

Despite Labour's convincing victory in the Feltham and Heston by-election, there is no strong trend in the party's favour.

Dec 16 2011

Yesterday's by-election in Feltham and Heston saw one of the lowest by-election turnouts in recent years. And while Labour's superior efforts on the ground to increase turnout in the Labour-loyal areas of the constituency were effective, [Lewis Baston](#) argues that in light of other recent by-elections, the result does not signify a significant swing back to Labour nationally.



Despite Labour's convincing victory, the Feltham and Heston by-election was not what one would call a classic. The result was not surprising, the location was an unglamorous patch of west London next to Heathrow, and it took place at an unpromising time of year. The turnout in the by-election was dismal, at 28.8 per cent. The cold, dark, wet conditions on polling day could be partly to blame, but even so it reflected a lack of interest in elections and politics that has some significance. A fairly high proportion of votes cast were postal (6,854 out of the total of 23,298) so on the day turnout was very poor indeed: 23.7 per cent. In a couple of polling stations it fell as low as 15 per cent. As Figure 1 shows, all parties, except UKIP, polled fewer votes than they did in May 2010.

Figure 1 – Feltham and Heston 2011 by-election results

Party	Candidate	Votes	% vote	Change on 2010 %	Vote retention rate %
Labour	Malhotra, S.	12,629	54.4	+10.8	59.6
Conservative	Bowen, M.	6,436	27.7	-6.3	39.0
Lib Dem	Crouch, R.	1,364	5.9	-7.9	20.5
UKIP	Charalambous, A.	1,276	5.5	+3.5	128.6
BNP	Furness, D.	540	2.3	-1.2	31.5
Green	Goldsmith, D.	426	1.8	+0.7	80.4
Eng Dem	Cooper, R.	322	1.4	-	-
Ppl B4 Profit	Hallam, G.	128	0.6	-	-
Bus Pass Elvis	Bishop, D.	93	0.4	-	-

Feltham and Heston is a constituency of two parts, as its name suggests, but there is a stark contrast between its two elements. Feltham is a mostly white, mostly working class town on the edge of London, while Heston is a more middle class area which has become very popular with the Asian community and is part of the Asian metropolis that stretches from Slough to Southall. Demographic and political trends have carried each part in opposite directions in recent decades. Heston was probably the basis for the Conservative wins in the seat in 1983 and 1987, but it is now the most Labour element of the seat. Feltham, by contrast, has trended to the right – once solidly Labour, it elected 10 Conservatives (including by-election candidate Mark Bowen) out of 15 councillors in 2010. While turnout in both sections was poor in the by-election, it held up slightly better in Heston (24.8 per cent, not including postal votes) than in Feltham (22.7 per cent, not including postal votes).

Partly because of the higher turnout in the better Labour areas, the Labour result was creditable – a swing of 8.5 per cent since the 2010 General Election. In opposition between 1997 and 2010, the Conservatives

managed to achieve this sort of swing three times in Con/Lab contests – doing a lot better in Crewe & Nantwich in 2008 and Norwich North in 2009, and only slightly better in a more obscure contest. See if you can guess where and when. It is a smaller swing, though, than Labour managed in most of the big contests of the 1987-92 and 1992-97 parliaments.

The result for Labour was better than might have been expected from the national polls. A national Conservative lead of 1 per cent or level-pegging implies a swing of 3 per cent or so nationally, so Seema Malhotra comfortably beat this benchmark. It was also a bit better than the two opinion polls conducted during the campaign had indicated. Lord Ashcroft's [research](#) found Labour leading with 52 per cent to the Conservatives' 30 per cent, while a [Survation poll](#) for the *Mail on Sunday* put the parties at Labour 53 per cent, Conservative 29 per cent. The pollsters, as well as Labour, can feel pleased about the by-election. Constituency-level polling has often been very inaccurate in the past, and with variables like postal voting, low turnout and mid-campaign developments in national politics, the two Feltham polls look very good indeed.

Labour's good result reflects the effort the parties put into campaigning – the party nationally made it a priority, and volunteers also seemed highly motivated. Although the Conservatives tried to encourage campaign visits, they encountered some resistance even from their MPs – the rather independent-minded Bob Stewart told CCHQ that there was no chance of winning and that he had wasted his time going to Feltham. It was in no way the fault of Mark Bowen, the Conservative candidate, a decent and hard-working councillor who has led an impressive build-up in Conservative strength in Feltham without pandering to any of the hard-right elements in the local white working class electorate.

The Liberal Democrats knew they were on a hiding to nothing, and their London activists were probably more interested in two local government contests in a marginal ward in Kingston-upon-Thames – they lost there as well. Lord Ashcroft's poll showed that Labour's campaign had been noticed more by voters than the other parties' on any measure, but perhaps most significant was that 15 per cent reported that Labour had knocked on their door while the figures for the Conservatives and Lib Dems were 8 per cent and 5 per cent respectively. In a low-turnout by-election, Labour's superior effort on the ground paid dividends.

However, as Figures 2 and 3 show, Labour's performance in by-elections since 2010 has been generally pretty good, and the party cannot claim Feltham and Heston represents huge progress on top of that evident in earlier by-elections.

Figure 2 – Labour's vote retention rates for 2011 by-elections

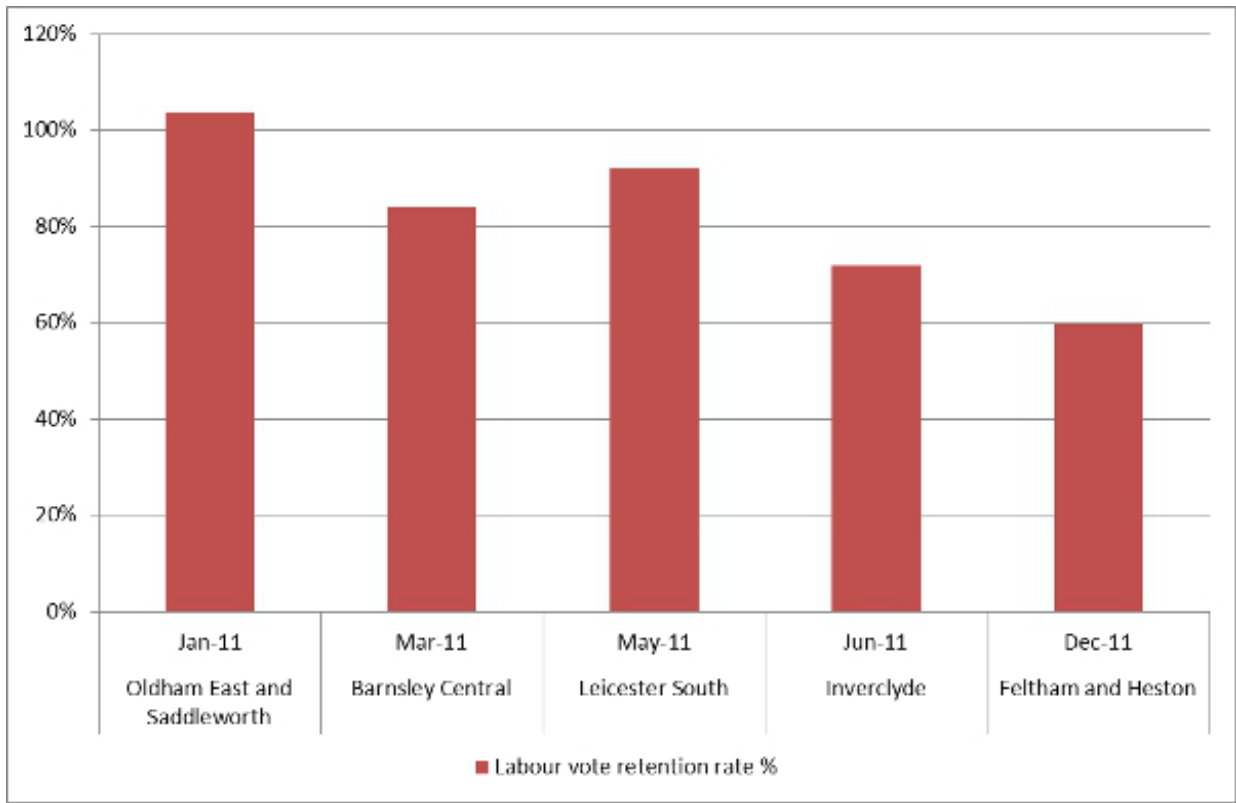
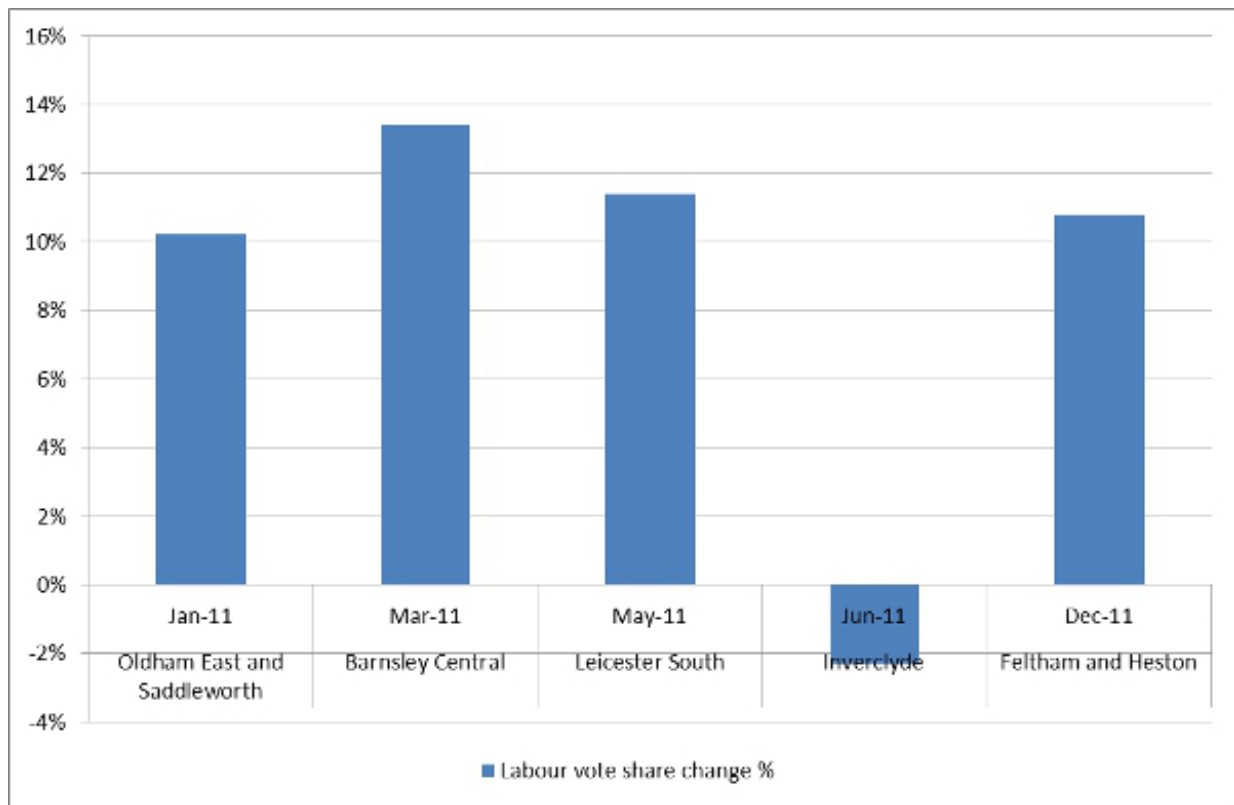


Figure 3 – Labour’s vote share change for 2011 by-elections



Given the low turnout, and the low vote for the Lib Dems in Feltham in 2010 (Labour progress in many areas has been based on harvesting centre-left votes from among 2010 Lib Dems), one cannot say that it is worse than earlier results, but it is hard to argue that it is better. Figure 4 shows that for the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, it was also in line with earlier by-elections.

Figure 4 – Conservative and Liberal Democrat 2011 by-election results

		Con vote share change %	Con vote retention rate %
Oldham East and Saddleworth	January 2011	-13.6	38.1
Barnsley Central	March 2011	-9.1	31.3
Leicester South	May 2011	-6.5	51.4
Inverclyde	June 2011	-2.1	61.8
Feltham and Heston	December 2011	-6.3	39.0
		Lib Dem vote share change %	Lib Dem vote retention rate %
Oldham East and Saddleworth	January 2011	+0.3	79.2
Barnsley Central	March 2011	-13.1	15.8
Leicester South	May 2011	-4.7	60.7
Inverclyde	June 2011	-11.2	12.5
Feltham and Heston	December 2011	-7.9	20.5

Taking the change in the total vote for the coalition parties, the 14.2 percentage point drop is again par for the course. It was better than Barnsley (22.2 per cent) but worse than Leicester (11.2 per cent), Oldham or Inverclyde (both 13.3 per cent). A small irony of Cameron stomping out of the European summit in Brussels was that it probably saved his Lib Dem coalition partners from the indignity of coming fourth. The

Conservative bounce in the polls since the “veto” has come mostly at the expense of UKIP and other small parties, and this almost certainly deprived UKIP of the 89 votes it needed to overhaul the Lib Dems. While its vote was up, and it saved its deposit, the Feltham and Heston by-election must have been frustrating for UKIP.

The turnout, though, is the stand-out feature of this by-election. There have only been five worse turnouts to fill any Commons seat since 1945 – four in the 1997-2001 parliament (Wigan, Leeds Central, West Bromwich West and Tottenham) and the lone by-election of the short parliament in 1974 (Newham South). Even the most perfunctory contests tend to do better – for instance, Falkirk West four days before Christmas in 2000 attracted 36 per cent to the polls.

And that other decent-sized Tory swing in a 1997-2010 by-election? It was Preston, in November 2000, when the turnout was 29.6 per cent and the swing to Conservative reached 9.1 per cent. Preston, like Feltham, was probably significant mostly as an indicator of low turnout and low interest in politics. It certainly did not predict the national result with any accuracy, even with a gap of months rather than years before the next general election.

This entry was posted in [Lewis Baston](#), [Party politics and elections](#) and tagged [by-election](#), [Conservatives](#), [elections](#), [Feltham and Heston](#), [Labour](#), [Liberal Democrats](#), [postal voting](#), [Turnout](#), [votes](#), [voting](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).