



# Political Studies Association

## **The Local Elections**

### **Media Briefing Pack**

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*NB. All slides will be emailed round following the event, along with these notes*

## **The Political Landscape**

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### **The Political Landscape**

To date in this Parliament there have been two major changes in the fortunes of the political parties. First, following an adverse reaction to the formation of a coalition with the Conservatives, the announcement of that coalition's austerity policy and its decision to hike university tuition fees, Liberal Democrat support fell away sharply in the second half of 2010. At the same time Labour rapidly recovered from its severe election defeat in May 2010 and emerged with a narrow lead over the Conservatives. Second, after having largely remained at its 2010 level support during the party's first two years in office, in the spring of 2012 Conservative support fell away noticeably in the wake of a Budget that occasioned an unusual level of criticism and subsequent policy reversals, and which coincided with a number of other ministerial misfortunes that came to be dubbed by the opposition as an 'omnishambles'. That has been followed by a remarkable increase in support for UKIP whose current polling rating is on average at least equal to that of the Liberal Democrats and which now threatens to pose the most serious independent fourth party incursion in English electoral politics in the post-war period.

This presentation focuses initially on the second, more recent of these developments, looking at the source and nature of UKIP support and the Conservatives' difficulties. It then returns to the first development to assess the sources of Labour support, and to examine whether it may be too reliant on Liberal Democrat disaffection for its polling lead.

There is no doubt that the Conservative party is losing votes more heavily to UKIP than are either the Liberal Democrats or (especially) Labour. On average recent polls suggest that some 16% of those who voted Conservative in 2010 and currently have a party preference would now vote UKIP. The equivalent figure for the Liberal Democrats is 8% and for Labour 4%. As a result it appears that between two-fifths and a half of current UKIP supporters voted Conservative in 2010, making them the largest single source of UKIP support. Claims made by UKIP themselves that much of their support comes from those who did not back any party in 2010 cannot be verified from the information published by most national polls. What can be stated is that around a third of UKIP's support comes from those who did not vote for one of the three largest parties in 2010, including those who abstained, but also, crucially, those who voted UKIP in 2010.

UKIP support is at least three times higher amongst those aged 60/65 and over than it is amongst those 18 to 24, while it tends to be rather lower in the AB professional and managerial portion of the population, patterns that would be anticipated for a party that has made social conservatism a key part of its appeal alongside anti-Europeanism. At the same time its support is higher amongst men than women, a pattern also to be found in support for nationalism and independence in Scotland.

In responding to UKIP's rise, the Conservative party appeared initially at least to assume that it was driven primarily by growing discontent with the UK's membership of the European Union, thereby leading the Prime Minister to offer the prospect of a referendum on that subject in the event of a majority Conservative government after 2015. In the event that manoeuvre has proven inadequate (though the speech may for a while at least have had the paradoxical effect of reducing the level of opposition to Britain's membership). Rather, the initial trigger for the Conservatives' difficulties does appear to have been a marked drop at the time of the 2012 Budget in public confidence in the

Conservatives' ability to handle the economy. According to ComRes, before that Budget consistently around 30% agreed that they trusted David Cameron and George Osborne to run the economy; since then the figure has consistently been around 25%. Satisfaction with David Cameron's leadership has also been consistently lower since spring 2012. UKIP supporters are amongst those expressing very low levels of trust in the Conservative duo.

Thus some voters were shaken from the Conservative tree by declining confidence in the party's ability to provide effective government. Many of those voters might have been expected to use UKIP as a haven of protest anyway, given that voting Liberal Democrat as a way of protesting against the performance of the government was, in contrast to previous parliaments, no longer an option. But UKIP also has some positive attractions for voters. Moreover, it is clear from polling evidence collected by Lord Ashcroft in Eastleigh and from data collected by YouGov nationally that that attraction lies as much in concern about levels of immigration into the UK as it does in the party's anti-European stance per se, a concern that continuing low growth will have done nothing to assuage.

Meanwhile, the Conservatives' junior coalition partner, the Liberal Democrats, continue to be losing support heavily to Labour. Recent polling data suggest that somewhere between a quarter and a third of all those who voted Liberal Democrat in 2010 would now vote Labour, a pattern that has been persistent ever since the autumn of 2010. Former Liberal Democrat supporters constitute a crucial portion of Labour's current support; according to recent polls they amount on average to 15% of all those currently intending to vote Labour – or some 6% of all voters. If they were all to return to the Liberal Democrats, Labour's lead over the Conservatives would be no more than a narrow one.

The risk of that happening would seem to be lower the more that Labour is seen as a positive attraction rather than a convenient repository of protest. Here Labour would still appear to be vulnerable. Although trust in the ability of David Cameron and George Osborne to handle the economy has declined, there is no sign of any increased confidence in the financial abilities of Ed Miliband and Ed Balls. The proportion trusting them to run the economy has remained at around 20%, still below the 25% figure for David Cameron and George Osborne (though 2010 Liberal Democrat voters do take a slightly more favourable view of the Labour than the Conservative team). Equally, it continues to be the case that voters are more inclined to blame the public expenditure cuts on the previous Labour administration than on the current coalition.

Ed Miliband is also still struggling to win the public's respect. More people are dissatisfied than satisfied with his performance as Opposition leader; a narrowing of the gap in the second half of 2012 has not been sustained this year. While his net satisfaction rating after two and a half years as Opposition leader is nothing like as bad as that of Michael Foot or William Hague after the same amount of time in the job, it still trails that of the three most recent Opposition leaders who eventually went on to become Prime Minister.

Nevertheless, Labour has been played one very considerable card during recent months – the abandonment of the revision of parliamentary boundaries. This will make it much harder for the Conservatives to win an overall majority and much easier for Labour themselves. For example, according to estimates of what the outcome of the 2010 election would have been on the new boundaries produced by Anthony Wells, if Liberal Democrat support were at 15% then on the new boundaries the Conservatives would have needed only just over a three point lead to secure an overall majority, whereas now they will need almost a seven point one, that is almost as big a lead as the party achieved in 2010. Meanwhile Labour would have needed almost a four point lead under the new boundaries, but now could win a majority while just one point ahead. In short so long as Labour can remain at least a short nose ahead of the Conservatives, they should have a good chance of winning an overall majority, just as they managed to do on the back of a three point lead at the 2005 general election.

British – or least English – politics is commonly represented as a battle between Labour and the Conservatives. And indeed they remain the only two parties with any realistic prospect of providing the country's Prime Minister. But when it comes to the battle for voters, the nation's politics is now dominated by two very different, separate, contests, between Labour and the Liberal Democrats on the 'left' and between the Conservatives and UKIP on the 'right'. Yet in both cases economic performance and evaluations could prove crucial. To win back votes lost to UKIP the Conservatives need to restore their reputation for economic confidence (rather than just fret about Europe), while to ensure it keeps its substantial gains from the Liberal Democrats, Labour needs to persuade that it does indeed represent a better economic alternative.

# The English Local Elections 2013

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## Local elections 2013

**County councils –all seats (1811 in total) in 27 councils. Nine counties have boundary changes**

	Con	Lab	LD	Other	No overall control
Current control	26	-	-	-	1
Seats being defended*	1228	148	333	102	-

\*accounting for boundary changes

**Unitary authorities –all seats (528 in total) in 6 councils (3 with boundary changes); 23 seats (one third of the council) in Bristol**

	Con	Lab	LD	Other	No overall control
Current control	3	1	-	-	3
Seats being defended*	223	93	148	87	-

\*accounting for boundary changes

**Wales –all seats in Anglesey (30) following boundary changes.**

	Con	Lab	LD	Ind	Nat	No overall control
Current control	-	-	-	1	-	-
Seats being defended*	1	4	-	19	6	-

\*accounting for boundary changes

**TOTAL – 2392 seats in 35 councils**

	Con	Lab	LD	PC	Other	No overall control
Current control	29	1	-	-	1	4
Seats being defended*	1452	245	481	--	214	

\*accounting for boundary changes

## National equivalent vote at selected *local* elections 2001-12

	Con	Lab	LD	Oth
2001	31	39	25	5
2005	31	34	27	8
2008	43	24	23	10
2009	35	22	25	18
2010	35	28	25	12

2011	38	37	16	9
2012	33	39	15	13

### Election results in 33 counties/ex-counties 1997-2009

Control	Con	Lab	LD	NOC
1997	8	8	3	14
2001	15	7	0	11
2005	22	6	2	3
2009	29	1	0	3

Seats	Con	Lab	LD	Ind/Oth
1997	873	804	496	84
2001	966	679	390	80
2005	1085	552	453	76
2008/9*	1478	242	477	189

\*Durham and Northumberland last had elections in 2008.

### Six councils to watch

**Buckinghamshire (Con). Boundary changes.** The only county council to have been continuously Conservative since reorganisation in 1973. Neither boundary changes nor government unpopularity will interrupt that pattern this year. However, keep a watch on UKIP who performed well here in both the 2009 county and 2011 district elections and could grab a handful of seats.

**Cumbria (NOC). Boundary changes.** The only county not under Conservative control after 2009, and run by an unusual Labour/Conservative administration. Labour need 19 gains for overall control, with the Conservatives looking vulnerable in several unchanged divisions like Wigton (Allerdale) and Yewdale (Carlisle). The LibDems defend 11 mainly very safe seats in their South Lakeland heartland. Labour likely to be largest party at least.

**Derbyshire (Con). Boundary changes.** The Conservatives' narrow majority may already have been eroded if the boundary review had taken place before 2009. An 8% swing from the Conservatives since then would see Labour back to its 2005 strength with an overall majority.

**Gloucestershire (Con). Boundary changes.** Several previously Conservative seats disappear under the new boundaries, but the party still has a cushion from 2009. Labour will look to the Forest of Dean, Gloucester, and Stroud to register a comeback from that year's disastrous performance which saw its county-wide vote share more than halved. A bad night for the Conservatives if they lose control here.

**Nottinghamshire (Con).** The Conservatives deposed Labour in 2009 and defend a narrow majority. They lose it on a less than 1% swing to Labour since then; Labour need more than 20 gains to take over which would require a double figure swing from both Conservatives and Lib Dems.

**Somerset (Con). Boundary changes.** The Conservatives took over straight from the Lib Dems in 2009 and it is hard to imagine the position being reversed in the current climate. However, the Lib Dems (who control 4 of the county's 5 parliamentary seats) could benefit from any anti-incumbent sentiment locally. Success for Independents or minor parties could leave the council hung.