

**The 2011 English local elections and
the renaissance of two-party politics**

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Paper presented to Elections, Public Opinion and Parties Annual Conference,
University of Exeter, September 9th-11th September, 2011.

Political scientists have always been rather better at explaining the past than predicting the future. Nonetheless when predictions come true there is a certain understandable satisfaction. The fact that electoral trends appeared to make a ‘hung’ parliament more likely had been common currency for some years before 2010. A mixture of a decline in the two-party share of the vote; a pattern of electoral geography and behaviour which made it very difficult for the Conservatives in particular to win sufficient seats for an overall majority; a drop in the number of marginal seats; and an increase in the presence of ‘third’ parties in the House of Commons were all pinpointed as contributing to such an outcome. Labour’s hegemony somewhat disguised the underlying situation in 1997, 2001 and even 2005, but the 2010 general election delivered a result (and eventually a government) which seemed to encapsulate a new era in which a single party would find it very hard to dominate.

Papers at last year’s EPOP conference had a strong focus on a multi-party Britain, and supporters of the proposed modest and limited reform of the electoral system were keen to argue that it would more accurately represent the views of an electorate whose preferences were now ill-served by a winner takes all duopoly. However, no sooner had a future peppered with coalition agreements and inter-party alliances become the conventional wisdom, than the electorate appeared to revert to type. By the end of last summer the Liberal Democrats were falling back towards single figures in the polls; minor parties had not really stepped into the vacuum created; and the combined Labour and Conservative share of the vote in UK Polling Report’s ‘poll of polls’ often exceeded 80% -a figure last reached in a real contest at the 1979 general election.

The 2011 local elections in England gave further substance to this pattern. They marked the worst electoral performance by the Liberal Democrats since the party emerged out of the rubble of the Liberal/SDP Alliance in 1988. Minor parties such as the Greens, UKIP and the BNP did less well than expected. The combined Conservative and Labour share of the ‘national equivalent vote’ reached 75% for the first time in 20 years. In this paper we use electoral and demographic data to show that England does not so much have multi-party politics as three different and differently sized types of two-party system. It was the sharply varying changes of party support between each ‘type’ which led to the unexpected pattern of results in 2011, and it will be the same battlegrounds that could well determine the outcome of the next general election.

2011 –the ‘back story’

Speculation in the run up to the elections tended to focus on the Labour opposition. It was 12 years since Labour last recorded a victory in the popular vote in stand-alone local elections, but the party’s lead in the polls and by-elections alike suggested that their famine could now end. In the spring of 2011 Labour led the Conservatives by an average of more than 5 percentage points in the national opinion polls; in our model of local by-elections its lead was narrower but still consistent –see slides 1 and 2. However, whereas Labour continues to have a problem matching its poll ratings with real election performance, the Conservatives’ score on the two measures tends to be much more in accord. The Liberal Democrat position is the mirror image of Labour’s with its poll ratings always substantially lower than its average

local election showing. On the former the party had fallen back close to single figures by March; on the latter it was holding up more strongly, but still plumbing depths not seen for 20 years. There were also signs of a general public malaise with the traditional protagonists with the various minor parties attracting support into double figures.

As well as the likely share of the vote for the parties at the 2011 local elections, commentators were just as interested in potential seat gains and losses. Calculating those requires benchmarking against the performance of the parties at the same point in the local electoral cycle four years previously. In 2007, with the country waiting for an unpopular Tony Blair to stand down in favour of Gordon Brown, Labour only just came out ahead of the Liberal Democrats in terms of share of the vote and lost more than 500 seats. Four years before that Labour had lost a further 900 seats in the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq. Surely the party now had an open goal at its mercy to recover all or most of those losses. With local by-elections suggesting a swing from the Conservatives to Labour of 9% since 2007, it was projected that Labour could gain as many as 1,300 seats –see slide 3. Similar extrapolations suggested that the Conservatives might lose about 1,000 seats and the Liberal Democrats some 400. These figures were consistently referred to in media coverage of the campaign with particular emphasis being put on Labour’s need to make at least 1,000 gains from a low base to justify any claim that its electoral comeback was under way.

2011 –the outcome

The outcome of the local elections, and rather embarrassingly not for the first time, was rather different. Labour did almost, but not quite as well as expected in terms of both vote share and seat gains –see slide 4. However, the performance of the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats confounded predictions. The Conservatives actually made seat gains despite a small decline in overall vote share and, on our calculations, secured a higher national equivalent share of the vote than Labour. The Liberal Democrats polled only a little less well than in recent local by-elections, but haemorrhaged seats to such an extent that they lost more than four of every 10 they were defending. As a result the two-party share of the local vote was at its highest and the Liberal Democrat share at its lowest for at least 20 years, and not since Mrs Thatcher was in her pomp had a governing party held its ground at stand-alone local elections –see slide 5.

The clue to the large disparity between the projected and actual seat changes lies not in the overall share of the vote (that was predicted reasonably accurately), but in the relationship between votes cast and seats won. In a first past the post system with different parties going head to head in different constituencies/wards accurate projection requires the ability to discriminate between types of party competition and to make forecasts accordingly. Such an approach has been at the heart of recent successful television exit polls. Unfortunately data for use in the annual local elections, either from opinion polling or prior election results, is simply not available at a fine enough grain of detail.

2011 –votes in their context

However, now that the full results from this May's local elections are available, it is possible to see how the parties fared in differing electoral circumstances. In 'traditional' contests, with Labour and the Conservatives in first and second place going in to the elections, the Conservative vote fell and Labour's rose by about nine percentage points –see slide 6. With the Liberal Democrats too falling back, if often from a rather distant third place, seats of this type were responsible for 100 Conservative direct losses of first place to Labour in the 2,130 wards in our sample. In wards where the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats opposed each other, Labour also gained about 9 points but the LDs declined by a similar or even heavier margin. The Conservative share of the vote actually improved (by one point) compared with 2007 in LD-held wards. As a result, although the Conservatives lost first place to Labour in about two dozen cases, they overtook the Liberal Democrats in more than 120 wards. Perhaps the most dramatic turnaround came in those mainly urban wards where it was Labour and the LDs who occupied the top two places in 2007. These registered swings of between 15% and 18% with the third-placed Conservatives' vote barely changed. The Liberal Democrats retained first place in just 40 out of more than 200 such wards with Labour making some 150 direct gains from them.

So, after almost twenty years of enjoying the luxury of being the first port of call for voters disillusioned with the government of the day, the Liberal Democrats found themselves caught in a pincer movement. The Conservatives lost ground to Labour, but more than compensated in those places where they challenged the LDs. Labour did tolerably well where it was up against the Conservatives or had not really featured in the results in 2007, but performed spectacularly in its battle with the Liberal Democrats.

This feature of three two-party contests across England is indirectly reinforced by two different kinds of analysis. First, the pattern of seat gains and losses in the regions shows Labour as the beneficiary of a decline by both the Conservatives and especially the LDs in the Midlands and North –see slides 7 and 8. The Conservatives, on the other hand, had a greater net increase of seats than Labour in the South where their battle with the LDs is fiercest and where a swing from Lib Dem to Labour will often have the effect of handing them a 'free' gain. Second, the performance of the parties can be measured in terms of the demographic composition of wards –see slide 9. The Conservative vote declines, though only slightly, in areas of both high and low social status. However, Labour made particular progress at Liberal Democrat expense where there was high unemployment, low levels of education and/or car ownership, and in those wards in the top quartile of the government's Index of Multiple Deprivation. The LDs' participation in the coalition has, for the moment at least, had a savage impact on the party's appeal in those deprived areas where for a decade and more it had carefully positioned itself as a left of centre alternative to Labour.

Potential impact on 2015

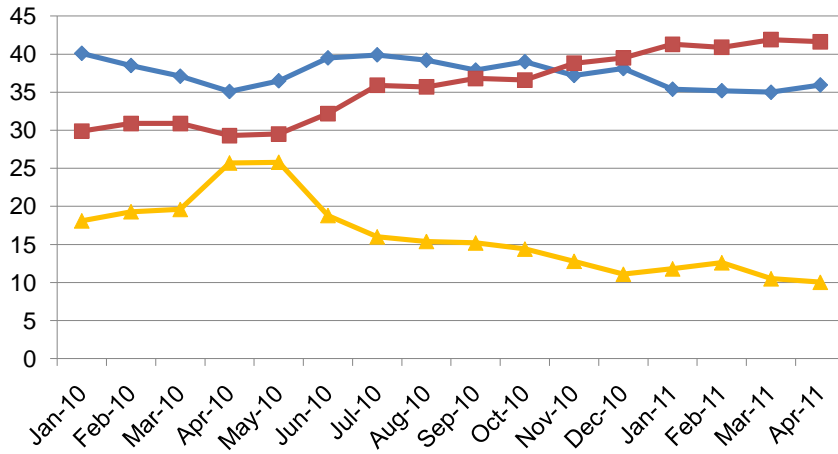
Extrapolating a putative general election result from the 2011 locals must be hedged with all the usual caveats. However, applying uniform change in each constituency between 2010 and 2011, suggests that Labour would have emerged as the largest party in a still hung parliament -see slide 10. Despite the sharp reduction in Liberal Democrat seats and votes, Labour continues to benefit from the 'bias' which allows it to win more seats for a given share of the vote than the Conservatives. Even if the combined Conservative and Labour share reaches 75% in 2015, the Conservatives would need to be seven points ahead (41 to 34) to win an overall majority, whereas Labour could secure the same with a lead of a single point (38 to 37). This contrasts with required leads of almost 3% (Labour) and 11% (Conservatives) if the Liberal Democrat and minor party vote remained unchanged from 2010.

A slightly different outcome might obtain if allowance is made for different levels of vote change in different constituencies. Using data from more than 1,000 wards where we have directly comparable local election results for both 2010 and 2011, it is clear (slide 10 again) that the Conservatives could do rather better and Labour a little worse than under a uniform change model if the patterns of 2011 were repeated. There would still be a disparity in the lead each required to achieve a majority, but it would be narrower. And the spread of results which would produce a hung parliament would itself diminish.

It is of course impossible to predict the future, which is where we came in. The outcome of the next general election will be shaped by several known unknowns (for example, the reduction in the number of constituencies from 650 to 600, and the pattern of any differential turnout) which will impact on how votes cast translate into seats at Westminster in 2015. The 2011 local elections did, however, highlight that in England too politics has become more complex. The three major parties fight each other in three, largely discrete two-party battles. Any attempt to forecast election outcomes needs to take that into account and to do so requires somewhat more sophisticated data than is often available. Using uniform change led us to badly skew our predictions of the 2011 local elections. The task now is to search for ways in which the nuances of English electoral politics can be represented in our local election modelling.

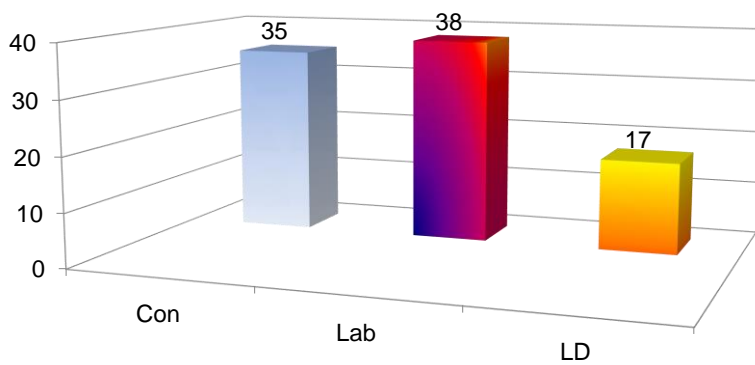
Slide 1

Polling trends 2010-11



Slide 2

By-elections forecast 2011



Slide 3

Seats forecast 2011

Con	Lab	LD
-1,000	+1,300	-400

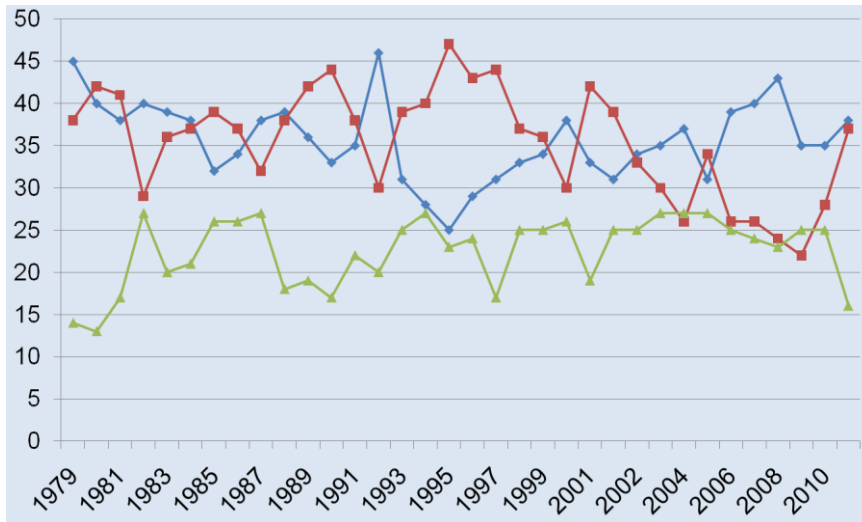
Slide 4

2011 Outcome

	Con	Lab	LD
2007 National Equiv Vote	40	26	24
2011 National Equiv Vote	38	37	16
	-2	+11	-8
Seat tally	+60	+850	-800

Slide 5

National equivalent vote 1979-2011



Slide 6

Change in share 2007-11 and party competition

*Three-party contests in both 2007 and 2011. N = 2,130

	Con	Lab	LD
Con first; Lab second	-5.2	9.4	-3.6
Con first; LD second	-2.7	8.3	-7.6
Lab first; Con second	-3.3	8.7	-4.6
Lab first; LD second	0.9	14.7	-14.9
LD first; Con second	1.0	9.7	-11.4
LD first; Lab second	0.1	17.5	-17.8

Slide 7

Seat change by region

	Con	Lab	LD
North	-70	+370	-250
Midlands	-70	+330	-190
South	+200	+180	-410

Slide 8

Share change by region

	Con	Lab	LD
North	-1.0	+15.3	-11.4
Midlands	-1.0	+11.2	-7.7
South	-1.3	+7.3	-6.3

Slide 9

Change in share 2007-11 and ward social characteristics

*Hi = 2+ st dev above mean; Lo = 1+ st dev below mean

	Con	Lab	LD
Hi unemployment	-1.5	17.9	-11.5
Lo unemployment	-1.0	6.6	-5.6
Hi education	-1.6	9.1	-7.9
Lo education	-0.4	13.2	-9.4
Hi no car	-0.3	17.9	-13.7
Lo no car	-1.3	7.4	-6.4
IMD top quartile	-1.1	13.3	-9.5
IMD bottom quartile	-1.1	8.3	-7.2

Slide 10

General election projections

	Con	Lab	LD	Other
2010 General Election (GB)	37	30	24	10
2011 National Equiv Vote	38	37	16	9
	+1	+7	-8	-1
Uniform change in share				
Westminster seats	270	318	26	36
	-37	+60	-31	+8
By party competition				
Westminster seats	290	301	25	34
	-17	+43	-32	+6