

From Councillors to MPs

Looking beyond the 2013 Local Elections

2 May 2013 | Chris Terry

Report &
Analysis



Electoral
 Reform
 Society

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Preface

What came first? The councillor or the MP?

The relationship between performance in local and national elections has not received the attention it deserves.

Pundits will endlessly speculate on what a hammering at midterm means for a sitting government's prospects. Polls are compared, models compiled, but big questions are left unanswered.

It is chicken and egg territory. Are councillors on the ground a prerequisite for that planned Westminster breakthrough, or simply a reflection of a party on the up?

That synergy is what this report sets out to explore. Outcomes in national elections hinge on a local base, local knowledge and crucially local data. And the arrival of the 'Big Data' approach to political campaigning, working in tandem with established 'pavement politics', will make that local base more – not less – important in the battles to come.

A quick glance at any political map – be it Westminster MPs or local government control – shows that Britain is a divided nation. But it is a country less divided than political geographers make it appear.

Both the major parties have supporters outside their traditional heartlands. But that is not translating into elected local officials, or the party machinery capable of taking that support to the next level.

Both One Nation Conservatism and One Nation Labour remain dim prospects while the parties are unable to build a real base outside their heartlands.

June 2013

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Introduction

1. Scherer, Michael
How Obama's data crunchers helped him win
<http://edition.cnn.com/2012/11/07/tech/web/obama-campaign-tech-team> Published: 08/11/2012
Last accessed: 30/05/2013

2. Romano, Lois
Obama's Data Advantage <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0612/77213.html> Published: 06/09/2012
Last accessed: 30/05/2013

The 2013 local government elections resulted in much comment and intrigue, primarily over the performance of UKIP who won 147 seats and 23% support according to the BBC's projected national vote share (a projection of how many votes parties would have won if there had been elections in every part of the UK).

The Earthquake of UKIP's success aside, local elections provide interesting data for psephologists – those who study elections - not just for the results themselves but for what they indicate about the national landscape.

For political parties the election of councillors can be doubly important. On the one hand, there is the opportunity to take control of a council and in doing so take control of millions or even billions of pounds worth of budgets and hold real executive power. On the other, councillors on the ground often act as 'super activists' who provide parties with superior ground organisation. Councillors get to know their areas, their voters and the local support and in doing so give parties the opportunity to gain insights about local voters which can later be successfully utilised in Westminster campaigns. They give party activists a sense of purpose, able to report back at ward meetings, and can secure a bank of favours to be used in election campaigns, such as asking a constituent they helped for a lawn poster.

The strategy of modern election campaigns relies on the targeting of voters, using data about them to pursue floating voters, and to get supporters to make the all-important journey to the polling station. Data is key. In the US, the Obama campaign gathered unparalleled reams of data about voters in its quest to target voters, and to drive up donations.

The Obama campaign used data on age, sex, ethnicity, neighbourhood, voting record and even

consumer data to target supporters for possible donations. This same data was then used to turn out voters in key demographics. Data on voter's TV habits was used to target ads, airing them in then unconventional programming such as the *Walking Dead*¹. As the American news site Politico put it "They know what you read and where you shop, what kind of work you do and who you count as friends. They also know who your mother voted for in the last election."²

UK political parties have yet to reach this level of data complexity, though it is a model that all parties in every country are attempting to learn from. However, there is also more opportunity for more one-on-one data gathering by telephone bankers, door knocking activists and politicians. Councillors are an important plank in that data gathering exercise.

A Divided Britain

3. (1997)
'Anatomy of a Labour Landslide',
Parliamentary Affairs
50: 509-32

4. See Malmersjö,
Gertrud, Local
Elections 2007,
Report and
Analysis, Electoral
Reform Society

5. Curtice, John,
Fisher, Stephen
and Ford, Rob
'Appendix 2: An
analysis of the
results' in The
British General
Election of 2010.

At the time Margaret Thatcher entered office, Conservatives had 12,143 councillors. It is a figure they have never bettered, even during the high watermark of David Cameron's leadership. They then had control of major cities such as London, Birmingham and Edinburgh, the metropolitan counties of Greater Manchester, Merseyside and the West Midlands.

As Pippa Norris has documented in her analysis of the 1997 Labour landslide, the Labour Party had successfully built a machine at local level that pushed the Conservatives out of those town halls.³ And the effect appears to have been permanent.

After the May 1996 local elections the Conservatives were left with only 4,400 councillors - leagues behind Labour's 11,000 and the Liberal Democrats 5,100. On their return to office in May 2010, the Conservatives could boast of 9405 councillors. But there has been no real recovery in former heartlands. While the early years of Cameron's leadership saw clear gains the most notable progress was in marginal local authorities.⁴

2007's local elections demonstrated the Conservatives were much more prone to fight the Liberal Democrats than Labour. Consequently, the party made most of its gains in its base of southern England, particularly in the South East.

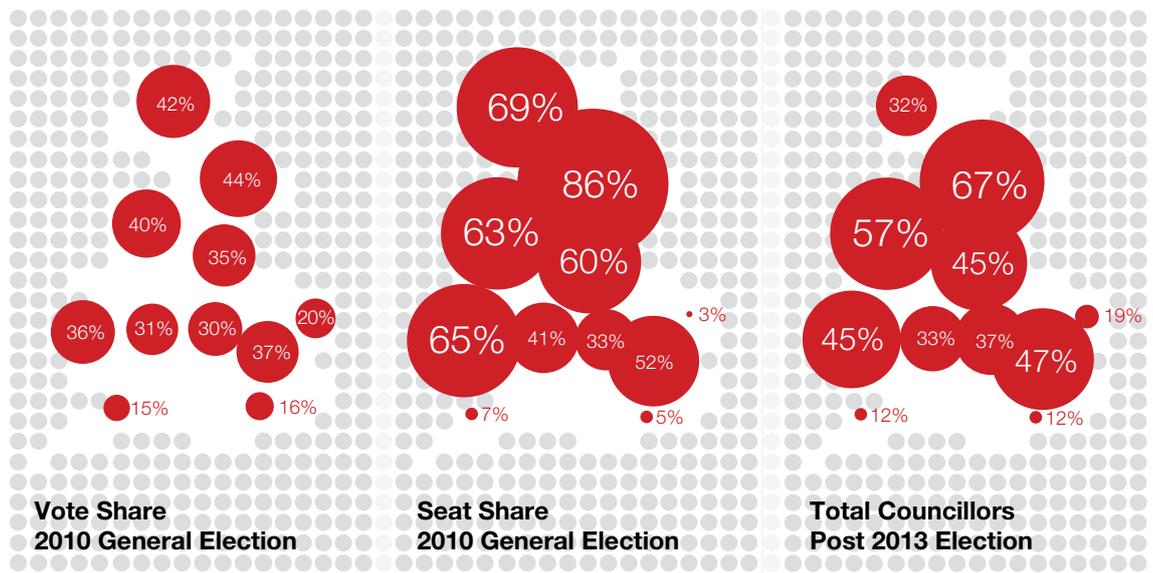
This pattern is repeating with Labour in opposition. Labour's current tally of 8,151 councillors is still light years away from the high point of 1997. There is something to be said for winning more councillors wherever they are, but extra councillors in Liverpool, do not help the Labour Party - in much the same way as extra councillors in Tunbridge Wells will never aid the Conservatives.

There has been much talk of the North/South divide over the years. It is true that the North of England tends to vote more strongly Labour than the South, but the electoral system exaggerates the real divides between the North and South electorally. With time, these divides have polarised. Areas of the country that were once Labour have become even more so, and similarly for the Conservatives. The eradication of regional bases has led to less competitive politics, with the South broadly Conservative (with some Lib Dem strength in the South West), the North, Scotland, Wales and London being broadly Labour and the Midlands being Britain's equivalent of America's 'swing states'.

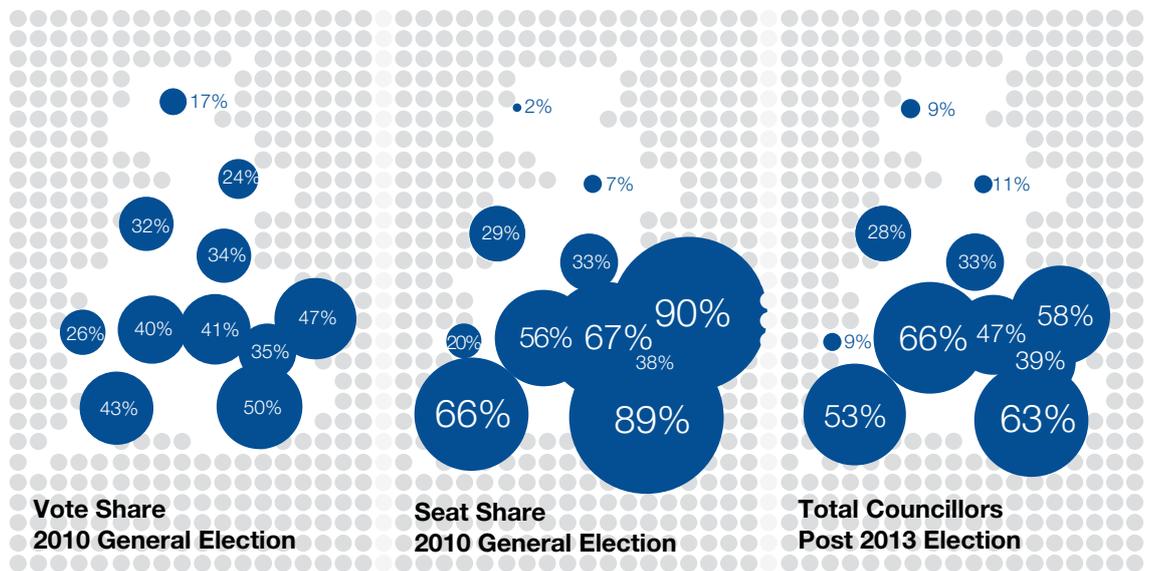
This polarisation is one of the reasons why hung parliaments are becoming more likely. Until 1974 there were always 150+ seats that were marginal. By 1980 it had fallen to 80, it then rose again reaching 114 in 2001 but has since then fallen again to 85 in 2010⁵.

In doing so, the system exaggerates the sense of a nation divided, and increases the polarisation of the country. More and more regions of the country are homogenous regions of control for one party, with local bases eradicated and unable to rebuild in future.

North/South Divide - Labour



North/South Divide - Conservative



Case Studies

6. Forsyth, James
Have the Tories
lost Eastleigh?
<http://www.spectator.co.uk/features/8849651/at-war-in-eastleigh/>
Published:
22/02/2013
Last accessed:
30/05/2013

7. Pickford, James
Lib Dems sweep
to Eastleigh victory
<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/4e944584-821f-11e2-b050-00144feabdc0>.

8. See, for instance,
Cutts, David and
Shryane, Nick Did
Local Activism
Really Matter?
Liberal Democrat
Campaigning
and the 2001
British General
Election *The British
Journal of Politics
and International
Relations: Volume 8,
Issue 3, Pages 427-
444, August 2006.*

The Eastleigh Effect

This year's Eastleigh by-election was keenly followed by many in the media in Westminster and outside. The seat was a Lib Dem-Con marginal whose incumbent Lib Dem MP had stepped down in the wake of pleading guilty to charges of perverting the course of justice.

In 2010 the Lib Dems had only won the seat by 7.2%, and considering the party's problems since the 2010 election, it was completely feasible that the Conservatives could have won the seat. For the Lib Dems, it was important to win the seat to show that the party could still hold on to its core areas in the South of England. For the Conservatives, winning seats like Eastleigh is vital to the party's chances of winning a majority in 2015. Eastleigh, and similar Southern Liberal Democrat seats, are high profile Conservative targets.

In the context of strong polling, the seat also served as a solid target for UKIP. The Liberal Democrats, however, had key weapons on their side: they controlled all the council seats within the constituency, all 40 of the seats on the borough council (4 seats on Eastleigh borough council are held by the Conservatives, but are actually within the Winchester constituency) and all 6 county council seats.

The Spectator journalist, James Forsyth, stated that "The Liberal Democrats' local advantage looks like it will be decisive, though. While the Tories are knocking on doors trying to find supporters, the Lib Dems know precisely where their electors are. As Thornton and Ming Campbell march down the street, a clipboard-wielding activist bounces along beside them shouting out which house to go to and the name of who lives there. They have a laser-like focus on their own support base: it is a get-out-the-vote

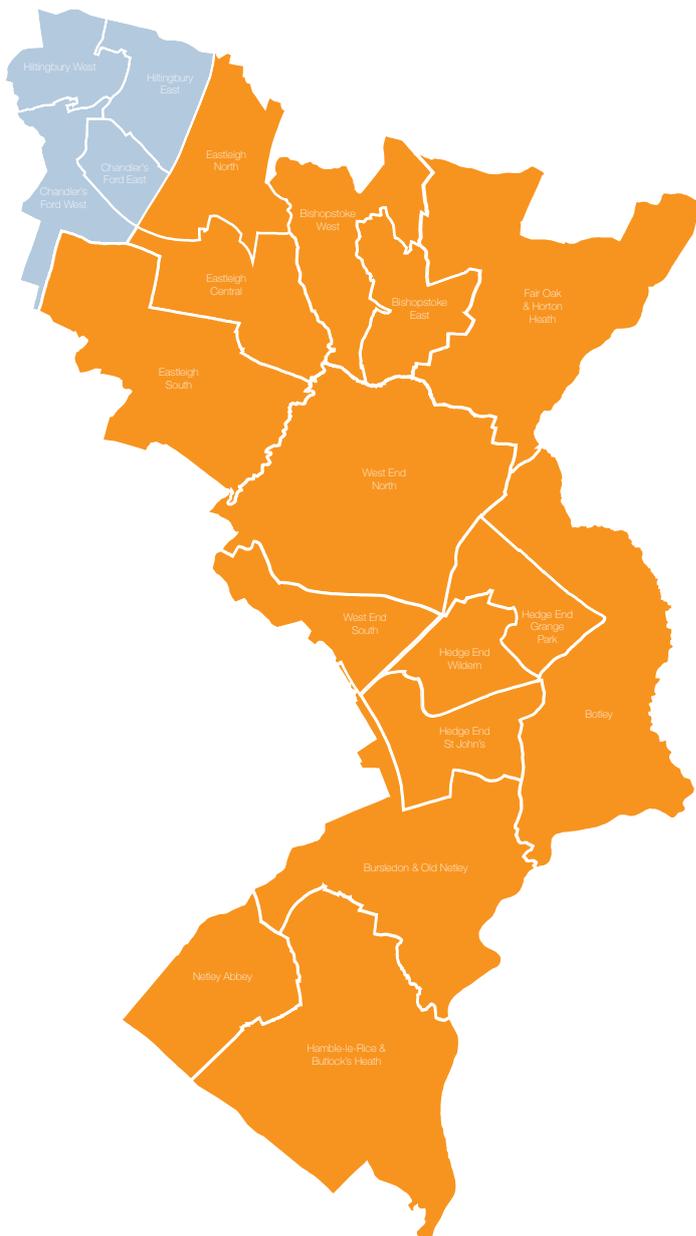
strategy."⁶ Similarly, the UKIP Chairman, Steve Crowther, noted that "We don't have the depth of data that the Lib Dems have"⁷ when discussing his party's impressive performance and why they failed to win.

The Liberal Democrats typically gain strength through spatial expansion. The title of Dorling, Rallings and Thrasher's 1998 study *The epidemiology of the Liberal Democrat vote* hints that the Liberal Democrat vote acts like a 'virus' spreading from one ward to neighbouring ones. David Cutts has also noted in a series of interrelated works that the Lib Dems seek council seats partially because of the utility of councillors in general election campaigns.⁸

Tracing back the history of the Liberal Democrats in Eastleigh, their success is demonstrably built on local strength.

The Lib Dems' predecessors had a strong beginning in Eastleigh, and the party has always exceeded national performance in terms of votes there (but not seats). The Liberals' 25.5% of the vote in 1973 was a temporary high point, though the inequities of First Past the Post only gave them 1 seat. They fell back in subsequent elections to lower figures, bottoming out at 14.2% in 1978. With the formation of the Alliance with the SDP in the 1980s, they grew in popularity in Eastleigh, winning 34.2% of the vote and 4 seats out of 14 (with Labour getting 4 and the Conservatives getting 6). The Alliance broke through to become the largest party in 1986, but became truly dominant in 1994, just following the Lib Dems by-election win in February of that year. In that by-election, the Lib Dems swung a Conservative safe seat into a Lib Dem seat in dramatic style: on a swing of 16.8%. Since then, the Lib Dems have slowly but surely moved to defeat all remaining opposition to themselves on the council, setting the conditions that led to their Eastleigh win.

Eastleigh Borough Council Elections 2012



15 wards throughout the Borough of Eastleigh were elected on Thursday 3 May 2012. The new make up of the Council was 40 Liberal Democrats (an increase of 2 seats), 4 Conservatives (no change) and 2 Independent Party Of Eastleigh Councillors lost both their seats.

	Total Vote	Vote share	Seat Share
Conservative	7202	26.7%	8.9%
Liberal Democrat	12210	45.3%	90.1%
Labour	4050	15.0%	0%
UKIP	2887	10.7%	0%
Others	576	2.1%	0%

● Liberal Democrat ● Conservative

Council Wards outside Eastleigh
Parliamentary Constituency on [transparency](#)

This is an approach the Liberal Democrats commonly adopt to their seats. To use the unflattering comparison from Dorling, Rallings and Thrasher, they act like a 'virus', spreading from ward to ward and building up to take a constituency. Like a virus, once they have 'infected' an area, they are very hard to remove. A noticeable facet of Liberal Democrat performance since the formation of the coalition is that the party has hung on in their core areas.

The Green breakthrough

In 2010, the Green Party took control of Brighton Pavilion, electing Caroline Lucas, the first Green MP. Yet, once again, it is difficult to imagine this happening without the party having built up an activist base in terms of local councillors.

Brighton and Hove council is covered by three seats – Brighton Pavilion, Hove, and Brighton Kemptown (which also covers part of Lewes).

The Greens had first won seats on Brighton and Hove council in the 1990s, holding 3 in 1999. Importantly however, like the Lib Dem model, the Brighton Greens' support became very geographically clustered. By 2007 the Greens held 12 seats in Brighton, all in neighbouring wards, and all but 3 within the boundaries of Brighton Pavilion. Of the seats in Pavilion, the Greens in 2010 held 9, Labour 5, and the Conservatives 3.

The Green's advantage in Brighton helped them build momentum and maintain their strength. While the Greens remain relatively weak in Hove and Brighton Kemptown (where they won 5.2% and 5.5% of the vote respectively), in Brighton Pavilion they dominated. The party has since increased its seats on Brighton and Hove council to 23 - and taken minority control. They now control a further 4 seats in Brighton Pavilion constituency and a further 7 more beyond that.

This will give the Greens an additional advantage in the next election.

Brighton and Hove, Ward Results for Brighton Pavilion Constituency, 2007:

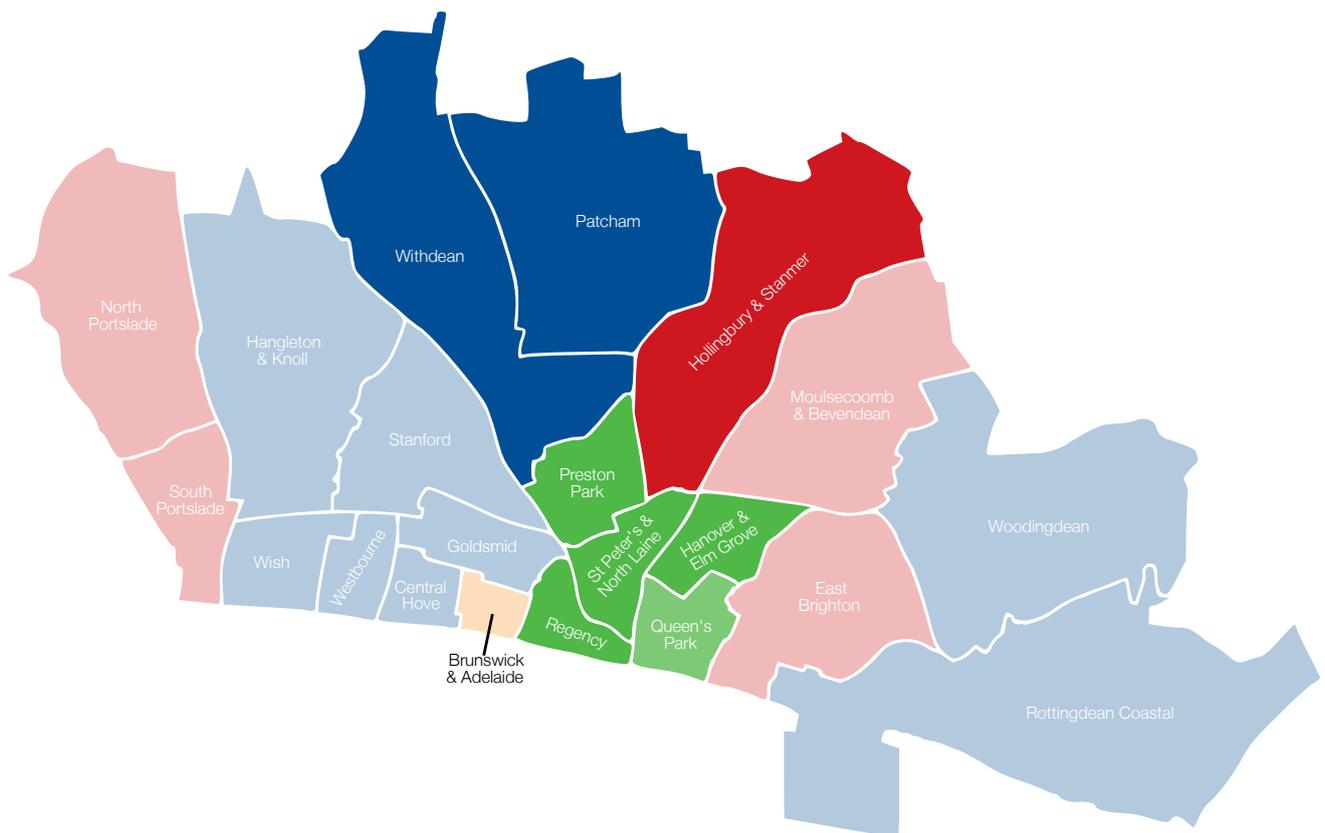
	Green Cllrs	Lab Cllrs	Con Cllrs
Hanover & Elm Grove	3		
Hollinbury & Stanmer		3	
Patcham			3
Preston Park	1	2	
Regency	2	1	
St Peter's & North Laine	3		
Withdean			3
TOTAL	9	6	6

The Greens have successfully adapted the tried and tested Liberal Democrat model. They have become experts in ruthlessly targeting council seats which seemed winnable either due to demographics – they hold a lot of wards covering student areas for instance – or through popular local candidates.

There are clear lessons here for UKIP. Despite high profile campaigns, and impressive performances in by-elections, they have only just begun adapting the Green strategy of focusing effort on a small number of target seats. And despite their current momentum, it will be essential for Farage's party to find their own 'Brighton Pavilion'.

Brighton and Hove Council Elections 2007

Parties receiving largest share of the vote by ward



● Green ● Labour ● Liberal Democrat ● Conservative

Wards outside Brighton Pavillion Consituency on [transparency](#)

The 2013 results: Labour & Conservative prospects

9. Baston, Lewis 2013 Local Elections: The battlegrounds of the 2015 general election <http://www.fabians.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/2013localelections.pdf> Published May 2013 Last accessed: 31/05/2013

Taking this information into account, it is worth considering what promise there is for Labour and the Conservatives from the 2013 local elections.

Using data partially assembled by Lewis Baston of Democratic Audit, for the Fabian Society,⁹ it is possible to look at Labour and Conservative chances at the next election.

Baston's list of seats (available in the appendix) are a selection of Labour target seats and seats they lost to the Conservatives in 2010. In each seat he calculated how many votes were won in 2013. Several health warnings should apply. Local elections are not the same as national ones. Voters vote on different issues, turnout is much lower and parties do not necessarily stand candidates everywhere. Also, voters can and do change their minds. According to Baston's analysis, the parties 'won' the following number of parliamentary constituencies:

	Seats
Conservative	21
Liberal Democrat	1
Labour	26
UKIP	4

It is worth noting that this isn't a list of all potential Labour targets in the country; only those who had elections on the 2nd of May 2013. As these seats are Labour target seats, they are not representative of the country as a whole.

The list of seats provides a dual function. Firstly, it shows those seats which Labour has the best chances of gaining. Secondly, it shows those seats that the Conservatives are most at risk of losing to Labour.

In addition to the initial analysis which just showed the percentage of votes the ERS has

calculated, the data shows the number of council seats won in each parliamentary constituency.

This provides a dual measure of success – votes and seats. Vote figures provide a measure of popular support within a constituency. In a sense, a local election vote is ephemeral, with an increasing number of voters making their choice at the ballot box. But a local election seat is more impactful, in that the councillor will be there for four years (except in the case of a by-election) and, as outlined above, gives parties an advantage in other terms.

By comparing seats to votes it is possible to see where parties have perhaps gained an advantage from their council seats which was not, in fact, warranted by their votes. In doing so, we can categorise the seats as follows:

Type of Seat	Seats
Oversized Labour majority	13
Oversized Conservative majority	8
Oversized Liberal Democrat majority	1
Oversized UKIP majority	1
Relatively even result	21
Wrong winner	7

The categories were defined on the basis that a 'relatively even result' was a result that would have been conceivable under a proportional system, such as the Single Transferable Vote system in Scotland. That is to say, with no more than a seat or two (depending on the number of seats available) variance.

That gives us 30/51 seats where a party won a disproportionate advantage in preparation for the next election.

The **Oversized Labour Majority** seats are seats where Labour won the most votes, but where they won a disproportionately oversized majority. This includes seats such as Amber Valley in Derbyshire, Ipswich and Crawley in Essex. This is actually a fairly disparate group. North Warwickshire has only a majority of only 54 and was a Labour seat from 1992 until 2010. Gravesham, on the other hand, was lost by Labour in 2005 and currently has a majority of 9,312.

In Gravesham Labour won by only 1% but won 4 seats to 1 against the Conservatives. UKIP won 19% of the vote, while the Lib Dems only won 2%, suggesting vote splitting may have played a role. Similarly, in Northampton North, Labour won 27% of the vote, the Conservatives, 26%, the Lib Dems 23%, and UKIP 19%. This relatively even spread in the vote led to 4 Labour, 1 Conservative and 2 Lib Dem seats. In Nuneaton, a result of 37% Labour, 36% Conservative and 16% Green led to 7 Labour, 2 Conservative and 1 Green councillor.

Labour won large majorities of the seats available in North Warwickshire, Lancaster and Fleetwood, Amber Valley, Carlisle and Lincoln, all within the party's top 20 target seats. These victories will give the party a greater advantage at the next general election in these vital seats.

There were fewer **Oversized Conservative Majorities** and by comparison they tended to have larger majorities. This is likely due to the differential turnout effect, whereby voters supportive of governing parties are less likely to turn out than opposition party voters.

33% of the vote in Northampton South provided, in some ways, a mirror image of the Northampton North result, with the Conservatives winning 7, the Lib Dems winning 2 seats with 18% and Labour winning no seats at all with 29%, demonstrating the occasional randomness

of the First Past the Post system. In South Ribble, a Conservative result of an 8 point lead resulted in them beating Labour 4 seats to 1.

There was only one **Oversized Lib Dem Majority**, indeed only one constituency the Lib Dems won at all – Watford. Watford is a key three way marginal held by Labour from 1997 until 2010, when they fell to third. It has always been a Lib Dem target. The party has also held the mayoralty since 2002 in the form of Dorothy Thornhill and so, considering the localised nature of the contest this is perhaps a sign of support for Thornhill more than anything else.

The Lib Dems received 36% of the vote in Watford, to 23% for Labour and 20% for the Conservatives. They received 6 seats compared to 2 for Labour and 1 for the Conservatives. The Lib Dems will probably still target Watford at the next election, and based on these results, they will have a disproportionate advantage. If they do not target the seat, their seats will have harmed the Conservative and Labour chances of holding a similar advantage.

There was also only one **Oversized UKIP Majority** in the analysis: the seat of South Thanet, where UKIP got 35% of the vote compared to 27% for Labour and 26% for the Conservatives, and won 5 seats compared to 1 each for the big two. This may make South Thanet a key UKIP target at the next election and it may use its new advantage to increase its local base.

Perhaps worst of all were the **Wrong Winners**, seats where the party which won the popular vote lost in terms of seats. This seat included several key Labour targets. In Waveney (majority of 769) the Conservatives won by 2%, but Labour won 5 seats. The Conservatives won 2 seats and UKIP, who came 3% behind Labour, won 3 seats.

In South Dorset, the votes were split 32% Conservative, 26% Labour and 17% Lib Dem and yet Labour won 5 seats to 3 a piece for the Conservatives and Lib Dems. Lib Dems off the back of strength within the Weymouth and Portland portion of the seat won a four-way marginal on a small proportion of the vote, while the Conservative vote spread wider throughout the constituency.

In Norwich North, Labour beat the Conservatives 44% to 38%, but the Conservatives maintained an advantage in seats with 6 to Labour's 4, with the Liberal Democrats also winning a seat.

There were 21 **Relatively Even Results**, where the number of seats given did not provide a big advantage to any party. Examples of this include seats such as Dover, where the Conservatives beat Labour by 2% but where both parties got 2 seats a piece. Similar results occurred in Tamworth, Bromsgrove and Stafford. There were also seats where a party only won by one or two seats (results that could have happened under more proportional systems), such as in Sherwood, Morecambe and Lunesdale, Stroud, Corby, and Warwick and Leamington.

Nonetheless, this group still contains some mildly problematic results. In Broxtowe, for instance, Labour and the Lib Dems got 4 seats each, whereas the Conservatives got just 3 when they fell only 1% behind Labour, and came 7% ahead of the Liberal Democrats. In High Peak, 36% for Labour returned 3 seats, while 31% for the Conservatives returned 2. The Lib Dems also got 2 seats on 13% of the vote.

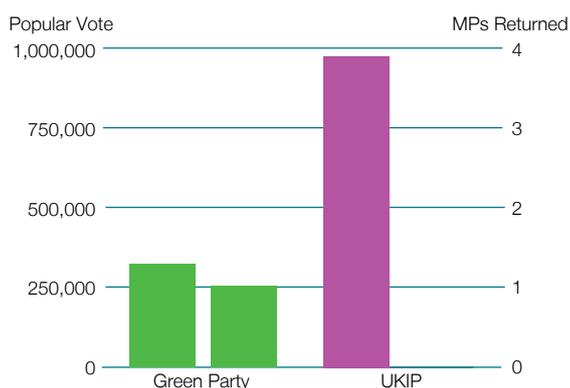
The inequity of the First Past The Post system at local level is not just in its undemocratic nature, but in the way in which its randomness can give disproportionate advantages to parties. A system such as Scotland's Single Transferable Vote would provide much needed balance to our elections.

Boston and Skegness: UKIP's Brighton Pavilion?

10. Electoral
Calculus UKIP
– Initial Electoral
Analysis http://www.electorcalculus.co.uk/Analysis_UKIP.html Published:
05/05/2013
Last accessed:
07/06/2013

Much attention has been paid to the success of UKIP in this year's county council elections. UKIP won 23% of the vote on a Projected National Share. Subsequent analysis by Electoral Calculus suggests that UKIP would have to win 24% of the vote to gain a seat¹⁰.

In a First Past the Post electoral system, it is best for parties to have an efficient voter spread. The most efficient voter spread is achieved by winning seats by a small number of votes, and losing seats by a large margin. This is a big reason behind the perceived bias in the electoral system against the Conservative Party. Projections under more equal boundaries still show the Conservatives losing out to Labour on an equal vote because the party has recently tended to win by large margins in its core areas, while losing by smaller margins outside them.



UKIP and Green Performance in 2010 General Election

Unlike the Greens, UKIP's vote has traditionally tended to be geographically spread out. The Greens got 1% of the vote in the 2010 election - one third of UKIP's 3.1%. Yet before the May 2013 elections, the Greens held double the number of councillors and had managed to win their most prized position – the parliamentary constituency of Brighton Pavilion in 2010.

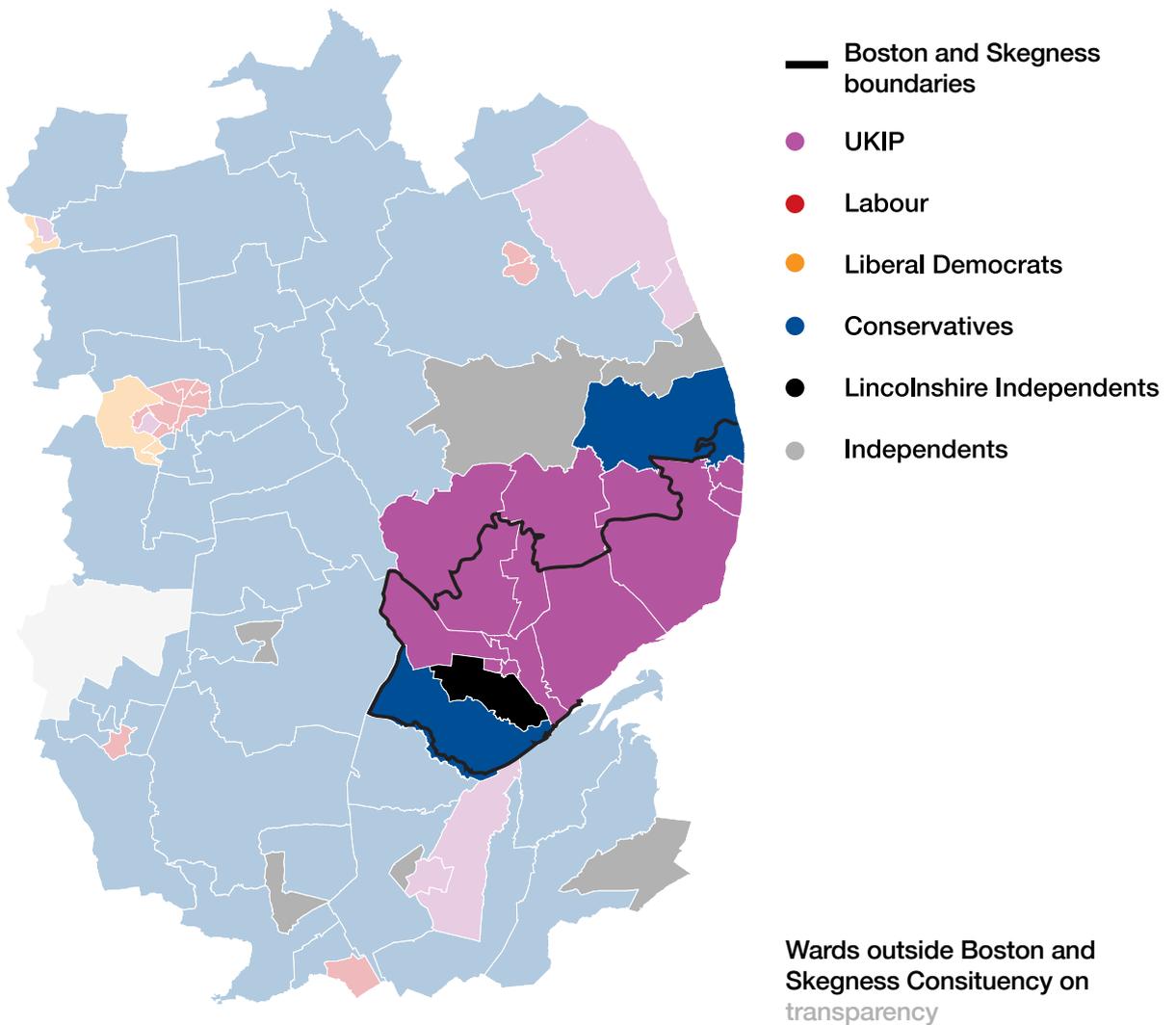
Since 2010, the UKIP have posted a series of successes. Strong opinion poll results and strong performances in by-elections have built momentum, which eventually resulted in the party's local election triumph. In 2012 the party made a net gain of 0 councillors across England. In 2013 they made a net gain of 147. We now have, for the first time, a picture of the types of areas in which UKIP appears to have an advantage. UKIP strength seems to correlate with the number of non-graduates, with a more elderly age profile and with stronger religious identification. It is also stronger along the coast. We now have a picture of where UKIP may make its first breakthroughs. It won the popular vote in the equivalents of nine parliamentary seats: Boston and Skegness, Bognor Regis and Littlehampton, Worthing East and Shoreham, Great Yarmouth, Forest of Dean, Aylesbury and Camberne and Redruth.

In the area around Boston, UKIP took 10 of the 13 seats up for grabs, and won around 41.9% of the vote in Boston and Skegness constituency, beating the second placed Tories by 11.8% of the vote. In Lincolnshire as a whole, they now form the largest opposition grouping on the council.

Boston and Skegness is notionally a Conservative safe seat, with a majority of 12,426. In the last council elections they'd won 10 of the same 13 seats, with 2 being won by Independents.

Since 2010, UKIP has learned much. It is no longer the same party that ran Nigel Farage against the speaker in Buckinghamshire and came third, even when the big three weren't running. The party is slicker and cleverer, and learning rapidly. In order to gain a seat at Westminster, it will need to target resources ruthlessly and ignore siren voices to campaign everywhere in the hope of maximising votes.

Lincolnshire County Council Local Elections 2013



With its new councillors, it will be able to target voters better than ever before, and it may begin to change those councillors into parliamentary seats, as the Greens have done in Brighton Pavilion.

UKIP's new councillors will provide extra data, and will also give it a bank of favours which can

be used to secure things like garden poster sites. UKIP councillors may well become more prominent members of the local community and gain trust from voters. In Boston and Skegness, UKIP now has a big advantage in creating a strengthened ground operation. It has the potential to be UKIP's Brighton Pavilion.

Lessons from Scotland?

11. See: Hassan, Gerry (ed), *The Modern SNP: From Protest to Power*, for a discussion of the SNP's early years.

Scotland moved from First Past the Post to the Single Transferable Vote (STV) for local elections in 2007. While most of the country is run by single party administrations, the parties now have a more even geographic spread.

The SNP's rise of course predates the shift, but has long demonstrated the value of a local base. Stepping into the void created by the decline of the, previously dominant, Conservative Party in the 1960s, the SNP proved adept at winning local contests, even with the high bar set by the system. It set the scene for their second place performance in the West Lothian by election of 1962 that shattered the complacent attitudes of the political establishment.¹¹

The SNP has historically suffered from a spread out vote, much like UKIP across the UK (and indeed, this is something the Scottish Conservatives have also suffered from). In the 2010 general election in Scotland, for instance, the SNP won 1% more of the vote than the Liberal Democrats, but received only slightly more than half the seats. (Similarly the Scottish Conservatives only came 50,000 votes behind the Lib Dems and only received 1 seat). However in 2007, the new Single Transferable Vote electoral system provided them with serious dividends.

In 2007 the SNP contested every seat in every authority with the exception of the three Island authorities (no candidates in Shetland or Orkney, and four of the nine seats in the

Western Isles). The SNP therefore had the most complete coverage of any of the Scottish parties, although it was running fewer candidates than Labour (433 to 520). The SNP did run the most candidates in 2003, but they were mainly 'paper' candidates with little chance of winning because of the FPTP electoral system.

	Total Wards	% Votes	% Wards
1999 (FPTP)	204	28.7	16.7%
2003 (FPTP)	181	24.1%	14.8%
2007 (STV)	363	27.9%	29.7%
2011 (STV)	425	32.33%	34.75%

The 2007 elections saw the party emerge as the largest force in Scottish local government. 2012 saw considerable gains across Scotland, and following the election Orkney and Shetlands are the only authorities without an SNP presence in council chambers.

The impact of this local base on the SNPs prospects is clearly a subject for further research. But since their initial breakthrough in 2007 there is tantalising evidence of consolidation based on local gains.

Edinburgh Eastern MSP Kenny MacAskill was defending a seat with new boundaries which

	SNP Cllrs	SNP Majority	Largest party in NOC	SNP in Coalition/ Minority Administration	Councils without SNP presence
2003	181	1	2	2	8
2007	363	0	5	11	2
2012	425	2	9	11	2

12. Why MacAskill is chipper in a knife-edge marginal, Daily Herald, 12 April 2011

amounted to a notional Labour hold in 2011. As he told the Herald “the fact is, a lot has changed in the past four years. At that time there were no SNP councillors in the area. Now we have representation in every ward.”¹² The seat was held by over 2,000 votes. East Dunbartonshire, which didn’t return a single SNP councillor from 1980 to 2007 saw its two Labour seats of Strathkelvin and Bearsden and Clydebank and Milngavie fall on swings of more than 6%.

Afterword: One Nation?

A 'One Nation' platform has clear emotional resonance. However, the political impact of our local election system means that it will remain unfulfilled.

Britain is currently lacking what can accurately be described as a 'national' party, and the policy implications of this should be obvious to anyone.

From the bottom up, large parts of the country are essentially off limits to the main parties. The First Past the Post system we use for electing councillors in England and Wales predicates against the development of the grassroots that can turn local gains into Members of Parliament.

This is both a principled and a partisan appeal. It is in the interest of voters, parties and politics itself to change the way local elections work in this country.

Appendix

Data

Source: Lewis Baston, 2013 Local Elections: The battlegrounds of the 2013 General Election, Fabian Society, May 2013. Additional data on seat control by the Electoral Reform Society.

Seat	2010 Maj.	2013 Result	Con	Lab	LD	UKIP	Green	Swing Since 2010	Con Seats	Lab Seats	LD Seats	UKIP Seats	Green Seats	Other Seats
North Warwickshire	0.11%	LAB GAIN	27%	49%	0%	17%	3%	-11%	3	10				
Sherwood	0.44%	LAB GAIN	31%	39%	3%	24%	0%	-4%	4	6				
Broxtowe	0.74%	LAB GAIN	27%	28%	20%	17%	4%	-1%	3	4	4			
Lancaster and Fleetwood	0.78%	LAB GAIN	29%	39%	2%	11%	18%	-5%	2	4			1	1
Amber Valley	1.17%	LAB GAIN	28%	44%	3%	20%	1%	-8%	2	7				
Waveney	1.50%	CON HOLD	30%	28%	4%	25%	12%	0%	2	5		3		
Morecambe and Lunesdale	1.99%	CON HOLD	35%	32%	3%	17%	5%	0%	4	3				
Carlisle	2.02%	LAB GAIN	26%	44%	4%	18%	3%	-10%	3	8	1			1
Stroud	2.24%	CON HOLD	33%	31%	7%	10%	19%	0%	5	4				
Lincoln	2.31%	LAB GAIN	28%	39%	7%	23%	0%	-7%	1	8	1	1		
Corby	3.49%	LAB HOLD	32%	40%	7%	13%	1%	-8%	3	4				
Hastings and Rye	4.00%	LAB GAIN	29%	39%	7%	23%	0%	-7%	3	7				
Ipswich	4.43%	LAB GAIN	26%	41%	8%	18%	3%	-10%	3	9	1			
Nuneaton	4.63%	LAB GAIN	36%	37%	0%	7%	16%	-3%	2	7	1			
Gloucester	4.77%	CON HOLD	33%	28%	17%	18%	3%	0%	5	3	2			
Northampton North	4.81%	LAB GAIN	26%	27%	19%	23%	4%	-7%	1	4	2			1
Erewash	5.25%	LAB GAIN	31%	40%	7%	13%	1%	-6%	3	5				
Worcester	6.09%	CON HOLD	33%	28%	17%	18%	3%	0%	3	4	1			1
Cannock Chase	7.01%	LAB GAIN	25%	40%	8%	25%	0%	-11%	1	5				
Loughborough	7.09%	LAB GAIN	38%	44%	7%	6%	0%	-7%	6	4	1			
Warwick and Leamington	7.16%	LAB GAIN	29%	29%	17%	6%	12%	-3%	4	3	2		1	
Pendle	7.96%	LAB GAIN	31%	35%	25%	3%	0%	-7%	2	2	2			
Stevenage	8.01%	LAB GAIN	30%	36%	11%	16%	4%	-7%	2	6	1			
Watford	8.23%	LD GAIN	20%	23%	36%	12%	6%	-6%	1	2	6			
Norwich North	9.16%	LAB GAIN	29%	32%	7%	23%	4%	-3%	4	3				
High Peak	9.29%	LAB GAIN	31%	36%	13%	11%	6%	-6%	2	3	2			
Great Yarmouth	9.93%	UKIP GAIN	28%	34%	1%	36%	1%	-6%	1	3		4		
Dover	10.47%	CON HOLD	35%	33%	6%	16%	1%	-7%	2	2				

Seat	2010 Maj.	2013 Result	Con	Lab	LD	UKIP	Green	Swing Since 2010	Con Seats	Lab Seats	LD Seats	UKIP Seats	Green Seats	Other Seats
South Ribble	10.79%	CON HOLD	41%	33%	7%	20%	0%	-8%	4	1				
Stafford	10.87%	CON HOLD	40%	37%	0%	19%	0%	-4%	3	3				
Harlow	11.22%	LAB GAIN	30%	33%	4%	29%	3%	-7%	3	2				
Bristol North West	12.03%	CON HOLD	37%	27%	18%	3%	7%	-1%	5	2	1			1
Crawley	12.48%	LAB GAIN	35%	38%	3%	21%	2%	-8%	3	6				
Rugby	12.64%	CON HOLD	36%	31%	14%	9%	7%	-4%	5	4	2			1
Burton	12.65%	LAB GAIN	37%	37%	2%	21%	0%	-6%	4	3				
Tamworth	13.13%	CON HOLD	38%	35%	4%	17%	2%	-5%	3	3				1
Redditch	13.22%	LAB GAIN	28%	31%	4%	30%	5%	-8%	3	5		2		
Derbyshire South	14.14%	CON HOLD	36%	35%	3%	24%	0%	-9%	3	5				
Leicestershire North West	14.46%	LAB GAIN	31%	35%	3%	24%	0%	-6%	3	4	1			
South Dorset	14.79%	CON HOLD	32%	26%	17%	9%	9%	-5%	3	5	3			
Staffordshire Moorlands	15.27%	CON HOLD	33%	26%	7%	25%	0%	-4%	4	3				1
Northampton South	15.40%	CON HOLD	33%	29%	18%	10%	5%	-6%	7		2			
Scarborough and Whitby	16.50%	CON HOLD	31%	23%	3%	22%	5%	-4%	8	4				1
South Thanet	16.58%	UKIP GAIN	26%	27%	4%	35%	5%	-4%	1	1		5		
Kettering	19.21%	CON HOLD	35%	26%	3%	26%	0%	-5%	5	2				1
Gravesham	19.69%	LAB GAIN	34%	35%	2%	19%	0%	-11%	1	4				
Dartford	21.22%	CON HOLD	42%	26%	0%	25%	1%	-3%	5	1				1
Bromsgrove	21.90%	CON HOLD	34%	28%	3%	11%	5%	-8%	4	4				2
Forest of Dean	22.69%	UKIP GAIN	24%	24%	5%	28%	4%	-11%	3	2		2		1
Wellingborough	22.82%	CON HOLD	40%	27%	2%	26%	1%	-5%	8	1				
Selby and Ainsty	23.71%	CON HOLD	43%	30%	0%	9%	2%	-5%	7	3				2

