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The Demise of New Labour? The British 'Mid-Term' Elections of 2008

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Abstract

The annual local elections in Britain are closely scrutinised for the clues they offer about the current state of public opinion. The 2008 contests attracted particular attention. The governing Labour party recorded its worst local election performance for 40 years; the Conservative opposition its best since John Major's electoral honeymoon in 1992. These elections, and other evidence, appear to have shifted the political narrative so that a Conservative victory at the next general election (due before mid-2010) is now seen as increasingly possible.

KEYWORDS: UK, mid-term elections, voting, political parties

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Following heavy losses for Labour across a range of elections during May of 2008, the Conservative party leader, David Cameron, claimed that the end of New Labour was nigh. After a decade in opposition, his party does now look far better placed to win the next general election. Labour politicians dismissed this catalogue of defeat as a result of economic difficulties associated with a sharp rise in the price of commodities, principally oil. It was, they said, typical for the incumbent party in western democracies to suffer at the parliamentary mid-term. But the polls since May have continued to show Labour support slipping and the Conservative lead widening.

This paper begins by considering the role that local elections now play in defining the context of national party competition and in presaging the likely behaviour of voters at a future general election. It then presents a more detailed analysis of voting at the London mayoral and assembly elections as well as the local elections in other parts of England and Wales. The closing section draws these strands together and considers the broader implications of the results for the future of British electoral politics.

Local Elections in the National Context

The local elections that take place in Britain each spring have a rather ambiguous status. On the one hand, they are the mechanism through which directly elected local councils are held to account. On the other, they are widely perceived as providing an opportunity for electors to cast a verdict on the performance of the national government. Their results provide evidence to satisfy both interpretations, and each of the main parties spends considerable time trying to shape the media's pre- and post-election analysis. The 2008 elections were no exception.

Currently, there are over 400 councils across Great Britain. In Scotland and Wales, a single tier of councils exists alongside a national Parliament/Assembly. In London, the Greater London Authority, comprising the Mayor of London and the London Assembly, acts as the focal point for governance in the capital, with a further 32 London boroughs providing services on a more local basis. In the rest of England, local government operates with either single- or two-tier structures, depending on a variety of geographical, political, and historic circumstances. Each of these types of local authority also has its own electoral cycle. There are considerable variations from year to year in the extent and number of electoral contests held, making detailed comparison sometimes difficult.

In political science terms, British local elections are clear 'second order' contests with the associated implications for turnout and electoral behaviour (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). Without a written constitution, local government's very existence is at the disposal of a sovereign parliament. Indeed, Mrs. Thatcher and

her then Chancellor of the Exchequer Nigel Lawson are reported to have toyed with its abolition (Butler et al, 1994). Such powers as it once had have eroded over recent years. Similarly, local government expenditure depends heavily on grants from central government rather than revenue raised locally. When a confusing division of powers between different local authorities and a complex cycle of elections are added to that sorry tale, it is no wonder that local electoral turnout is usually little more than half that for general election contests.

Those who do vote often illustrate another aspect of ‘second order’ election theory, in that ‘the political situation of the first-order arena at the moment when the second-order election is being held’ (Reif, 1985: 8) has an important influence on party choice. A general swing against the national incumbent party is common and can, over time, lead to quite dramatic changes in the overall pattern of local government, as Table 1 clearly shows.

The dominance enjoyed by the Conservatives when Mrs. Thatcher first came to power in 1979 was progressively eaten away by each bout of ‘mid-term blues’. By the mid 1990s and shortly before its landslide defeat in the general election of 1997, the number of Conservative councillors had more than halved, and the number of councils controlled had shrunk to almost nothing. Since 1996, it has been Labour’s turn to see its local representation wither away, even as it was being re-elected at parliamentary elections. It has gone from nearly 11,000 councillors to little more than 5,000, and controls just a quarter of its previous number of councils.

Table 1. Fluctuations by Party in British Local Government, 1979-2008

Councils controlled

	Con	Lab	LD	Other	No overall control
1979	244	109	2	86	76
1996	14	207	55	28	137
2008	215	48	29	13	135

Number of Councillors

	Con	Lab	LD	Nat	Independent/Other
1979	12,222	7,410	1,059	301	4,388
1996	4,276	10,929	5,078	298	2,157
2008	9,721	5,122	4,467	569	2,225

However, it is too easy to dismiss all those who do vote as merely conforming to the 'second order' agenda. Specifically local issues can influence behaviour, too, and there has recently been a modest renaissance of Independents and other smaller parties in a trend towards 'a plague on all your houses' voting. They are perhaps the product of an electorate more certain of what it does not want rather than what it does, but they have the added effect of strengthening the 'localness' of local election outcomes.

Unpopular incumbent councils can suffer the same fate as incumbent national governments. For example, the Conservatives in Richmond-on-Thames in 2006 and Eastbourne in 2007 were summarily thrown out by the local electorate despite the party performing well nationally. In 2005, when some electors had the opportunity to vote in both general and local elections during the same visit to the polling station, there were several instances of small 'local' parties convincingly beating major-party opponents at the local level.

On balance, though, a national trend is usually clear, and the political parties frantically manoeuvre to show how they did better than could have been expected whereas their opponents, of course, did much worse. The media tend to focus on what the results would mean if a general rather than local election had been taking place. However, because not every council has an election every year, and because the pattern of party competition is more variable than at a general election, making that connection is less than straightforward.

To overcome this problem, we developed a model for estimating national party support based on how electors actually behaved in the ballot box when voting in local government elections (Rallings and Thrasher, 1999). This so-called 'national equivalent vote' enables each party's performance to be measured, and to be compared on a like-for-like basis with previous years. The vote shares generated by this model have become important benchmarks in the coverage of both the run-up-to and aftermath-of each year's local elections.

Based on an analysis of the votes cast by over 3.5 million voters in 1,350 local wards, we estimate the Conservatives to have won a national equivalent 43% of the vote at the local elections in May of 2008. Labour was far behind but just in second place with 24%, with the Liberal Democrats on 23%. The results represented Labour's worst performance at a local election for 40 years, and the Conservatives' best since John Major's electoral honeymoon in 1992. Repeated at a general election, such a result would put the Conservatives in power with a majority of 126 seats following an 11% swing from Labour since 2005 –see Table 2. The number of Labour seats in the House of Commons would slump from 356 at the last election to just 177, with Conservative seats almost doubling from 198 to 388.

Table 2. Measuring Electoral Change, 2005-2008

	2005 general election	2008 national equivalent vote at local elections	Change 05/08	Projected seats on new boundaries*
Conservative	33	43	+10	388
Labour	36	24	-12	177
Liberal Democrat	23	23	-	55
Other	8	10	+2	30

*Details of the electoral consequences of the new parliamentary boundaries, to be used for the first time at the next general election, can be found in Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher, *Media Guide to the New Parliamentary Constituencies*, LGC Elections Centre for BBC, ITV, PA News, Sky News, www.plymouth.ac.uk/elections.

Further confirmation of Labour's dire electoral plight came just three weeks later in a parliamentary by-election in the Crewe and Nantwich constituency in northwest England caused by the death of the well-known sitting MP, Gwyneth Dunwoody. A swing of more than 17% from Labour to the Conservatives saw a Labour majority of 7,000 votes at the 2005 general election converted to a Conservative cushion of nearly 8,000 votes. This was the Conservatives' first straight by-election gain from Labour since 1978. By-elections, like local elections, are snapshots of current opinion rather than accurate predictors of future results, but in the past they have often marked turning points in the nation's political narrative (Norris, 1990). Naturally enough the Conservatives are convinced that Crewe will prove to be another example of the genre. As if to add insult to Labour's injury, a further by-election in late June in the safe Conservative seat of Henley in south east England saw Labour finish in fifth place behind two minor parties with just 3% of the vote – a drop of over 10 percentage points since 2005.

Voting in London

Labour's general election manifesto of 1997 promised to restore city-wide government to the UK's capital through a directly elected Mayor and Assembly. The post of elected mayor epitomised the New Labour agenda, embracing both constitutional change and modernisation. The hope was that the new mayor would put London on the map in the same way that Giuliani had done in New York and Chirac in Paris. Ken Livingstone was elected as the inaugural mayor in 2000, winning as an Independent candidate. Livingstone had been leader of the former Greater London Council, abolished by Mrs. Thatcher in 1986, and was elected as a Labour MP in 1987. However, he was considered too left-wing by the Blair administration and failed to secure the Labour mayoral nomination. Four years

later, Livingstone won again, though by this time he had been officially restored to the Labour fold. In 2008, and despite having initially suggested that two terms would be sufficient, Livingstone stood for election once more with a high profile Conservative MP, Boris Johnson, as his most prominent opponent.

London's mayor is elected by the highly unusual Supplementary Vote (SV) system. The ballot paper has two columns against the list of candidates. These columns are reserved for the first and second votes, with each choice indicated by a simple cross. In the first column voters mark a cross alongside the name of their most preferred candidate. The count of these votes is made first and should any one of the candidates receive an absolute majority of them, i.e., 50% plus 1 or more, then he or she is declared the winner. If no one has an absolute majority, then all but the top two candidates are eliminated from the contest and their ballots scrutinised for any votes cast in the second column. Ballots that are blank or have votes cast for other eliminated candidates are rejected, but those supporting one or other of the two remaining candidates are counted. These are the supplementary votes that are transferred to each candidate's total. Thus, the final vote for each of the candidates in the run-off is a combination of 1st votes cast directly in their favour plus any relevant 2nd votes contained on the ballots of eliminated candidates. The candidate with the most votes following this second count wins.

Alternative methods for producing a winner with the widest possible support were rejected at the design stage. 'Majority-runoff', frequently used for presidential elections (Blais and Massicote 1996), was seen as a recipe for dismal turnout at the second round. It was also believed that SV would be better understood by voters in the UK because it retained 'x-voting' as opposed to the more exotic preference ordering required by the Alternative Vote (AV). Furthermore, counting SV votes would be simpler than re-distributing preference voters under AV and it would be unlikely that the weak preference votes of fringe candidates would determine the winner (Van der Kolk et al., 2004)

Unable to resist the national tide against Labour, Livingstone's career as London mayor came to an end in 2008. The final tally of votes gave him 47% to Boris Johnson's 53% share –see Table 3. Trailing Johnson by 148,884 votes after the first vote, Livingstone recovered some of the deficit after the count of second votes among the eliminated candidates, but the gap proved too large. Johnson's final tally of first and second votes is 48.4% of the total first votes cast. For the third election running the winner did not receive an absolute majority of votes cast.

We can identify some other interesting characteristics of voting behaviour from these results. Although it was abundantly clear from pre-election polls and campaign coverage that the contest was essentially a two-horse race, a large number of voters chose instead to cast a second vote for someone other than these

two candidates. The third-placed Liberal Democrat challenger for example received one in three second votes, although only one in ten voters had supported him with their first vote. A large number of voters cast both votes for the same candidate. For example, Livingstone received over three hundred thousand second votes but it appears that more than half of these came from people who had already supported him with their first vote! Under the rules of SV, such second votes could not possibly count towards the result.

Perhaps this helps to explain why the number of second votes is so much smaller, more than four hundred thousand fewer, than the number of first votes – the difference could largely comprise Johnson and Livingstone voters realising that the voting rules make a strict partisan choice meaningless and that their chosen candidate could only benefit from supplementary votes from eliminated candidates. Of more than two million second votes cast, only one in eight can be regarded as valid in the sense that they contributed towards the final outcome.

Table 3. Voting for the London Mayor, 2008

Candidate	Party	1st votes	%	2nd votes	%	Valid 2nd votes	Total votes
Boris Johnson	Conservative	1,043,761	43.2	257,792	12.9	124,977	1,168,738
Ken Livingstone	Labour	893,877	37.0	303,198	15.1	135,089	1,028,966
Brian Paddick	Liberal Democrat	236,685	9.8	641,412	32.0		
Siân Berry	Green	77,374	3.2	331,727	16.6		
Richard Barnbrook	British National Party	69,710	2.9	128,609	6.4		
Alan Craig	Christian Peoples Alliance	39,249	1.6	80,140	4.0		
Gerard Batten	UK Independence Party	22,422	0.9	113,651	5.7		
Lindsey German	Left List	16,796	0.7	35,057	1.7		
Matt O'Connor	English Democrats	10,695	0.4	73,538	3.7		
Winston McKenzie	Independent	5,389	0.2	38,954	1.9		
Total		2,415,958		2,004,078		260,066	2,197,704

The Additional Member System (AMS, also known as Mixed Member Proportionality) is used to elect the twenty-five members of the London Assembly. This voting system is the same as that for electing both the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly. Fourteen Assembly members are elected from single-member constituencies by simple plurality voting; the remaining eleven members are chosen from a London-wide list. Each voter has two votes –one for a constituency member and one for the list. The distribution of party list seats is determined by a formula that takes account of the number of constituency seats already won and aims to achieve an overall result that sees some equalisation between vote and seat shares.

Going into the election, the Conservative Party, as the largest party, was defending nine seats, Labour seven seats, the Liberal Democrats five, and the Greens and UK Independence Party (UKIP) two seats each. The outcome of the election (Table 4) shows a gain of two seats for the Conservatives, taking them to 11 seats but still short of an overall majority. Despite losing the mayoralty, Labour was able to increase its representation in the Assembly by one seat. Having been denied an Assembly seat in 2004 because of the operation of a 5% threshold rule that denied a party a list seat unless its vote reached that level, the anti-immigration British National Party (BNP) this time succeeded in winning a seat. The Liberal Democrats and UKIP each lost two seats.

Further signs of the Conservative recovery were evident in the votes cast, with the party increasing its share of the constituency vote by six percentage points compared with 2004. Labour's vote, too, increased: a three-point improvement on four years before. Support for the Liberal Democrats declined by around five percentage points, while the combined vote for other parties fell sharply. The several 'minor' parties together attracted the support of just one in eight of all voters, compared with almost one in five in 2004.

Table 4. Voting for the London Assembly, 2008

	Constituency			List		
	vote	%	Seats	vote	%share	Seats
Conservative	900,569	37.4	8	835,535	34.6	3
Labour	673,855	28.0	6	665,443	27.6	2
Lib Dem	330,018	13.7	0	275,272	11.4	3
Green	194,059	8.1	0	203,465	8.4	2
BNP	18,020	0.8	0	130,714	5.4	1
Other	289,768	12.1	0	302,178	12.5	0
Total	2,406,289			2,412,607		

Perhaps the most notable feature of the London Assembly voting is the closeness between each party's share of constituency and list votes. Under AMS, we might expect to find substantial differences between each party's share for the two different kinds of seat, especially for smaller parties that are disadvantaged by simple plurality voting. Even the third-placed Liberal Democrats performed better at constituency than list level, though their third of a million votes were insufficient to win any constituency seats. The Greens did attract additional support on the list, but their increment was fewer than 10,000 votes. The one party that does appear to have understood the voting system and adjusted its campaign accordingly is the BNP. It fielded a candidate in just one of the 14 constituencies, where it stood no realistic chance of victory, but explicitly asked voters instead for their list vote. A list seat was assured as soon as the party received more than 5% of votes across London.

Although it is difficult with aggregate data to arrive at definitive judgements about awareness of the voting systems, both mayoral and Assembly, it appears that many voters do not appreciate the strategic value of the different kinds of vote. Many mayoral second votes went to candidates who were clearly never going to feature in the runoff race. Many constituency votes went to parties whose candidates were not going to threaten the two-party dominance of these seats, while the pattern of list voting mirrored to a remarkable degree the distribution of constituency votes.

Voting in England and Wales

Straightforward comparisons with previous local elections are often difficult to make because of the irregular electoral cycle, but they are possible in the case of the larger cities outside London and also for Wales. The more densely populated parts of England are administered by 36 metropolitan boroughs, and the 2008 elections can be compared with those for 2004. Traditionally, Labour has dominated in these authorities, but as Table 1 makes clear, its strength in local government has eroded over the past decade, even in what is rightly regarded as its electoral heartland. Table 5 shows the result for the metropolitan authorities as a whole and how near the Conservatives came to overtaking Labour – fewer than nine thousand votes separated the two parties! The low support for Labour is notable because it represents a decline from the already low base of 2004, when the elections occurred at the height of Tony Blair's unpopularity over the war in Iraq.

Table 5. Voting in the Metropolitan Boroughs: 2008 and 2004 Compared

	Share %	Change 04/08	Seat %	Change 04/08
Conservative	31.0	+5.1	29.9	+7.5
Labour	31.4	-1.2	38.3	-10.1
Lib Dem	21.7	-3.8	25.2	+0.9
Others	16.0	-	6.7	+1.7

The increase of five points in the Conservative vote was outweighed by the greater rise in its share of seats. Seats were won thanks not only to more Conservative votes in the ballot box, but also to the falling away of its opponents in different areas. It appears too that the Conservatives are learning to target resources better and not to fall victim to amassing large and unproductive majorities in safe seats whilst failing to convert marginal ones. This is a lesson that it must transfer to the country as a whole if it is to overcome the large electoral bias that currently favours the Labour party. By contrast, Labour's share of both votes and seats in the metropolitan boroughs was its lowest since the authorities were created in 1973 (Rallings and Thrasher, 2003). The Liberal Democrats declined in vote support but improved marginally in terms of seats won and, unusually for a third-placed party in a plurality system, obtained a greater share of seats than of votes. Such a result reflects the party's care in choosing both the seats to contest and a shorter list to campaign in.

The pattern of voting in Wales was even more depressing for Labour and gave further encouragement to the Conservatives. At the last general election, the Conservative Party won just three of the 40 Welsh parliamentary constituencies, but there are four Labour-held seats that will fall on a relatively modest swing next time round. The local elections provided an important opportunity for the party to oil its machine in preparation for the later assault on Labour. Table 6 shows a clear improvement in the Conservatives' vote and seat share, largely at Labour's expense. Although the party remains in third place behind Labour and the Welsh nationalist party, Plaid Cymru, these elections restored it to a position in line with its long-term average in Wales.

The drop in Labour's vote was modest compared with the drop in seats, but on both measures it plumbed an all-time low. As in the metropolitan borough elections, Labour appears to have become vulnerable to the electoral strategies of its opponents, based on wooing support for the party best placed to defeat it. The Liberal Democrats, for example, won fewer votes than before but won a greater share of seats, while Plaid Cymru's performance in winning extra seats was better than its ability to win more votes. In many areas of Wales, however, local elections remain the preserve of non-party candidates, the bulk of whom make up

the votes of ‘Others’. Independents hold more seats than do any of the main parties and control the largest single number of local councils in Wales.

Table 6. Voting in the Welsh Councils: 2008 and 2004 Compared

	Share %	Change 04/08	Seat %	Change 04/08
Conservative	15.6	4.6	13.8	5.3
Labour	26.5	-4.1	27.2	-10.7
Lib Dem	12.9	-1.0	13.0	1.4
Plaid Cymru	16.9	0.5	16.4	2.5
Others	28.0	-0.1	29.7	1.5

Conclusions

There is a danger in reading too much into these local election results, in terms of their meaning for the next general election. The outcome of that election is still far from cut and dried. However the significance of the evidence, allied with parliamentary by-elections, is threefold. First, it confirms recent opinion polls that the Conservatives are now able to attract the support of over 40% of voters. Second, it adds to the perception of a government that is losing touch with the very electors who gave it such impressive majorities in 1997, 2001, and 2005. Third, it will make Labour strategists ponder whether it is policies or personalities (or both) that need to be changed before the next general election.

Nonetheless, the Conservatives still face a formidable hurdle if they are to win power. History tells us that the government will recover some support by 2010, and it is likely that David Cameron’s party will need a lead of at least 10 points in the popular vote to get an overall majority at Westminster. Even after boundary changes which have ameliorated some of the ‘biases’ within the electoral system (Rallings, Johnston and Thrasher, 2008), it will take a swing of more than 4% and a turnover of 72 seats for the Conservatives to become the largest party in a hung parliament; one of nearly 7% (equivalent to 116 seat gains) for a majority of just one over all other parties (Rallings and Thrasher 2007). That swing is considerably more than the 5.3% Mrs. Thatcher achieved in 1979, and indeed greater than at any election since 1945, with the single exception of Labour’s 1997 landslide (10.2%). This spring’s election contests give credence to the argument that the government is on its way out. It would be a far bolder prediction that the Conservatives are poised to step straight into Labour’s shoes.

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