



# Political Studies Association

## **The Local Elections**

### **Media Briefing Pack**

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**Political Studies Association: Media Briefing 29 April 2014**  
**The Political Landscape**

John Curtice, Strathclyde University

The campaign season for the local and European elections on 22<sup>nd</sup> May kicks off with none of the three principal parties at Westminster well placed in the polls. A poll of polls based on the regular monthly polls conducted by ComRes (by phone), ICM, Ipsos MORI and YouGov throughout this parliament (see slide 2) shows that:

- a. There is still no evidence of the Conservatives profiting from the signs of economic recovery and increased economic optimism in recent months. The party's support has simply oscillated between 31% and 33% since June of last year.
- b. Although it won plaudits from many commentators, Labour's focus on the 'cost of living', highlighted by the promise of an energy price freeze, has failed to restore the party's fortunes following a dip in support that became evident last summer. The party has been flatlining on 37% or 38% ever since last June. (Labour's decline in support last summer has indeed one of the few key turning points in party popularity during this parliament.)
- c. The last six months have registered the worst sequence of poll ratings for the Liberal Democrats in this parliament. The party has averaged just 10% in four of the last six months, a level to which it had previously only fallen on two occasions.

In contrast, UKIP have demonstrated an ability to retain most of the support that it garnered in the months leading up to last year's local elections (slide 3). After briefly reaching a high of 15% in the immediate wake of those elections, the party has consistently registered around 11% of the vote since July last year, and in the last month has seen its support rise once again to 13%.

There does though continue to be disagreement between the polls as to exactly how popular UKIP are. Some, though not all polls conducted via the internet, most notably those conducted by ComRes, Opinium and Survation, tend to secure higher levels of support than other companies (or in ComRes' case even in phone polls conducted by the same company). Recently these companies have put UKIP support as high as 18-20% (slide 4). But whatever the question marks about the exact level of UKIP support, the party continues fully to live up to the description of it as the most significant independent fourth party challenge in English politics since the Second World War.

In line with the stability of its poll rating, very little has changed in respect of the origins and character of UKIP support. Those who voted Conservative in 2010 are more likely to have switched to UKIP than those who backed either the Liberal Democrats or (especially) Labour four years ago (slide 5, which is based on the polls that are included in the 'poll of polls'). Of those 2010 Conservative voters who have switched to another party far more (nearly two-thirds) have done so to UKIP than to any other party (Slide 6). However, it is perhaps all too easy to exaggerate the degree to which current UKIP support consists of former Conservative voters. Only around a third or so of UKIP supporters have made that particular journey; rather more backed UKIP or some other party in 2010, or else did not vote at all (slide 7). UKIP may primarily represent a threat to the Conservatives' electoral fortunes, but its support base far from simply consists of disaffected Tories.

UKIP support continues to be higher amongst older people than younger people than older people and (to a lesser extent) amongst men than amongst women, and amongst those in the

less affluent 'C2DE' social grades than amongst middle class 'ABC1's (slide 8). The party's support is also consistently lower in London and in Scotland than elsewhere in Britain (not shown). Given that some 45% of the local council seats being contested on May 22<sup>nd</sup> are in London, this might well limit the party's scope for making spectacular gains in the local contests.

The failure of Conservative support to increase in the wake of an improvement in the economy in recent months is striking. After all, the public's evaluations of the economic competence of the coalition in general and of the Conservatives in particular have improved. The proportion who think that the coalition is managing the economy well now stands at over 40%, a level not reached since the last weeks of 2010 (slide 9). At 31% the proportion of people who 'trust David Cameron and George Osborne to make the right decisions about the economy' has now recovered to a level last seen before the spring 2012 'omnishambles' budget that appeared to instigate the initial decline in Conservative fortunes in this parliament (slide 10).

However, there are three important points to note. First, UKIP supporters are still relatively sceptical about the ability of Cameron and Osborne to run the economy (and much the same is true of their evaluations of how well the coalition has run the economy) (slide 11). Second, UKIP supporters are relatively pessimistic – at least as much as Labour supporters are – about both their own future financial prospects as well as those of the country as a whole (slide 12). Third, while voters are now relatively optimistic about the economic prospects for Britain as a whole, they are much more cautious about the prospects for their own household finances (also discernible from slide 12). In short, economic optimism (and willingness to give credit for better economic times) has yet to percolate through to those parts that perhaps need to be reached – in people's own lives in general and amongst UKIP supporters in particular. Meanwhile, we should remember that voters do not necessarily simply judge governments on the basis of their perceived economic performance. Some aspects of how the public view the government – most notably their level of satisfaction with the Prime Minister (slide 13) – have still not recovered to the (even then still negative) levels that were in evidence before the spring of 2012.

If the battle between the Conservatives and UKIP is one of the key electoral battles in this parliament, the other is that between the Liberal Democrats and Labour. The switch of much Liberal Democrat support to Labour in the wake of the formation of the coalition and the decision to introduce £9,000 tuition fees is one of the key foundations of Labour's recovery from its drubbing in the 2010 general election. It continues to be the case that just under a third or so of those who voted Liberal Democrat in 2010 and who currently state a vote intention now say they will vote Labour (slide 14). It should be noted, however, that this is far from being the only possible destination for disaffected Liberal Democrats supporters – nearly one in ten say they would now back the Greens, while a similar proportion are currently backing UKIP.

Labour thus needs to be aware that there is potential competition for disaffected Liberal Democrats – from the left as well as from the right – while its poll lead is still well short of what is required to instill confidence that it is well on course for victory in 2015. Yet despite, for example, a promise to keep to the Tories' overall spending envelope in its first year in office, it has still failed to make any progress in persuading people that Miliband and Balls can be trusted to run the economy (slide 15). Meanwhile, although his 'cost of living' campaign and his promise of an energy freeze helped stem a sharp decline in Miliband's

personal satisfaction ratings, these continue to be about as bad as they were at any time before the summer of 2012 (when satisfaction rose in the wake of his response to the Milly Dowler affair) (slide 16). For many voters, Labour apparently still does not look like an alternative government to which they can turn.

These weaknesses in the profile of all three main parties at Westminster – together with the general tendency of voters to vote for smaller and anti-European parties in European Parliament elections – have created a perfect environment for UKIP to prosper in the Euro elections on May 22<sup>nd</sup>. At the last Euro elections in 2009, the party's share of the vote was some eleven points above its contemporaneous standing in Westminster opinion polls (slide 17). At 27%, its average rating in polls of European voting intention conducted by six companies (ComRes, ICM, Populus, Survation, TNS BMRB and YouGov) this April is some 14 points above its current Westminster standing. Some of that gap is accounted for by the tendency of some of these Euro vote intention polls to score UKIP relatively highly in the first place (see above) but on average those polls that have asked both Westminster and European voting intention have still put UKIP's Euro tally at some nine points above its Westminster one.

Much of that UKIP Euro bonus comes from the relatively high willingness of those who say they would vote Conservative in a Westminster election to vote for UKIP in the Euro elections (slide 18). It appears that the outcome in the Euros in May will present an exaggerated picture of the degree to which UKIP can differentially harm the Conservatives' prospects in a UK general election, while also reminding us forcibly of the risk to those prospects that any continuance of UKIP's current level of support into next year would pose. In the meantime, however, it is the Liberal Democrats who would appear to have most to fear from the ballot box on May 22<sup>nd</sup>. The party tends to perform relatively poorly in European elections at the best of times. However, at the moment the polls suggest it may be able to hang to most of its already low level of Westminster support and avoid the ignominy of winning just 6% as in 1989. If it can do so then, as our projection based on recent polls (including separate polls in Scotland and Wales) shows, it should be able to avoid losing all representation at Strasbourg - though it could be uncomfortably close thing.

## The English Local Elections 2014

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### Local elections 2014

**London boroughs –all seats (1851 in total) in 32 councils. Three boroughs have boundary changes**

	Con	Lab	LD	Other	No overall control
Current control	11	17	2	-	2
Seats being defended*	712	870	246	23	-

\*accounting for boundary changes

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

	Con	Lab	LD	Other	No overall control
Current control	2	29	-	-	5
Seats being defended	150	517	133	15	-

**Unitary authorities –all seats (99 in total) in 2 councils with boundary changes; a third of seats (295 in total) in 17 councils.**

	Con	Lab	LD	Other	No overall control
Current control	4	12	1	-	2
Seats being defended*	130	176	76	12	-

\*accounting for boundary changes

**District councils –all seats (72 in total) in 2 councils with boundary changes; one half of seats (124 in total) in 7 councils; a third of seats (960 in total) in 65 councils.**

	Con	Lab	LD	Other	No overall control
Current control	36	19	5	-	14
Seats being defended*	582	225	277	72	-

\*accounting for boundary changes

**TOTAL – 4216 seats in 161 councils (not including any casual vacancies –‘by-elections’)**

	Con	Lab	LD	Other	No overall control
Current control	53	77	8	-	23
Seats being defended*	1574	1788	732	122	-

\*accounting for boundary changes

### Five Mayoral contests

Hackney, Lewisham, Newham -Labour; Tower Hamlets -Independent; Watford -LD

## National equivalent vote at selected local elections 2006-13

	<b>Con</b>	<b>Lab</b>	<b>LD</b>	<b>Oth</b>	
2006	39	26	25	10	
2009	35	22	25	18	
2010	35	28	25	12	
2011	38	37	16	9	
2012	33	39	15	13	<b>UKIP</b>
2013	26	29	13	10	22

## Local election results at this phase of cycle 2002-10\*

	<b>Con</b>	<b>Lab</b>	<b>LD</b>	<b>Ind/Oth</b>
2002	2011	2400	133	107
2006	1820	1441	912	241
2010	1609	1778	728	108

\*structural and boundary changes mean that comparisons are not exact

### London only

	<b>Con</b>	<b>Lab</b>	<b>LD</b>	<b>Ind/Oth</b>
2002	652	866	310	33
2006	784	685	318	74
2010*	712	870	246	23

\*accounting for boundary changes

## Councils to watch (current control)

**Croydon (Con).** The switch of a single ward will turn this from Conservative to Labour control. Not for the first time Waddon ward (Con majority 8.8% over Labour in 2010) has the destiny of the council in its hands.

**Kingston upon Thames (LD).** The gap between the Conservatives and the Lib Dems is less than 10% in nine of the 16 wards. The party that is least harmed by any rise in anti-coalition voting will come out on top. A key test of the Lib Dems' ability to hold their 4 parliamentary seats in south west London.

**Trafford (Con).** The Conservatives have just a two seat cushion. Their vote held up well in 2012, but two wards are vulnerable to a modest 3% swing to Labour since 2010. They can

afford to lose no more, including the next most marginal Broadheath (12.6% maj and a Labour gain in both 2012 and at a January 2014 by-election).

**Walsall (NOC).** Labour are three short of gaining an overall majority for the first time since 1999. On paper that requires a 3% swing from the Conservatives since 2010. The party won Bloxwich West and Brownhills easily last time, but fell short in St Matthews (6.3% Con majority in 2010).

**Peterborough (Con).** Conservative since 2002, but that run may now come to an end. Five seats which the party won in 2010 fell to Labour two years later. A repeat and the council becomes 'hung'.

**Swindon (Con).** All-out elections in 2012 left the Conservatives with only the narrowest of majorities. Losing the currently split Lydiard and Freshbrook ward to Labour would deprive them even of that.

**Crawley (Con).** Conservatives have a 3 seat cushion, but they lose that number and control straight to Labour on a little more than 3% swing since 2010.

**West Lancashire (Con).** A straight two-party battle with Conservative control now on a knife edge. A loss of one seat to Labour and the council is tied; two and Labour takes over. A swing of a little over 3% since 2010 will deliver Burscough East, Derby, and Knowsley wards to Labour.