Northern reaches of Scotland. Comparing such maps over a period of several general elections would reveal remarkably little change in the geography of party control.

This remarkably static electoral geography is underpinned by the phenomenon of the 'safe seat'. At the 2001 General Election, 506 of the 641 MPs elected to represent constituencies in Great Britain (79 per cent) were returned with majorities of 10 per cent or more. The pattern was very similar in 2005, when 461 of the 628 parliamentary constituencies across England, Scotland and Wales (73 per cent) returned MPs with majorities on this scale.

Within this broad descriptor of

'safe seats', moreover, a sizeable proportion can be described as 'ultra-safe', by virtue of MPs securing majorities of 20 per cent or above. As table 1 shows, a total of 281 constituencies (45 per cent of all seats) fell into this category after the 2005 General Election, the great majority of which were the 182 'ultra safe' seats in which Labour MPs were returned. As table 2 shows, these 182 seats represented just over half (51.3 per cent) of those won by the party in 2005. They also comprised 29 per cent of all constituencies in Great Britain.

However, the possession of a safe seat is by no means a unique privilege of Labour MPs. As table 2 also shows, 84 of the 197 Conservative MPs (43 per cent) elected to the 2005-10 Parliament occupied 'ultra safe' seats. Moreover, if we combine the categories of 'ultra safe' and 'very safe', then table 2 reveals that almost two-thirds of both Labour and Conservative MPs elected in 2005 represented seats with majorities of at least 15 per cent. Just 20 Liberal Democrat MPs elected in 2005, a third of the party's total, enjoyed this notional 'job security'. Conversely, 47 per cent of Liberal Democrat victories in 2005 were in seats which were subsequently defined as 'ultra' or 'fairly' marginal, approximately double the proportion of Labour (24 per cent) and Conservative (23 per cent) seats which fell into this category.

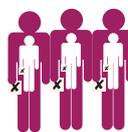


Table 2: Distribution of seats by party and by categories of marginality, post-2005 (Great Britain)

	<i>Labour</i>		<i>Conservative</i>		<i>Liberal Democrat</i>	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Ultra safe	182	51.3	84	42.6	11	17.7
Very safe	40	11.3	40	20.3	9	14.5
Fairly safe	45	12.7	28	14.2	12	19.4
Fairly marginal	47	13.2	17	8.6	16	25.8
Ultra marginal	41	11.5	28	14.2	12	22.6
Total	355	100	197	100	62	100

Source: Data derived from Pippa Norris' British Parliamentary Constituency Database 1992-2005, release 1.3: <http://www.hks.harvard.edu/fs/pnorris/Data/Data.htm>

Of course, this distinction between safe and marginals seats is by no means set in stone. While safe seats rarely become marginals overnight, individual seats may move from being fairly marginal to being very safe, or vice versa, over a period of several elections. Shifts can occasionally be more dramatic, such as when there are profound changes in the political landscape. When Labour won a 'landslide' victory in 1997, a surprising numbers of previously safe seats changed hands, and Conservative Parliamentary representation was halved to 165 seats. Labour managed to retain a remarkable number of previously safe Conservative seats through to 2005. However, landmark elections in which voting shares shift dramatically from the previous contest are sometimes more notable for the proportion of seats which they leave in the hands of the same party. When Labour's share of the vote fell to 28.3 per cent in 1983, a fall of almost 10 percentage points compared to 1979, a total of 209 Labour MPs were still returned – only 60 fewer than at the previous election.

Even in the wake of the expenses scandal, the surge in Liberal Democrat support, and a degree of unpredictability added by boundary changes, the outcome of the majority of individual constituency contests at the 2010 General Election can be predicted with relative certainty well in advance

of polling day. With the outcome of so many local contests a virtually foregone conclusion, the result of the General Election as a whole will therefore hinge on the votes cast by electors in a far smaller number of seats, where the outcome is far from certain – in particular, the 'ultra marginals'.

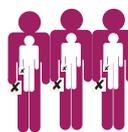
Voters in key marginal seats are likely to share this sense that their individual votes will be crucial in determining the outcome of the election. These voters will have been heavily targeted by the political parties, not only in the period since the election was announced, but also in the weeks and months leading up to the election. Meanwhile, millions of electors across the great majority of seats which are classified as 'safe' will have a radically different experience of the election. Many such constituencies will appear almost as 'campaign free zones', particularly when contrasted to the frenetic campaigning taking place in marginal seats. In short, a general election is really a tale of two electorates. To misquote George Orwell: 'all voters are equal, but some are more equal than others'.

Implications for party strategy

THE THREE MAIN POLITICAL parties have adopted distinct electoral strategies in light of their particular spread of safe and marginal seats and whether they are in government or opposition. Clearly, for Labour as the incumbent in 2001, 2005 and now in 2010, it has been rational to focus on defending as many of its marginal seats as possible, while assuming that it will hold safe seats with little difficulty. For the Conservative Party, the rational strategy is to make much the same assumption in relation to its safe seats and to mount as strong a campaign as possible to win the key marginal seats it needs to secure a majority. Meanwhile, the Liberal Democrats face a quite different challenge. With few obvious concentrations of electoral support, and with less financial resource at their disposal, the Liberal Democrats must go to greater lengths to defend their existing seats, and face a substantial uphill battle to make any additional gains.

As a result of the distinctive strategies employed by the political parties, the great majority of voters, even those in marginal seats, will rarely have the opportunity of choosing between three candidates with a realistic chance of being elected. Aside from the two dozen or so genuine 'three-way marginals', and a handful of seats in which the Welsh and Scottish Nationalists have substantial levels of support, the vast majority of marginal seats fall into one of three distinct types of battlegrounds. Thus, the typical marginal will involve a head-to-head contest between either: the Conservatives and Labour; the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats; or Labour and the Liberal Democrats.

Political parties have become



increasingly sophisticated in the way in which they target their efforts on key marginal seats. As party strategists have come to focus on the marginals, which tend to be geographically disparate, they have tended to define core socio-demographic categories of 'swing' or 'floating' voters to which they seek to enhance their appeal. Based principally on variables such as age, occupation, housing tenure and consumption preferences, many of these categories have become well known. The most notable are, without doubt, 'Worcester Woman' and 'Mondeo Man', key target groups for Labour in 1997 as the party sought to expand its appeal beyond its traditional base of blue-collar workers and welfare state professionals.⁵ Both 'Worcester Woman' and 'Mondeo Man' were shorthand for the swing voters of 'Middle England – the former representing younger female voters, typically home-owners and working in white collar jobs and the latter their male counterparts, often working in sales or similar roles.

Implications for the electorate

IT CAN BE ARGUED, quite legitimately, that the targeting of categories of swing voters in key marginals constitutes entirely rational behaviour for political parties. Yet, while this amalgam of political sociology and marketing fascinates political strategists and pundits, rather limited consideration is ever given to the implications for the electorate. Yet, important consequences stem from political parties targeting their resources in an increasingly strategic way

5 In 2001, the Conservatives sought to target 'Pebbledash People' – middle-aged, white collar workers living in suburban areas. At the 2010 election, 'Motorway Man' has emerged as the key target demographic – held to represent male professional voters who live in new-build housing close to motorway junctions and whose work requires that they travel extensively by car.

– as a tiny sub-section of the electorate becomes defined as the 'kingmakers', election campaigns become increasingly 'uneven', with turnouts holding up in marginal seats, but falling sharply in safe ones.

With floating voters in key marginals being targeted with growing intensity by the political parties, psephologists have calculated the minimum number of voters who would need to change their allegiance in order for the election to produce a change of government. Over time, the estimate of the number of electors who yield such remarkable power has progressively been reduced. At the 1997 General Election, it was estimated that around 500,000 individual voters 'could have swung a close election one way or the other'.⁶ In 2007, following the 'General Election that never was', the Electoral Reform Society estimated that the difference between a Labour and a Conservative victory could have depended on how as few as 8,000 voters across 30-35 key marginals cast their votes.⁷

Much the same point is made, using a different basis for calculation, by the New Economics Foundation's 'Voter Power Index'. The Index, created by Nic Marks, assesses how much weight an individual vote has, based on the total electorate for each constituency, the marginality of the seat and the probability of it changing hands. The index reveals that the most powerful voters in 2010 are those in Arfon, a tight marginal in North West Wales with 43,000 voters, who have the notional equivalent of 1.3 votes each. At the other end of the scale, ranked 650th, are the 66,000

6 S. Weir and D. Beetham, *Political Power and Democratic Control in Britain* (London: Routledge, 1999) p.63.
7 Electoral Reform Society, *The Election that Never Was* (London: ERS).

voters of Sheffield Brightside and Hillsborough, whose voter power is calculated as being equivalent to 0.002 of a vote.⁸

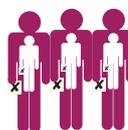
While the political parties cannot simply target their efforts at 8,000 voters, there is no doubt that electors in Arfon will have received significantly more attention from the political parties than voters in Sheffield Brightside during the 2010 campaign. The natural corollary of the targeting of marginal seats is that residents of ultra-safe Conservative and Labour seats are the least likely to be contacted by the political parties during the election campaign. As we noted in our 1999 Audit, if we take Bootle and Kensington as the archetypal safe seats for Labour and the Conservatives respectively, we can confidently surmise that, at previous general elections:

'Bootle Man' and 'Kensington Lady' no doubt received their election addresses, courtesy of a free mail service, but they were not solicited by direct mail, they were not telephoned six times during the campaign, their views were not sought nor their fears assuaged, they were not invited to an intimate question-and-answer session with a party leader. Such privileged status was reserved for the 'swing voters'.⁹

If parties behave rationally in targeting certain seats, then the response of electors may be argued to be equally rational. Since casting a ballot in an ultra-safe seat is highly unlikely to make any impact on the outcome of the contest, voters have significantly less motivation to turn out to vote compared to their counterparts in an ultra-marginal, where a single ballot could realistically make the difference between one candidate losing and another winning. As

8 New Economics Foundation, *Spoiled Ballot: why less than three per cent have a fair share of power in Britain* (London: NEF). See also: <http://www.voterpower.org.uk/>

9 S. Weir and D. Beetham, *ibid*, p.66.

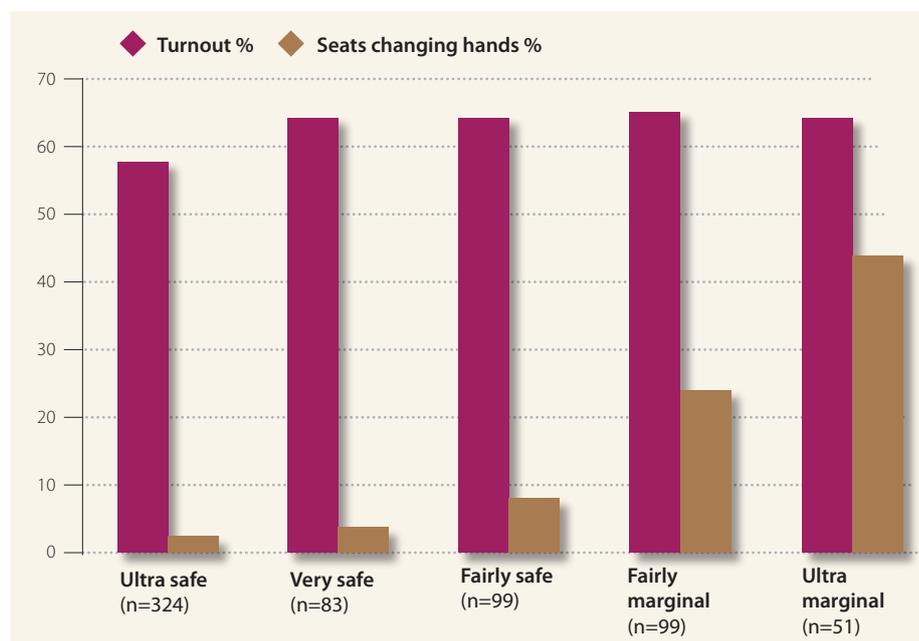


a consequence, turnout rises significantly as seats become more marginal, with low turnouts concentrated overwhelmingly among the ultra safe seats. As figure 1 shows, this creates a very clear pattern. Following the 2001 General Election, 324 seats were classified as ultra-safe. At the 2005 election, the average turnout in these seats was 57.4 per cent and just 2.2 per cent of the seats changed hands. Both turnout and the proportion of seats changing hands rose as seats became more marginal, with the result that over 20 times as many seats changed hands among the 51 ultra-marginals, compared to ultra-safe seats, while turnout was almost 10 percentage points higher in ultra marginal, compared to ultra safe, seats.

The response of the electorate to the parties' strategic focus on marginal seats therefore tends to reinforce the progressive targeting of election campaigning. Since safe seats are very unlikely to change hands, with voters more likely to stay at home rather than vote against the incumbent, parties may feel there are few incentives to campaign. At the same time, the targeting of policy and campaigning towards median and swing voters creates obvious ironies. For instance, it can be argued that, by 2005, 'Worcester Woman' had become a more reliable Labour voter than 'Bootle Man'; Labour's total vote in Bootle in 2005 was numerically smaller than in Worcester: 19,000 compared to 30,000.

How did Worcester come to have more Labour voters than Bootle? The core reason is that traditional Labour voters in Bootle have disengaged from the electoral process. Turnouts have dropped dramatically since Labour succeeded in winning office in 1997 – most obviously in Labour's

Figure 1: Turnout and proportion of seats changing hands at the 2005 General Election, by marginality of seat (marginality based on 2001 results)



Source: Data derived from Pippa Norris' British Parliamentary Constituency Database 1992-2005, release 1.3: <http://www.hks.harvard.edu/fs/pnorris/Data/Data.htm>

Table 3: Natural Labour voters? Worcester Woman versus Bootle Man

	Worcester Woman	Bootle Man
Likelihood of voting Labour (2005)	39%	30%
Likelihood of not voting (2005)	41%	60%
Voter power – score and ranking (2010)	0.455 (Rank: 129/650)	0.003 (Rank: 644/650)
Likelihood of being workless (2005)	13%	32%

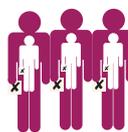
Sources: Derived from British Parliamentary Constituency Database 1992-2005; ONS Electoral Statistics (2005); New Economics Foundation (2010); NOMIS (2010).

traditional strongholds. There is also some evidence to suggest that levels of electoral registration have fallen quite sharply in areas which have conventionally been considered 'safe Labour'.¹⁰ At the 2005 General Election, Bootle returned the largest Labour vote in the country – 75 per cent of the votes cast. Yet, only an estimated 84 per cent of eligible Bootle voters were registered in 2005, while the turnout among those registered was just 48 per cent.

By contrast, while Labour secured a much lower share of the vote in Worcester (42 per

cent), it did so in a contest with a 64 per cent turnout, based on an electorate with a notional 92 per cent registration rate. The net result, as is shown in table 3, was that the likelihood of 'Bootle Man' voting Labour was only 30 per cent, compared to a 60 per cent probability that he would not be voting at all. Conversely, the probability of 'Worcester Woman' being a Labour voter in 2005 was 39 per cent, roughly equal to the 41 per cent probability of her being a non-voter. Given that around one-third of working age voters in Bootle were without work in 2005, compared to 13 per cent in Worcester, these contrasts are all the more remarkable.

¹⁰ The Electoral Commission (2010) *Completeness and Accuracy of Electoral Registers in Great Britain* (London: The Electoral Commission).



The price of votes: targeting campaign spending

ELECTION CAMPAIGNS DO NOT come cheap, least of all heavily targeted ones. With the onset of the media age, the parties began to increase their spending on election campaigns from 1964, but it was really after 1987 that the sea change in the scale, focus and organisation of campaign operations occurred. The result was that the political parties became engaged in what is often described as a ‘spending arms race’, culminating in the record national spending levels at the 1997 General Election – when the three main parties spent in excess of £80 million between them, in today’s prices.¹¹

General election campaign spending consists of two notionally distinct elements, which are often difficult to separate in practice. First, there is the money spent by local candidates at a constituency level. This expenditure is based on legal limits, originally introduced under the Corrupt and Illegal Practices Act 1883 as part of a wider set of reforms aimed at eliminating corruption and malpractice from British elections. The system has been retained ever since and currently entitles each candidate at a general election to spend up to £7,150 plus 5p per Parliamentary elector in a borough/borough constituency or 7p per Parliamentary elector in a county constituency.

The second category of campaign expenditure is the money spent by the parties nationally. This expenditure has grown exponentially in the post-war period and it was only after the passage of the Political Parties,

11 S. Wilks-Heeg, *Purity of Elections in the UK: Causes for Concern* (York: Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust, 2008).

Elections and Referendums Act 2000 that national party spending was capped. While national party spending at the 2001 General Election fell dramatically compared to 1997, this was largely due to the state of party finances rather than the introduction of the cap – none of the three main parties came close to the imposed expenditure limits. In 2005, national campaign spending began to rise again and, by historical standards, recent general election campaigns have remained expensive affairs despite the caps on spending. In real terms, the 1997, 2001 and 2005 General Elections rank respectively as the first, fourth and second most expensive in the post-war period.

A key shift over the past six decades has been the eclipsing of local candidate spending by national campaign spending. In 1945, spending by individual candidates still constituted around 90 per cent of total election expenditure. In real terms, the total sum of candidate expenditure in general elections has remained relatively stable since 1945. However, after 1959, the balance began to shift, quite dramatically, towards national spending directed by the political parties rather than by local candidates and their agents. During the period 1970-83, the balance between the sum of national expenditure incurred by parties and the total of local expenditure incurred by candidates remained broadly equal. But, from 1987 onwards, national party spending began to grow sharply. By 1997, the ratio between local candidate spend and national party spend was 1:10, the exact reverse of the division of spending in 1945.¹²

As national campaign spending grew and general elections became increasingly dominated by national media coverage, the consensus among most academics

12 For further discussion, see Wilks-Heeg (2008), *op cit*.

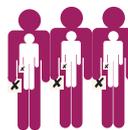
was that local candidate spending had limited impact on electoral outcomes. A cursory glance at the aggregate figures might appear to confirm that this view was shared by the political parties. In 2005, the collective sums spent by Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat candidates at the local level amounted, in real terms, to about one-third of the combined outlays of their predecessors in 1945.

However, to draw conclusions from these aggregated national figures would entirely misrepresent shifts in party strategy over recent decades. As Ron Johnston and Charles Pattie have demonstrated, local candidate spending has shifted as the parties have become increasingly sophisticated in how they target individual local seats, resulting in growing variations in local candidate expenditure.¹³ Moreover, Johnston and Pattie have shown that local candidate spending is far from irrelevant in an era of media-led national campaigning. By targeting expenditure at marginal seats which they are seeking to defend or to gain, political parties are able to increase their share of the vote at a relatively low cost and, therefore, are acting in a highly rational and strategic manner.¹⁴

Candidate spending during the period of the election campaign is far from the only means through which parties seek to target their resources at marginal seats. Indeed, much of what is defined as national campaign spending is, in fact, directed at marginal seats. When party leaders and other senior party figures criss-cross the country during the election campaign, their

13 R.J. Johnston and C.L. Pattie, ‘Where’s the difference? Decomposing the impact of local election campaigns in Great Britain’, *Electoral Studies*, 16 (2), 1997, pp.165-174.

14 R.J. Johnston and C.L. Pattie, ‘How much does a vote cost? Incumbency and the impact of campaign spending at English general elections’, *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 18 (2), 2008, pp. 129-152



routes are carefully planned to take in as many target seats as possible. In addition, the sites chosen for 'national' expenditure on billboard posters will be carefully selected according to each party's strategic focus on specific marginal seats, as will the voters who receive telephone calls from 'national' call centres set up by the political parties. As we noted in our second full Audit of UK democracy, published in 1999, the intensity with which national campaigns are focused on a handful of local contests, circumventing local expenditure limits, pointed to potentially serious issues of legality – these have not been resolved by the introduction of caps on national expenditure at general elections.¹⁵

There is also growing evidence that the national parties have sought to direct resources to local parties in target seats in order to build the capacity for them to mount a 'long campaign' between election periods. Secondary analysis of data compiled by Johnston and Pattie from the Electoral Commission's register of donations to political parties highlights the same pattern of geographical targeting of donations to local party units.¹⁶ The practice is most evident among donors to local Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties. In the year before the 2005 General Election, 71 per cent of donations to local Conservative Associations and 63 per cent of local Liberal Democrat parties were directed to marginal seats, compared to 38 per cent for Constituency Labour Parties.¹⁷ It is the Conservative Party, above all, which has gone furthest in channelling money to local parties, based on an approach

15 S. Weir and D. Beetham, *op cit*, p.90.

16 R. L. Johnston and C.J. Pattie, 'Funding local parties in England and Wales: donations and constituency campaigns' *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 9 (3), 2007, pp.365-395.

17 S. Wilks-Heeg, *op cit*.

masterminded by its current Vice-Chair, Lord (Michael) Ashcroft.¹⁸

As such, candidate expenditure by no means represents a measure of the totality of a party's focus on an individual seat. However, it provides an invaluable proxy measure of the intensity of local campaigning, which we can use to identify variations in the extent to which voters in different constituencies are being targeted by the political parties. In turn, we are likely to find that the patterns associated with local candidate spending are reinforced by other forms of evidence, ranging from the extent to which voters receive any form of contact from the political parties to the constituencies which party leaders chose to visit during an election campaign. What, then, do these patterns of local campaign spending reveal?

Poor odds on a one horse race

AS OF 28TH APRIL 2010, bookmakers Ladbrookes were offering odds of 1/500 on Labour winning in a host of individual constituency contests from Barnsley East to Glasgow North East. A successful £40 bet on a Labour victory in one of these seats would therefore result in a yield of 8p. In other words, Ladbrookes have come to the view that electoral contests in the likes of Barnsley East constitute a 'one horse race'.

The political parties have reached much the same conclusion. The parties spent less campaigning in Barnsley East and Mexborough at the 2005 General Election than anywhere in Britain. The constituency's electors had £5,128 spent on them by the four candidates contesting the seat in 2005, equivalent to

18 Lord Ashcroft has attracted considerable controversy as a major donor to the Conservative Party via Bearwood Corporate Services, and has non-domicile status for tax purposes.

just 8p per elector. More than half of the total was spent by the Labour incumbent, who opted to spend a mere 25 per cent of the permitted maximum. Meanwhile, the candidates contesting the seat for the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats could have mounted little more than tokenistic campaigns, spending less than £1000 each, respectively amounting to six and eight per cent of the expenditure limit.

As an ultra safe Labour seat, Labour took 61 per cent of the vote in Barnsley East in 2005, just over twice the vote share of the other two main parties combined. Yet, the bulk of the electorate appeared to have been deeply underwhelmed by what must have been a lacklustre campaign; 51 per cent of voters did not vote at all. In ultra safe seats, low levels of campaign spending and low voter turnout are two sides of the same coin.

By contrast, candidates in marginals spend significantly more campaigning to win the seat. Excluding constituencies in the more remote parts of Scotland and Wales which have electorates of 55,000 or below, the constituency with the highest candidate spend per elector at the 2005 General Election was Falmouth and Camborne in Cornwall. In this tightly contested three-way marginal, won by the Liberal Democrats with a 34.9 per cent share of the vote, the candidates from each of the three main parties spent at least 95 per cent of the maximum permitted, with UKIP also contesting the seat and spending two-thirds of the limit. The combined spending of all nine candidates at the election was £46,361, equivalent to 65p per elector. The electorate responded accordingly, resulting in a 67.1 per cent turnout, significantly above the average of 61 per cent in 2005.

Clearly, these two constituencies

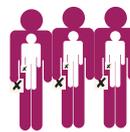


Table 4: Division of parliamentary constituencies in Great Britain by levels of candidate spending (total candidate spending per elector), 2005 General Election

<i>Range of spend per elector</i>	<i>Proportion of mean spend (%)</i>	<i>Number of seats</i>	<i>Turnout</i>	<i>% seats changing hands</i>	<i>% seats not won by Lab/Con</i>	<i>% adults classified as workless</i>
48p or more	150 plus	41	63.4	32.0	42.0	16.1
40-47p	125-149	101	63.9	21.0	25.0	14.5
24-39p	75-124	329	61.5	6.7	9.8	15.6
17-23p	51-74	119	58.2	0	0	18.0
16p or less	50 or less	37	54.3	0	0	21.8

Sources: Derived from British Parliamentary Constituency Database 1992-2005; Electoral Commission (2005); NOMIS (2010).

mark two extremes ends of the spectrum. Yet it is nonetheless striking that, in monetary terms, the voters of Falmouth and Camborne in 2005 appeared to be worth eight times as much to the political parties than the voters of Barnsley East and Mexborough. Moreover, the basic dichotomy between safe seats with minimal campaigning and low turnouts, and marginal seats with vibrant campaigning and higher turnouts, goes far beyond these two cases.

Table 4 lists five categories of parliamentary contest based around multiples of the average candidate spend per elector for seats in England, Scotland and Wales. The contrasts between the areas of high and low spend are highly apparent. At the 2005 General Election, the average combined candidate spend per elector across 628 parliamentary seats in GB was 32p. However, in 37 seats where candidate spending per elector was 16p or below, i.e. half the national average or less, average turnout was 54.3 per cent. Conversely, in 41 constituencies, combined spending by candidates amounted to 48p or more per elector, i.e. one and a half times the national average, with turnout averaging 63.4 per cent.

Significantly, table 4 identifies 156 seats (25% of the total) in which candidate spend per elector was at 23p or below and in which no meaningful electoral contest appeared to take place. Not only are candidate spend and turnouts typically low in these areas, there is also no real evidence of electoral

competition. None of 156 seats changed hands, and every one of these seats returned an MP from one of the two main parties (two-thirds were represented by Labour after 2005, and one-third by the Conservatives). It is also significant that rates of worklessness, as measured by the proportion of the working-age population in receipt of a key social benefit, were noticeably higher in these areas of low candidate spend in 2005, particularly in the 37 seats with the lowest levels of spending.

Table 4 underscores how dynamic party competition occurs in just a handful of seats. Only in seats where candidate spend per elector was 40p or above did turnout typically rise above the national average of 61 per cent in 2005. In the 41 seats where candidate spending per elector was at least

1.5 times the national average, one third of seats changed hands, with 42 per cent of the seats being won by candidates representing parties other than Labour or Conservative.

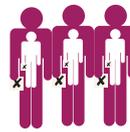
Of course, many of these patterns are mutually reinforcing. Marginal seats are obviously more likely to change hands and, as a result, parties spend more attempting to win or retain them than they do in other seats. Moreover, many of the seats in the top spending bracket are three-way marginals, which inevitably drives up candidate spending. However, the key point is what these contrasts between high and low spend areas tell us about the differential experience of electors in different constituencies.

Tables 5 and 6 provide summary data for the bottom 10 and top 10 constituency contests in 2005,

Table 5: Bottom 10 constituency contests in 2005, ranked by candidate spend per elector (Great Britain)

<i>Name of constituency (2005)</i>	<i>Cand. spend per elector (£)</i>	<i>No. of registered electors</i>	<i>Worklessness (%)</i>	<i>Turnout (%)</i>	<i>Winner 2005</i>
Barnsley East and Mexborough	0.08	66,941	25.8	49.3	Lab
Bolsover	0.10	67,568	20.6	57.3	Lab
Houghton and Washington East	0.10	67,089	21.7	51.7	Lab
Eccles	0.11	69,006	21.3	50.2	Lab
Rother Valley	0.11	67,973	18.3	58.1	Lab
St. Helens North	0.11	69,834	20.7	56.2	Lab
Halton	0.12	64,379	23.4	53.1	Lab
Doncaster Central	0.13	65,731	22.2	52.3	Lab
North Durham	0.13	67,506	20.8	55.3	Lab
Scunthorpe	0.13	62,669	20.2	52.1	Lab
Average/total	0.11	668,696	21.5	53.6	---

Sources: Derived from British Parliamentary Constituency Database 1992-2005; ONS Electoral Statistics (2005); Electoral Commission (2005); NOMIS (2010).



as ranked by candidate spend per elector. Each group of 10 constituencies were home to around 600,000 voters in 2005, yet the political contrasts between them could hardly be greater. All of the 10 constituencies with the lowest spend were won by Labour in 2005, with turnouts averaging 53.6 per cent. In the 10 seats with the highest spend, there is an almost even balance between the three main political parties, and average turnout was 63.2 per cent.

It is notable that, while levels of worklessness average 21.5 per cent in the seats with the lowest spend, this is not substantially higher than in the areas with high candidate spending. This surprising and perhaps counter-intuitive finding is part of an emerging trend. In several seats where candidate spending is high, Labour dominance has been challenged by the Welsh or Scottish Nationalists, by a rise in support for the Liberal Democrats, or both. While such cases remain relatively isolated among safe Labour seats, they do create a situation in which Labour is forced to respond in some localities by mounting a more vigorous campaign. As the Liberal Democrats and others begin to make in-roads on seats in Labour heartlands, Labour will therefore be increasingly forced to divert

campaign resources back towards some of its previously safe seats.

The 2010 campaign

TO WHAT EXTENT HAS the 2010 election campaign followed the pattern established by other recent general elections? Data on candidate expenditure at the 2010 General Election will not be available until some time after the election. However, to provide at least an interim answer to this question, Democratic Audit has gathered data from two other sources as the campaign has unfolded.

First, we have been monitoring national and local media reports of the constituencies visited by party leaders and other senior party figures since the election campaign started. Second, we have conducted a small-scale internet survey of 200 voters across a geographical spread of 160 constituencies in Great Britain to gauge the extent and forms of contact which voters in a diverse range of constituencies have had from political parties – both during the campaign, and in the three months prior to it. Our full analysis of the data from these two sources will be reported after the election campaign has concluded. However, it is possible to report some striking initial findings from our research, all of which underline

the broader pattern presented in this briefing.

Based on media reporting and party websites, we recorded 156 place-specific visits by party leaders or other senior party figures to individual constituencies during the period from 7-28 April 2010. Of these, around two-thirds were made by the three party leaders, all of whom visited at least 30 distinct localities each during this 21-day period. While precise verification is difficult, several of these individual visits were clearly chosen because of the clustering of two or more adjacent marginal seats constituencies – as is highlighted in table 7 overleaf.

Around one-third of these localities have been visited by more than one senior party figure, with approximately 35 of them receiving high-profile visits from senior representatives of at least two different parties. The most visited location on the campaign trail in the period to 28 April was Brighton, home to two Labour-held seats which are key targets for the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives respectively. While marginal and target seats within relatively easy reach of London also feature significantly among the places visited by two or more senior party figures, the localities which party leaders have travelled

Table 6: Top 10 constituency contests in 2005, ranked by candidate spend per elector (Great Britain, excluding remote seats with electorates of less than 55,000)

<i>Name of constituency</i>	<i>Cand. spend per elector (£)</i>	<i>No. of registered electors</i>	<i>Worklessness (%)</i>	<i>Turnout (%)</i>	<i>Winner 2005</i>
Falmouth and Camborne	0.65	71,509	17.3	67.1	LD
Cardiff Central	0.60	61,001	13.4	59.2	LD
Clwyd West	0.60	55,642	18.7	64	Con
Preseli Pembrokeshire	0.57	55,502	17.5	69.5	Con
Sedgefield	0.57	66,666	21.0	62.2	Lab
Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey	0.56	69,636	14.2	63.6	LD
Southport	0.55	67,977	16.5	60.6	LD
Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire	0.55	56,245	17.6	67.3	Lab
Islington South and Finsbury	0.53	57,748	19.6	53.6	Lab
South Thanet	0.53	63,436	18.3	65	Lab
AVE/TOTAL	0.57	625,362	17.4	63.2	---

Sources: Derived from British Parliamentary Constituency Database 1992-2005; ONS Electoral Statistics (2005); Electoral Commission (2005); NOMIS (2010).

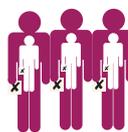


Table 7: Frequent destinations on the campaign trail

Place	No. of visits	Marginal/target seat	Incumbent	Target seat for
Brighton	3 x Labour; 1 x Conservative; 1 x Lib Dem	Brighton Pavillion	Labour	Lib Dem (88)
		Brighton Kempton	Labour	Conservative (45)
		Hove	Labour	Conservative (10)
Cardiff	2 x Lib Dem; 1 x Labour; 1 x Conservative	Cardiff North	Labour	Conservative (22)
		Cardiff Central	Lib Dem	Labour (72)
Swindon	1 x Conservative; 1 x Labour	Swindon North	Labour	Conservative (60)
		Swindon South	Labour	Conservative (45)
Southampton	2 x Lib Dem, 1 x Conservative	Southampton Test	Labour	Lib Dem (57)
		Romsey and Southampton North	Lib Dem (notional)	Conservative (4)
Reading	2 x Labour; 1 x Conservative	Reading East	Conservative	Labour (16)
		Reading West	Labour	Conservative (107)
Oxford	1 x Labour; 1 x Lib Dem	Oxford East	Labour	Lib Dem (4)

to have a remarkable geographical spread. David Cameron has visited several Conservative target seats in the North of England, including Bolton North East and Bury North, while Nick Clegg has made visits to Liberal Democrat target seats as geographically dispersed as Liverpool, Cornwall, Glasgow and Newcastle.

Our internet survey was designed to capture the extent of variation in the contacts which voters receive from political parties in different types of safe and marginal seat. The web-based questionnaire was circulated via a range of personal and professional networks to voters across England, Scotland and Wales. The survey was not designed to achieve a socially and demographically representative sample, but rather to gather data from a geographically dispersed range of constituencies. Completed questionnaires were gathered from a total of 202 respondents during the mid-point of the campaign from 20 to 22 April 2010, of which 187 were fully complete. Responses were gathered from constituencies in all English regions and from Scotland and Wales, although there was some bias towards five English regions: the North West, Greater London, the South East, Eastern and Yorkshire and the Humber.

While the data obtained should clearly be seen as indicative, the

Table 8: Reported contact from the political parties during the first two weeks of the 2010 General Election campaign, and in the three months before the election campaign, by type of seat/contest

Type of seat/contest	No. respondents	Average contacts (campaign)	Average contacts (pre-campaign)
LD-held marginals or LD top 50 target	14	10.4	6.4
Three-way marginals	14	10.4	5.8
Safe Lib Dem	4	7.3	4.5
Conservative targets (1-200)	33	6.9	2.8
Safe Labour	66	4.5	2.6
Conservative held-marginal	8	3.6	3.8
Safe Conservative	48	2.4	0.9

figures cited in table 8 demonstrate that voter report far higher levels of contact from the political parties in marginal seats, particularly those targeted by the Liberal Democrats, than they do in safe Labour and Conservative seats. This pattern is clearly apparent in both the periods before and after the election campaign officially began.

The rise of political inequality

THROUGH THIS BRIEFING THE ISSUE of the relationship between electoral competition and social deprivation has been alluded to. It has been noted that safe Labour seats, in which turnouts are low, campaign spending limited and party competition virtually absent, have levels of social deprivation, as measured by worklessness, tend to be significantly above average. To what extent does the evidence presented in this briefing about political inequality (whether

measured by voter power, voter turnout, or campaign spending per elector) suggest a correlation with wider forms of socio-economic inequality?

As a partial answer to this question, figure 2, overleaf, maps the relationship between voter turnout and worklessness across all parliamentary constituencies in Great Britain in 2005. As the data show, there is a very clear relationship between the two variables. Turnouts of 70 per cent and above are heavily concentrated in areas with lower levels of worklessness, and there is a very clear tendency for turnout to fall as worklessness rises. The great majority of seats in which turnout was below 50 per cent in 2005 had levels of worklessness running at 25 per cent or above.

These findings should not surprise us; there is widespread evidence that virtually all forms of civic and political engagement

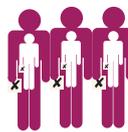


Figure 2: Relationship between turnout and worklessness, GB Parliamentary constituencies, 2005



rise with socio-economic status.¹⁹ However, growing evidence of a relationship between political inequality and other forms of inequality should very much concern us. After the early 1990s, Labour's core electoral focus on the aspirations of middle-class voters in marginal seats, together with the wider electoral dynamics described in this paper, were significant factors prompting increasing numbers of voters in the most deprived areas to disengage. The purchase which the poorest groups in society exercise over government policy has almost inevitably declined as a consequence. The absence of meaningful electoral contests across a host of safe Labour seats in 2010 will only serve to reinforce these trends.

Conclusion

WHETHER THE 2010 GENERAL Election produces the sort of outcome which is widely seen as democratically abhorrent remains to be seen, but there can be little doubt that the debate about electoral reform in the UK has reached a pivotal moment. As that debate gathers pace, it is crucial not to lose sight of some of the wider political and social implications of the UK's current electoral system.

Evidence that turnouts and campaigning are depressed in safe seats, especially safe Labour seats, is undeniable – particularly when contrasts are drawn with the marginals. There is also widespread evidence, and growing concern, regarding the manner in which political parties, often supported by individual or corporate donors, have sought to direct financial resources to the marginal seats in which the outcome of general elections is effectively determined.

The net result is an increasingly polarised democratic geography. Vibrant local political activism is generally restricted to a handful of

seats, at least some of which may well amount to 'proxy' politics, supported by the 'cheque book' activism of large scale donors. By contrast, in areas where either of the two major parties enjoys large majorities, local parties are often found to be withering on the vine – a phenomenon whose symptoms become most obvious at election time. The broadcasting of live television debates between party leaders in 2010 does not alter the fundamental fact that the election will be won or lost in marginal seats. The evidence we have been able to gather about the geography of the 2010 campaign clearly reinforces the patterns of inequality which were apparent in 2005.

There has been remarkable reluctance, not just among the main two political parties, to debate the role of the electoral system as a factor prompting low turnouts, or to discuss the wider implications of all the political parties targeting their efforts at a minority of seats. But this is no longer just a question of political participation. That many of the seats in which local democratic activism and engagement (whether measured by campaigning, spending or voter turnout) are lowest also suffer the highest levels of social deprivation is perhaps the greatest indictment of all against our current electoral system. Reversing the downward spiral of political and social inequality will be a key challenge facing the new UK government. Policy-makers will fail to rise to the challenge if they neglect the impact of the electoral system as a driver of both political and socio-economic inequality.

19 S. Wilks-Heeg and S. Clayton, *Whose Town is it Anyway? The State of Local Democracy in Two Northern Towns* (York: Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust, 2006).



About the author

DR. STUART WILKS-HEEG is Executive Director of Democratic Audit and Senior Lecturer in Social Policy at the University of Liverpool. He is the author of *Purity of Elections in the UK: Causes for Concern* (York: Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust, 2008).

Any queries about this briefing may be directed to Stuart Wilks-Heeg: swilks@liv.ac.uk

About Democratic Audit

DEMOCRATIC AUDIT is an independent research organisation that carries out research into the quality of democracy in the UK. The Audit's methodology for auditing and assessing democracy has won international acclaim. It is widely copied across the world, having been employed in at least 21 nations by governments, international bodies such as the UNDP and the Open Society Institute, universities and research institutes. Democratic Audit has published three major successive democratic audits of the UK, using the methodology, and many path-breaking reports on specific aspects of the UK's political life from a clearly defined democratic perspective.

Democratic Audit is a not-for-profit company, grant funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust. Registered in England and Wales; company no. 6145962.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to convey particular thanks to Steve Ackers for his assistance with data analysis, Pete Campbell for helping to design the web-based survey questionnaire, and Dave Ellis for monitoring the movements of party leaders and other senior party representatives during the campaign. Thanks also to Stuart Weir, David Beetham and Dave Ellis for their comments on a draft of this briefing.

Design by Tony Garrett



Democratic Audit

Eleanor Rathbone Building
Bedford Street South
Liverpool, L69 7ZA

0151 794 3012

www.democraticaudit.com