England's local elections 2019: Part 2 – Rainbow and other coalitions

In the second of [two articles](#) reporting the outcomes of May's local elections, **Chris Game** *looks in detail at how a high number of multi-party 'Rainbow' coalitions have been agreed, and highlights how, behind certain patterns of participation, there are numerous varieties of governing pacts – which, perhaps, Westminster politicians could learn from.*
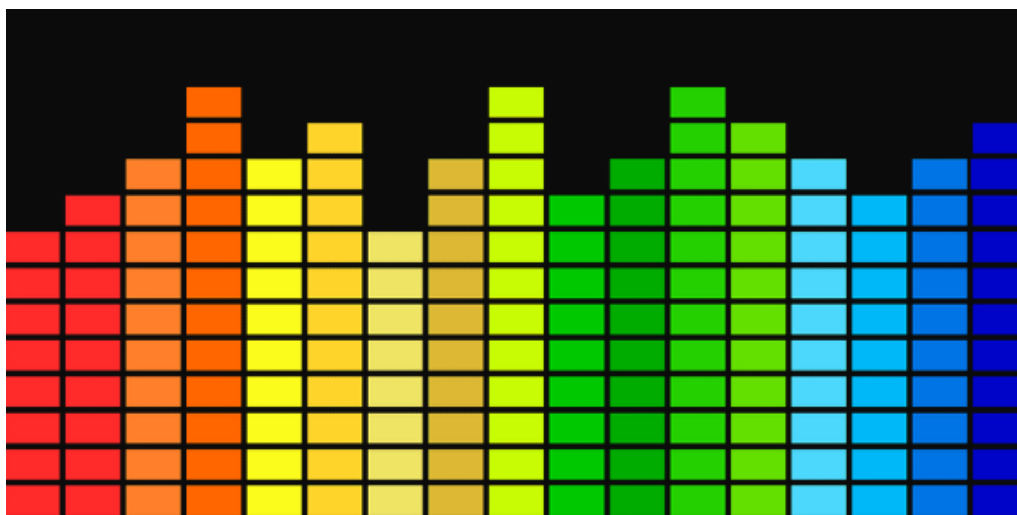

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Never mind rumours of cross-party pacts inside the House of Commons. As the recent Brecon and Radnorshire by-election illustrated, such arrangements in our dysfunctional party and electoral systems, even when confined to a single constituency, are treated as if they were venomous. That a pro-Brexit pact between the Conservatives and the Brexit Party would have been seriously considered seems obvious, yet it [was insistently denied](#) by those involved. Even on the winning Remain side, both Plaid Cymru and particularly the Greens seemed anxious to stress that they had decided not to field candidates against the eventually victorious Liberal Democrat, rather than emphasising the P-word.

Post-electoral pacts, on which many of our local councillors, like most EU politicians, have necessarily over the years become experts, are different in several ways. Most obviously, the parties and groups involved are generally keener to spell out publicly the cabinet and/or committee posts and policy commitments they have managed to win in what are invariably described as 'tough but amicable' negotiations. There are plenty of these following every set of elections, and sometimes in between, but, as detailed in the [first of these two linked blogposts](#), there were more after this year's May local elections than there has been for some time.

That previous article bemoaned many councils' reluctance even fully to report the nature and outcomes of these inter-party negotiations, let alone any implications – and sought to fill the information gap in an off-puttingly large table. This post's far more modest table attempts to bring some order to those individual council numbers, and, I admit, to share my personal satisfaction in seeing the albeit not terribly bold hypotheses that prompted the whole exercise broadly confirmed.

Negotiated outcomes from 'No Overall Control' results		
Negotiated 'Control'		**Examples** (in order listed in main table)
SINGLE-PARTY MINORITY	30	
Conservative	15	Chichester, Lewes, Thanet, Worcester, Bolton, Derby
Labour	10	Scarborough, Stockport, Brighton/Hove, Milton Keynes
Liberal Democrat	4	Arun, Guildford, Mendip, St Albans
Independent/Other	1	Eden
MINORITY COALITIONS	4	Mid-Suffolk, North Kesteven, Warwick, Cheshire East
MAJORITY COALITIONS	32	
2-party/group	11	Hart, North Herts, South Oxfordshire, Stoke, Torbay
'RAINBOWS'		
3-party/group	15	Basildon, Colchester, Folkestone/Hythe, Wyre Forest
4-party/group	3	Rother, Waverley, North Somerset
5+ party/group	3	Burnley, Swale, Bournemouth/Christchurch/Poole
PARTIES/GROUPS INVOLVED IN COALITIONS		
Conservative	15	Allerdale, North Kesteven, Tendring, Hartlepool, Stoke
Labour	16	Basildon, Forest of Dean, Cheshire East, North Somerset
Liberal Democrat	22	Colchester, Hartlepool, S Oxfordshire, N Somerset, Torbay
Green	12	Forest of Dean, Lancaster, Malvern Hills, Herefordshire
UKIP	4	Basildon, Burnley, Folkestone/Hythe, Tendring
'Independent', etc.	37	Swale, Wyre Forest, Burnley, Hartlepool, Herefordshire

Note: As before, the numbers of results counted above are for councils with 'leader + cabinet' executive arrangements, where seats were contested in May 2019, and no single party won over 50% of the seats and thereby immediate control of the council.

Hypothesis 1 was that coalitions, even if not labelled as such by the participating parties, would outnumber single-party minority administrations, which has certainly not always been the case even in the recent past, with both major parties being chary of 'sharing power' with either smaller fry or Independents. Single-party minority administrations formed after the 2014 elections, for example, outnumbered coalitions by well over two to one.

Hypothesis 2 was that 'Rainbow coalitions', as arbitrarily defined by me (an explicit working agreement involving at least three distinct groups), would outnumber two-party coalitions. There were several back in 2014 – I recall particularly the at least four-group 'Brentwood Accord', as well as 'regulars' like Southend-on-Sea, Colchester (they're naturally congenial in Essex) and Stroud – but nothing approaching this year's 21.

Hypothesis 3 was that the party involved in the greatest number of coalitions would be the Lib Dems, and that the Greens would be much more extensively involved than even their greatly boosted councillor numbers would suggest. Hypothesis 4, added admittedly after seeing their exceptional number of seat gains, was that 'Independents' collectively would feature in the most coalitions – partly because their usually smallish numbers can offer bigger parties a relatively cheap means of pushing them into majority territory.

The obvious problem in this instance of being proved so right is that behind almost every one of the 66 cases summarised in the table is an individual story of coalition formation worth recounting in detail, making selection somewhere between invidious and impossible. I have no structured solution, so will simply start with the biggest rainbows and stop when I approach a tolerable word limit.

The first is easy. It has to be the Unity Alliance now running **Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole (BCP)** council, one of the two unitaries created just this April – it having been decreed that nine (all Conservative-run) councils and 333 councillors constituted far too much local government for Dorset's 780,000 citizens, who would feel much better served by just two councils and under half the councillors. Not surprisingly, Conservatives won most BCP seats in May, but, with the Lib Dems and Independents hugely increasing their votes, they fell short of a majority. Hence the Unity Alliance, led by Lib Dem Vikki Slade and comprising – wait for it – 15 Lib Dems, 8 Christchurch Independents, 7 'Poole People', 3 other Independents, 3 Labour, 2 Greens, and a one-member 'Alliance for Local Living'. Enough groups for a full, traditional Newtonian seven-colour rainbow.

Exceptional, yes, but **Burnley** came close, with Labour playing the grouchy role of the BCP Tories. Having only narrowly lost their majority on the 45-member council, the 22 Labour members hoped to out-organise the disparate and less experienced 'opposition' at the full council meeting vote and hang on to the leadership. Bad mistake. First outvoted, they then declined to join a five-group coalition of Burnley and Padiham Independents (5), Lib Dems (8), Conservatives (4), UKIP – since turned Brexit Party (3), and Greens (2).

As already indicated, though, there are several councils for whom coalition government has become the norm in recent years – and for whom the instability implications of the 'No overall control' label is particularly misleading. **Colchester BC** is one example. A political mapping of the borough will show that for most of the past 20 years it has been predominantly Conservative blue – except for the Colchester/Wivenhoe patch in the east where the University of Essex happens to be. This accounts for the Lib Dems having generally been the largest party on the council here and for the past decade having headed a Lib Dem/Labour/Independent coalition every bit as stable as most single-party administrations.

As already indicated, I have no profound conclusion or message with which to close this extended blog. So I will end with two of the numerous cases that invariably make this kind of 'research' worthwhile. If there were an 'Admire the nerve!' award, it would surely go to **North Kesteven**'s Cllr Richard Wright, Leader of the Conservative group, which lost, by a margin, control of the council it had dominated for 12 years. Wright, however, comes from the John Cleese/Black Knight '[Tis but a scratch](#)' school. Unfortunate, he conceded, but it was 'a protest vote, not on local issues…about the ongoing deadlock between the national parties on Brexit.' The solution – obvious! The Conservative Group would 'no longer exist', the council would be run by the 'North Kesteven Administration', led by him, with Conservatives in all leading roles – oh yes, plus a couple of Independents to make the executive 'more inclusive'.

Finally, one of several 'well, you'd not have guessed that a few years ago' outcomes. **Hartlepool** achieved local government notoriety in 2002 for electing H'Angus the Monkey, the football club's mascot, as its first elected executive mayor. Stuart Drummond, for it was he, became the first elected mayor to win a third term, following which the townspeople voted to abolish the post. Whereupon Labour resumed its long-term dominance of the council – until, following a well-publicised internal personal and ideological split, the party lost its overall council majority, mainly to candidates of the recently formed Hartlepool Independent Union (HIU). Within days of this May's election, the Labour council leader and two other Labour councillors defected to the Socialist Labour Party, the HIU formed a coalition with the Conservatives and the Veterans' and People's Party, and the subsequently elected Chair of the influential Regeneration Committee is…former Labour council leader, Cllr Akers-Belcher. And still there are people who reckon local government is boring!

You can read Part 1 here: [England's local elections 2019: council outcomes from 'no overall control' results](#).

This post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit.

About the author

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