

The English local elections

Context

There are local authority elections nearly¹ everywhere in England outside London.

The local election calendar is complicated, and different councils have different electoral arrangements. The principal difference is between councils electing 'all out' every four years, and councils that elect a third of their members at a time. The 36 metropolitan boroughs all elect by thirds, as do many of the larger urban unitary authorities (such as Hull, Southampton and Plymouth). There are also elections, mostly all-out, for district councils in areas with two-tier local government (although one should note that some small districts do have elections by thirds while some big unitaries like Nottingham have them all-out...). There are also a few Mayoral elections such as Bedford, Mansfield and Watford.

Most of the seats being contested in 2011 were originally elected in May 2007.² This was a poor set of local elections for Labour, taking place just before the decision of Tony Blair to step down and pervaded by a sense of tiredness with the government and hostility to the messy situation in Iraq. Labour's organisation, particularly in its weaker areas, was in a very bad condition and the party faced difficulties finding candidates in many rural and suburban districts. Labour has made a determined effort to stand more candidates this year. For Labour, the only way is up given the low ebb the party's electoral fortunes reached in 2006-09, and conversely the Conservatives are going to shed some seats they won while in opposition.

The Liberal Democrats face a bad set of elections. For the most part, this is to do with their national unpopularity for their actions in government but it also reflects a longer-term trend. The slight gain in seats in 2008 is an exception to losses in every year starting in 2007. The 2009 county council elections saw the Lib Dems fall back badly against the Conservatives, particularly in the South West of England (they lost Somerset and Devon to Tory control and were easily defeated in the race to be largest party in Cornwall). In May 2010's local elections Labour, boosted by the higher turnout, regained serious ground from them in urban England, gaining Liverpool directly and depriving the Lib Dems of outright control of Sheffield.

Predicting the English local elections

National equivalent vote share % in local elections						
	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Con	31	39	40	43	35	35
Lab	34	26	26	24	22	28
LD	27	25	24	23	25	25
Other	8	10	10	10	18	12

(Source: LGC Elections Centre, University of Plymouth)

¹ The exceptions are a few county-based unitary authorities – Isle of Wight, Durham, Northumberland – some district councils with an unusual by-halves electoral cycle – Nuneaton & Bedworth, Fareham, Gosport, Oxford, Hastings – and some single or double member wards in district and unitary councils electing by thirds.

² The exceptions are some newly created unitary councils that had elections in 2009 but will have elections on new boundaries this year – Cheshire West & Chester, Cheshire East, Central Bedfordshire, Bedford.

There are two consistent tendencies in the national performance of the parties in local elections. One is that the government party (except in years like 2005 and 2010 when there is a general election on the same day) underperforms compared to its national poll ratings. In 1998, for instance, Labour's poll lead was usually around 20 points but the local elections had the party only 10 points ahead. The reason for this is mostly turnout bias –people are inclined to go out and vote in local elections when they are angered by something national government has done, but rather less so if they are generally content with the government. Others who might still want the government re-elected come a general election also feel able to use their vote as a protest against some aspect of the government's activities.

The other consistent trend is for the Liberal Democrats to do better in local elections than their national voting intention in polls might suggest. This owes a little bit to tactical voting in general elections, or a feeling that a general election is about choosing between Conservative and Labour government, but it is also strongly linked to the Lib Dems' local credentials. In many areas, their councillors and council groups have personal and political support from electors based on local issues and the effectiveness of their grass-roots campaigning techniques. Even many voters who might see the Lib Dems (in pre-2010 terms) as well-meaning but ineffective at a national level would acknowledge that they made good local representatives who got things done and believed in the politics of localism.

Relationship between national polls/ general elections and NEV												
	2005		2006		2007		2008		2009		2010	
	GE	NEV	Poll	NEV	Poll	NEV	Poll	NEV	Poll	NEV	GE	NEV
Con	33	31	37	39	37	40	44	43	43	35	37	35
Lab	36	34	31	26	32	26	26	24	27	22	29	28
LD	22	27	17	25	18	24	17	23	18	25	23	25
Other	10	8	15	10	13	10	13	10	12	18	12	12

(NEV – national equivalent vote in local elections; Poll is a YouGov poll taken at or shortly before the local elections).

We can expect the turnout enthusiasm bias to reverse itself in many areas, and for the Conservatives to poll a bit below their national ratings and Labour more or less at their national ratings. The turnout/ enthusiasm bias works particularly against Labour in government, and a bit less so against the Conservatives, because when there is a low turnout older, wealthier and better educated voters form a larger proportion of those voting.

The tendency for the Lib Dems to do better in local elections has never been tested with them in government, but it seems a plausible hypothesis that they should continue to outperform their national poll ratings. The gap might be a little less than in the past – perhaps 4-5 points rather than 6-8 as in the elections of 2006-09. Assuming opinion polls in the run-up to the local elections are more or less where they are now – Con 36 Lab 42, LD 10 – then the NEV in the local elections should pan out at around Con 34 Lab 41 LD 15. Compared to the 2007 baseline, these are changes of Con -6, Lab +15, LD -9 which translates into swings of 10.5 per cent from Con to Lab, 12 per cent from LD to Lab and 1.5 per cent from LD to Con.

Yardsticks for success and failure

Figures of this sort would produce large-scale Labour gains, more of them from the Conservatives than the Lib Dems because there are more Conservative than Lib Dem seats being defended. Because the largest number of seats are up for election in this year (2007, 2011) of the four-year cycle, the number of seats changing hands could be very large – media reports that Labour gains of over 1,000 are to be expected are reasonable. This would imply an outcome similar to 1999, a fairly ‘even year’ in recent local election history.

Net council seats gained and lost, England, every fourth year					
	1991	1995	1999	2003	2007
Conservative	-890	-2,042	+1,293	+562	+911
Labour	+490	+1,799	-967	-812	-505
Liberal Dem	+520	+495	-119	+173	-246

(figures for 1991 and 1995 include Wales)

Although Labour may gain quite a large number of seats, in terms of control of councils the change will be less dramatic for two reasons. In councils that elect by thirds, the replacement of the 2007 councillors by those elected in 2011 still means that there is one very good Tory year (2008) and one more even year (2010) among councillors, so that even if Labour does very well it is hard for the party to gain majorities. A lot of these councils, though, will flip over to Labour control in 2012. Many of the councils electing all-out in 2011 are in Labour’s weaker areas, so Labour gains will result in the party’s re-emergence as an opposition group with a respectable number of councillors rather than winning control.

	Metropolitan	Unitary (all out)	Unitary (by thirds)	District (all out)	District (by thirds)
Labour should gain easily	Bolton (NOC), Leeds (NOC), North Tyneside (NOC), Sheffield (NOC)	Blackpool (Con), Stoke-on-Trent (NOC),	Warrington (NOC)		Bassetlaw (NOC), Lincoln (NOC)
Con should lose to NOC	Walsall			Gedling, Thanet	Harlow, Rossendale
LD should lose to NOC			Bristol, Hull		
Labour should gain	Newcastle (LD), Oldham (NOC)	Redcar & Cleveland (NOC), Stockton (NOC)	Blackburn with Darwen (NOC), Thurrock (NOC)	Ashfield (NOC), North Warwickshire (Con), South Derbyshire (Con)	Hyndburn (NOC), Ipswich (NOC)
Labour would be doing well to gain	Bury (NOC)	Brighton & Hove (NOC), York (NOC)		Allerdale (NOC), Broxtowe (NOC), Chesterfield (LD), Dartford (Con), Dover (Con), Erewash	Preston (NOC)

				(Con), Gedling (Con), Gravesham (Con), North West Leicestershire (Con), Northampton (NOC), Thanet (Con), Waveney (Con)	
Con would be doing badly to lose	Dudley, Trafford	Medway	Southampton	Braintree, Charnwood, Forest of Dean, Newark & Sherwood, Stafford, Warwick	
LD would be doing badly to lose	Stockport	Bedford (Mayoralty)	Portsmouth		

A poorer result for the Conservatives than I expect would involve the loss of a number of the smaller district councils. There may be some cross-traffic between Conservatives and Liberal Democrats in some councils (e.g. Conservatives will be targeting Lib Dem held Hinckley & Bosworth in Leicestershire, Lib Dems target Torbay, etc.) There are one or two councils where Labour are vulnerable, including North Lincolnshire, or the Conservatives might pick up from no overall control (like Worcester or several districts in the south west).

I would expect a regional pattern, with Labour doing well in the north (particularly against the Liberal Democrats) and making smaller advances in the south against the Conservatives.

Broadly, if **Labour** fails to gain all of the 'easy' targets, and at least some of the 'should' targets, and does not manage 800 net gains from the low tide the party reached in 2007, and does not manage a respectable (3 points or more) lead in National Equivalent Vote, then the party is in trouble. This would indicate that the party is failing to get its message across and the consequences would be felt immediately in low morale in Westminster and a renewal of dissent with Ed Miliband's leadership. The party needs some headline successes in the south of England (Ipswich is being looked at for this role by the party) to produce a media narrative of 'Labour on the way back in the south'. A lack of southern gains would produce the less helpful story 'Labour consolidates position in the northern cities, Tories hold on in the south'. For the party to be really happy, of course, a larger net gain (1,100?) and National Equivalent Vote lead (6 points) are both required.

The **Conservatives** should be relatively relaxed about some local government election losses. This is normal when in government, and a loss of 800-900 merely takes the party's standing back to where it was in the 2003 elections. These were at the time regarded as not bad for the Tories, and were something of a high point for Iain Duncan Smith's leadership. The Conservatives will still be the strongest party overall in English local government after these elections (although they are nearly certain to lose this position to Labour in 2012 or 2013) and have the overall leadership of the Local Government Association. In broader political terms, too, given that so much of the impact of the government's cuts is to fall on local authorities in 2011-13, there is consolation in not having to make harsh decisions at a local level in so many places. Losses, however, of much more than the

expected level would be bad for morale locally although even so, the Tories can draw comfort from the likelihood that they will be in a far better position than they were following Labour's 1995 landslide.

Any crumb of comfort for the **Liberal Democrats** will be a relief for the party. A National Equivalent Vote of 15 per cent or so is to be expected given their polling (but they would still 'spin' it as being better than the 10 per cent or so they get in the polls); if they are better than 18 per cent it would be time to start writing about the surprising resilience of the Lib Dem vote. Holding Newcastle or Bristol would be something for the party to celebrate (although in each case a loss in 2012 is nearly inevitable). Anything less than annihilation in the urban wards they gained from Labour in 2002-08 by appearing to be a left-wing opposition would be notable.

Perhaps the most interesting Lib Dem story might be what happens in the councils that are contested between them and the Conservatives. I tend to think that this will 'net out' – gains and losses to and from each other being broadly in balance. If it is not, then something significant is happening. There are two forces at work.

One possibility is that being in coalition with the Conservatives has made right-of-centre electors much less reluctant to vote for them, and therefore that Conservative supporters who are disenchanted with their local Tory council feel that they can safely switch to Lib Dem. There have been a couple of interesting by-elections in some very well-off conservative areas (Pembury in Tunbridge Wells, Kent for instance, where UKIP also divided the centre-right vote) illustrating this pattern. If this proves to be a general trend, they could end up making significant gains from the Tories in areas where they have a reasonable organisation and the Conservatives have grown perhaps complacent (Mid Sussex, New Forest, Cambridgeshire – that sort of area). There might be clues in the local election results if the Lib Dems are picking up a new electorate to replace the discarded leftist support they had in 2002-10.

Another possibility is that coalition has damaged their organisational capacity and activist base, so that the party's ability to wage effective campaigns of the sort it depends on in local elections has been reduced. The fall in the number of candidates suggests that this might be happening. Another sign of negative reaction to the coalition would be an unwillingness of left-of-centre voters (often Labour supporters either without a candidate of their own or deciding to vote tactically) to vote for them. By running more candidates than in 2007, Labour is trying to give such voters an outlet for their votes. Even in some rural and conservative areas, the Lib Dems often do depend on the minority of left wing voters there to give them the margin of victory over the Tories, and if this votes Labour or Green instead, or refuses to turn out, this causes broad damage to the Lib Dems in local elections (and potentially the general election too).

Both these factors will be at work in the local elections in May. They may well be in balance with each other, as they were in the Oldham East & Saddleworth by-election – recruits from the Conservatives compensating for losses to Labour. On the other hand, one or other might predominate. If there are significant gains on the 'Pembury pattern' then Clegg can claim to have a viable political strategy. If they are melting down not only in the northern cities (which everyone expects) but also in suburban, southern and rural England, they have a serious problem indeed.