

What to watch for in the 2013 local elections

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*With results from the local elections expected tomorrow, **Lewis Baston** provides a preview of what to look out for, from key constituencies to the process of forming coalitions in divided councils. In particular, it may be fascinating to see what happens if the Conservatives lose control of some councils but can still govern if they form coalitions with UKIP councillors.*



There are comparatively few councils counting overnight – the [Press Association](#) expects only six to declare before the start of business on Friday. The reasons are partly that thanks to identity checks it now takes longer than it did to verify that postal votes are valid, and partly that it is cheaper to count during the day. It may also be that county council elections in two-tier council areas are administered by district councils, and that they feel less urgency in finding out who runs the counties!

The upshot of the slow count is that, for the first time in many years, there will not be an overnight election results programme and those who are exceptionally keen to find out what is happening will need to do this online, though the councils' own results services, discussion forums (such as [here](#)), and of course on Twitter. The most interesting overnight count should be in [Somerset](#) where the Conservatives gained at the Lib Dems' expense in the last elections in 2009 and the Lib Dems are now hoping to reverse the pattern. There has been little cheer for the Lib Dems in any set of local elections since 2008, and even if they will be net losers of seats a gain in Somerset and a share of the vote significantly above last year's 15 per cent would be encouraging.

We should also get some indications of how UKIP is doing in some of its target areas, such as [Essex](#), where gains are possible in the urban belt of south Essex as well as along the coast, [Dorset](#) and [Lincolnshire](#). If UKIP are breaking through, they should be scoring a few gains in each of these authorities. If they are gaining a steady 25-30 per cent of the vote in many wards in these counties, without winning any, they are unlikely to have any better news from the result declarations on Friday.

There are some areas where the results will be an interesting indicator of how the two main parties are faring in key marginal seats where Labour are hoping to make gains from the Conservatives in 2015. Lincoln and Harlow will probably be first, but there should also be results from Tamworth, Cannock and Stevenage overnight and Hastings & Rye, Norwich North and Great Yarmouth reasonably early on Friday. The results from [Buckinghamshire](#), the sole Tory county after their 1993 disaster, will come through as well. It might be quite interesting this time, because UKIP are campaigning hard in the county in opposition to the HS2 rail line and development and they have the foundation of a respectable electoral performance in Buckinghamshire in 2009.

The peak time for results declarations will start at around lunchtime on Friday. The Labour target councils of Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire, Staffordshire and Lancashire will be among the last authorities to finish their counts, but there should be sufficient evidence by early afternoon to see which way the wind is blowing in these areas. Labour's total number of gains should take an upward jump when the results from the large unitary authority of County Durham come through – Labour came as close as they have ever in 2009 to losing this stronghold that has been Labour since 1919, and should regain a substantial haul of seats.

There are two particular clusters of Conservative v Labour constituencies that will be worth watching when all the votes are in. One of these is the New Towns, where the Tories made strong gains in 2010 and Labour's recovery in 2011 and 2012 has been only partial – Crawley, Harlow, Redditch, Northampton, South Ribble, Stevenage and Tamworth. There is also a clutch of seats in the Midlands which seem to have been trending Tory over the years – North West Leicestershire, South Derbyshire, Amber Valley, North Warwickshire, Sherwood and around – and where Labour performed weakly in 2011. If the Conservative vote is still resilient in these areas, it would do much to bolster backbench Tory morale.

We should also have the mayoral election results from Doncaster and North Tyneside on Friday. These are Labour-inclined areas but the party tends to under-perform in mayoral elections. North Tyneside has elected Conservative mayors in 2002, 2003 and 2009, with Labour enjoying one victory (2005). Labour now has a very strong position on North Tyneside council with 43 seats out of 60, and they should be able to convert this to one of their rare mayoral election wins. Doncaster was won in 2008 by English Democrat candidate Peter Davies; Davies has subsequently left the English Democrats and defends as an Independent against a renewed Labour challenge. The elections for these posts use the Supplementary Vote system, in which if there is no overall majority for any candidate second preferences are taken into account. Labour's 2005 victory in North Tyneside was enabled by transferred preferences.

By the end of the day we will know who has been elected to all these local authorities, which undertake a very large proportion of local government spending in their areas. In many the result will be clear – a majority for one party or another – but there will be some councils where there is no overall majority. The process of forming administrations in these councils will be interesting and perhaps significant for future alignments. When the Tories lost heavily in their county strongholds in 1993, there were often agreements between Labour and the Lib Dems to take over – and then the co-operation between the parties on constitutional reform in 1997-2001. When Labour lost a lot of ground in the cities in the 2000s, Conservative-Lib Dem arrangements took over in many of them (Bradford in 2000, Birmingham in 2003 for instance), and national coalition followed in 2010. If there is Lib-Lab co-operation once again to run some counties, that might be a significant outcome. It may also be fascinating to see what happens if the Conservatives lose control of some councils but can still govern if they form coalitions with UKIP councillors. No doubt the Conservatives centrally would be reluctant to allow such arrangements, but the temptation may be too much locally and we could see UKIP politicians, for the first time, having executive positions in British government. If that were to happen, it would mark an important consolidation of UKIP as a permanent political presence, rather than a receptacle for nostalgic conservative protest votes.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

About the author

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