



Political Studies Association

The Local Elections

Media Briefing Pack

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The English Local Elections 2012

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- The most significant of the contests on May 3rd?
- 2012 and the local electoral cycle – local authorities with elections; current seats and council control
- What's at stake for the parties? – the legacy of 2008
- Estimating national equivalent vote share from local by-elections – trends since the 2010 general election
- Comparing local by-election performance and opinion polls – patterns and trends since the general election
- The management of expectations – benchmarking party targets for May 3rd

Although Labour's spring spurt in the polls has suffered a reality check following George Galloway's surprise victory in the Bradford West parliamentary by-election, the party is still favourite to be the clear winner in next month's local contests.

Its victory in the battle of gains and losses is almost assured. Nearly all the seats falling vacant in England and Wales were last contested in 2008 when Labour posted one of its worst ever local election performances with less than a quarter of the total vote. The party can hardly fail to do rather better now.

More than a dozen councils look set to fall into Labour's hands as the electoral pendulum swings from government to opposition. England's second city, Birmingham, is the prime target, but councils from Plymouth in the west to North East Lincolnshire in the east to Carlisle in the north should tumble too.

Such change will have an impact on local policy-making, but a perhaps more valuable prize for the party's leadership would be to come out top in this year's national equivalent vote too. The failure to do so last year sparked debate about Ed Miliband's leadership. If Labour should fall short again, the knives really may be out.

To reach that mark Labour needs to register at least 500 gains. An advance of closer to 700 gains would indicate the party was some 5 points ahead of its rivals.

The Conservatives face a more difficult task than last year when they defied the odds to become a rare example of a party in government actually winning additional seats and councils. They are defending the local electoral highpoint of their long period in opposition and will shrug off losses as the inevitable mid-term blues. Privately, however, they will be hoping to emerge with fewer of them than their coalition partners.

The Liberal Democrats need to demonstrate that they have drawn a line under the electoral disasters of 2011. They lost 150 seats in the metropolitan boroughs twelve months ago and face a similar haemorrhage if they do no better next month. Regardless of what happens elsewhere that alone would see them fall below 3,000 councillors across the country for the first time since 1986.

Local elections 2012

Metropolitan boroughs – a third of the seats (815 in total) in 36 councils

	Con	Lab	LD	Other	No overall control
Current control 3	24	-	-	9	
Seats being defended	245	312	204	54	-

Unitary authorities – a third of the seats in 16 councils; all seats in two councils with boundary changes (Hartlepool and Swindon). 367 seats in total

	Con	Lab	LD	Other	No overall control
Current control 6	6	1	-	5	
Seats being defended	166	108	73	20	-

District councils – half or a third of the seats in 70 councils; all seats in four councils with boundary changes (Broxbourne, Daventry, Rugby and Rushmoor). 1201 seats in total

	Con	Lab	LD	Other	No overall control
Current control 43	8	6	-	17	
Seats being defended	717	159	250	75	-

National equivalent vote at *local* elections 2000-12

	Con	Lab	LD
2000	38	30	26
2004	37	26	27
2007	40	26	24
2008	43	24	23
2010	35	28	25
2011	38	37	16
2012?	34	37	18

Seat gains and losses 2000-2008 England and Wales

Seats gained/lost	Con	Lab	LD	PC	Oth	
2000	610	-601	-37		37	No Wales
2004	250	-480	150	-30	100	
2008	300	-434	33	31	70	
Total	1160	-1515	146	1	207	

The Scottish Local Elections

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1. Background and Context

Each of Scotland's 32 single tier local authorities will face election on 3 May. These will be the second elections conducted under the **Single Transferable Vote** (STV). They will be the first elections since devolution to take place separate from the Scottish Parliamentary elections, and the first for 17 years to be held as 'stand-alone' elections, separate from elections to a higher level institution. All counting will take place on 4 May, using a new e-counting system, predicted to produce speedy and reliable results. Scottish local government elections are the only regular elections which are devolved to the Scottish Parliament under the devolution settlement.

2. De-Coupling and Turnout

In 2002, the Scottish parliament passed legislation to ensure that Scottish local elections would be held on the same day as Scottish parliament elections. The principal benefits of combined elections were increased turnout and lower operational costs. Critics argued that combined local and Scottish parliamentary elections led to the former being overshadowed by the latter.

In 2007, these combined elections were held using two different forms of proportional representation – the new STV system for local elections and the still relatively new mixed-member system for Holyrood elections, with the latter using a new single ballot paper for both votes. The result was considerable voter confusion, evidenced in an unprecedented and unacceptably high number of spoilt ballot papers. A subsequent expert review, led by Ron Gould, recommended that the elections be de-coupled, and this was actioned by Scottish Parliament legislation in 2009.

One effect of de-coupling is likely to be **lower turnout**. Before elections were combined, average turnout for local government elections was 46%.¹ In the three combined elections from 1999 – 2007, the average turnout rose to 54%, and on a par with turnout in the devolved elections. Fears have been expressed that turnout will fall below 40%. So far, the media focus on the elections has been minimal.

3. STV and Political Configurations

¹ Rallings and Thrasher. *British Electoral Facts 1832-2006*. Turnout in Scottish local elections from 1974 – 1995

In 2007, Scotland's councillors were elected by STV in multi-member wards of 3 or 4 members. This had a profound effect on the political make-up of local government in Scotland, ending the domination of one-party, mainly Labour, administrations that had until then been a key feature:

- after 2007, the Labour party led a majority administration in only two authorities: Glasgow and North Lanarkshire.
- All other local authorities have been led by minority administrations or more commonly coalitions of two or more parties.
- In some cases, like Angus, Falkirk, Inverclyde and South Lanarkshire, Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives have joined forces to exclude the SNP.
- Elsewhere, the SNP has formed coalitions, mainly with the Liberal Democrats, for example, in Edinburgh, Renfrewshire, Perth & Kinross and Fife.

If de-coupling was in part intended to enhance accountability, the prevalence of coalition governments arguably diminishes it. Accountability issues are exacerbated by that fact that in 13 out of the 32 local authorities, the political composition of local government has changed since the last elections. For example:

- East Renfrewshire changed from being a cross-party coalition that excluded the SNP to a cross-party coalition that excluded the Conservatives.
- Labour assumed majority control of Midlothian following a defection from the Liberal Democrats.
- Dundee city council changed from a Labour/Lib Dem coalition to an SNP minority administration in 2009.
- In Clackmannanshire, the SNP seized (minority) control from Labour in January 2012, following a vote of no confidence in the Labour administration.
- Most significantly of all, perhaps, in March 2012, the Labour Party lost majority control of Glasgow city council.

4. The Fight for Glasgow

"The symbolism of Labour losing Glasgow couldn't be greater"

Daily Record, 15 March 2012.

At the centre of the forthcoming elections is the fight for control of the city of Glasgow. Glasgow has long been Labour's heartland. The party has controlled the council since its inception, and dominated its forerunners, Glasgow District Council and Strathclyde Regional Council. Labour continues to dominate Glasgow in elections to Westminster, winning all of the city's constituencies. But in last year's elections to the Scottish Parliament, the SNP made significant gains, winning 5 of the city's 9 constituencies.

The council's administration has faced considerable difficulties in recent years, creating a sense of turmoil and decline. Council leader Stephen Purcell was forced to resign in 2010 amid allegations of drug misuse and alleged corruption.² A 'cull' of 20 councillors deselected from their wards ahead of the 2012 elections created divisions, bitterness and resignations. Since a controversial budget was passed in February, seven councillors have resigned. The last of these led to the party losing its majority control.

² The Crown Office dropped the case in January 2012, saying that there was insufficient evidence of criminality.

Gaining control of Glasgow city council is the SNP's no.1 priority in these elections. The party held its spring conference in the city in March, and winning Glasgow was the focus of numerous speeches, including those of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister. But defending what is left of its Glasgow heartland is also the top priority for Labour. Defeat for Labour in Glasgow would have repercussions not just for Scottish Labour but for UK Labour too. But a successful outcome could represent the first step towards recovery.

5. Second Order Elections

The now familiar theory of second order elections assumes that the outcomes of lower and apparently less important elections with less at stake will in part be determined by perceptions of governments and parties at higher levels.

The Scottish local elections will almost certainly be second order elections, but it's not altogether clear which higher order will have greatest influence on how people cast their votes. Dissatisfaction with the UK government could lead to losses for the Conservatives and especially the Liberal Democrats. The results will also be interpreted by winners and losers as a judgement on the independence issue, which has come to dominate political debate in Scotland.