

England's 2016 local elections: an indicator of the national political picture?



England goes to the polls on 5 May to vote in a variety of elections. Tony Travers and Martin Rogers highlight a number of key contests to analyse how local elections can affect local services and also help to reveal the national political picture.

An indicator of the national political picture

On Thursday 5 May 2016 England will go to the polls to elect members of the London Assembly, English Local Government and Police and Crime Commissioners as well as four Mayors, including London's Mayoral contest. These elections are important both in terms of who runs local government and services at the local level and for the national political picture. Local elections have in the past been a significant pointer to who will form the government after the next election.

Local government elections take place every year, though there are different patterns of election from place to place. In some councils, for example counties and London boroughs, all councillors are elected every four years. In others, including some unitaries and shire districts, half of the councillors face election every two years. A third pattern, involving metropolitan districts, some unitaries and some shire districts, sees a third of councillors elected every year for three years, with no poll in the fourth year.

Consequently, not all councillors are up for election every year. In some years, local elections are in predominantly urban areas, while in others it is mostly rural councils which vote. May 2016 will see elections in metropolitan districts, some unitaries and some shire districts within England. There are no *local* elections (apart from by-elections) in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland this year. There are also mayoral elections (in addition to London) in Bristol, Liverpool and Salford.

These elections are important both in terms of who runs local government and services at the local level but also because they provide an indication of the national political picture. Local elections are a significant indicator of who will form the government after the next General Election as they tend to give a clear picture of the state of national politics and are based on actual votes

cast rather than polls. For example, the 2011 local elections foreshadowed the SNP's 2015 General Election Landslide.

The unexpected triumph of the Conservatives at the 2015 General Election led Labour and the Liberal Democrats to elect new leaders. Jeremy Corbyn and Tim Farron need strong local election results to show that their parties are recovering from a poor performance last year.

The 'national equivalent vote share' calculations (adjusting the vote share for each party in a particular year's set of elections so as to reflect the result if there had been an election in all parts of the country) made by academic experts will make it possible to see if Labour and the Liberal Democrats have improved on their 2015 vote share. David Cameron and the Conservatives also need a positive result to steady the party's nerves following the resignation of Iain Duncan Smith.

National equivalent vote share and General Elections

Excluding General Election years, the government has outperformed the opposition in local elections on only six occasions since 1979: 1982, 1984, 1988, 1998, 1999 and 2011. In every one of those the Government secured re-election at the next General Election. Therefore these local elections are important as they give an indicator of the state of the parties and are also likely to reflect the government after the next General Election.

The tables below consider the performance of the major political parties in local elections in the period since 1979. Using 'national equivalent vote share' (NEVS) figures, Table 1 shows the vote share of the main Opposition party one year after each general election and whether the party went on to win the following election. The highest 'one year out' percentage was Labour's 42% in 1980, while the lowest was the Conservatives' 33% in 1998. Recent polling has shown Labour on around 27 to 33 per cent of the national vote.

<i>Table 1</i>			
National Equivalent Vote Share one year after general election			
- performance of Opposition and next election result			
GE+1	Opposition party	NEVS	Result of next GE
1980	LAB	42	Lose
1984	LAB	37	Lose
1988	LAB	38	Lose
1993	LAB	39	Win
1998	CON	33	Lose
2002	CON	34	Lose
2006	CON	39	Win (As part of coalition)
2011	LAB	37	Lose
2016	LAB		

Table 2 examines the performance (in terms of NEVS) of the main Opposition party in local elections in the three or four years between each general election. This measure is a test of support for the Opposition in a series of local election cycles. There are no examples of an Opposition winning a general election with an average NEVS of below 39.3 per cent in the previous three or four years. Indeed, the Conservatives did not win the 2010 election outright although they were the largest party. Labour's performance between 1988 and 1991, a NEVS of 40.5 per cent, proved insufficient to win in 1992. Looking ahead, Labour would likely need to have a NEVS average of 39 per cent or above between 2016 and 2019 if they are to have much hope of winning in 2020.

Table 2			
Average national equivalent vote share in inter-election years - performance of Opposition and next election result			
Inter-election period	Opposition party	NEVS average	Result of next GE
1980-82	LAB	37.3	Lose
1984-86	LAB	37.7	Lose
1988-91	LAB	40.5	Lose
1993-96	LAB	42.25	Win
1998-00	CON	35.0	Lose
2002-04	CON	35.3	Lose
2006-09	CON	39.3	Win (As part of coalition)
2011-14	LAB	34	Lose

What are the key local election contests?

Below is a summary of the key local election contests by party. The analysis looks at councils where there is a possibility of a change in political control and/or where the result casts light on the wider political picture. Of course, local elections are primarily about local issues but they nevertheless also provide evidence about the state of the parties at the time of the election and, as demonstrated above, they are important in terms of how they often resemble subsequent general elections.

Conservatives

The Conservatives will aim to hold all their current councils and to gain control of some currently Labour-held councils such as Southampton and Harlow. If they are able to achieve such a result, to keep the councils they currently control, and add new councils in the areas of important marginal Parliamentary seats, then the party will have had a positive result. If they are able to get a national equivalent vote share in the range 36-38% the party has recently polled, this would represent a positive result for the Conservatives.

Key contests: Thurrock, Swindon, Crawley, Watford, Welwyn Hatfield, Woking, Trafford

Labour

For the opposition Labour party the aim must be, at least, to consolidate its results from the previous elections to these seats in 2012 and also be looking to ensure that the party does not lose control of any council that it currently controls. It needs to perform strongly in Milton Keynes, Plymouth, Southampton and Thurrock as such places are key indicators (in terms of marginal seats) for the next general election. In order to demonstrate Labour has made gains amongst potential support it should look to win a significant proportion of the thirteen seats up for election on Norwich council. If Labour can achieve a national equivalent vote share close to the 39% it achieved in 2012 that would be positive result and would beat its recent national polling numbers which have been below that level.

Key contests: Thurrock, Norwich, Exeter, Plymouth, Southampton

Liberal Democrats

Can the Lib Dems make gains from the Conservatives to reclaim some ground? The party needs to perform strongly in places such as Stockport, Milton Keynes and Watford to demonstrate a solid

revival. If the party does reasonably well, it will be interesting to see from which of the other parties they gain most votes. Are they able to take votes from the Conservatives to mount a national fight back? Can they take votes from Labour at a time when the party has internal problems?

Key contests: St Albans, Norwich, Stockport, Watford

UKIP

The May 2016 elections are also important for UKIP. After failing to convert nearly four million votes in to more than a single parliamentary seat at the May 2015 general election, UKIP finds itself fighting local elections just seven weeks before the EU referendum. UKIP's primary issue will thus be at the forefront of voters' minds. UKIP achieved 13% of the vote share in 2015, and as much as 22% of the national equivalent vote in 2013. The extent to which they can reach such numbers in 2016 will go some way to demonstrating whether they can prosper as a challenger party in the longer term.

Key contests: Thurrock, Harlow, Redditch and Rushmoor

Read Tony and Martin's follow up piece for an in-depth look at the key contests in England's 2016 Local Elections



UK Elections 2016 on GovBlog

For the latest analysis of 2016's electoral contests, go to [UK Elections 2016](#) on GovBlog.



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