

## LOCAL ELECTIONS IN BRITAIN: COMPARING MYTH WITH REALITY

*By Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher*

SUCH attention as the national media pay to local elections in Britain invariably concentrates on the current health of the main parties and the likely outcome of the next general election. Although such treatment could be said to devalue local government, were it not for this desire to translate local into national the media would probably ignore local elections altogether. Yet, there is a long-term danger in regarding local elections in this manner. The more such contests are regarded as largely dry-runs for the real struggle ahead, the greater the difficulty in defending the principle of local democracy and accountability. The electorate already perceive the relationship between elections and policy output far better at national than local level. If that gap widens further, those wishing to remove responsibilities from local government will face less public opposition. The essential dilemma, therefore, is one of balancing interest in local elections as surrogate indicators of national political opinion with a recognition of their intrinsic value as expressions of community feeling within a system of representative and responsible local government.

A major obstacle in achieving this balanced coverage is the lack of readily available data on local electoral behaviour. In most Western democracies these data are gathered by the state, but in Britain this is not the case. As part of its cost-cutting programme, central government ceased its own limited collection of local results in 1981. A handful of academics have since stepped into the breach and published electoral statistics which together provide a complete picture of Scottish local elections and a partial coverage of English authorities.<sup>1</sup>

The position is no better regarding the availability of survey data. Until not so long ago, the most recent national survey of attitudes to local government was that produced for the Maud Committee in 1965. In 1986 NOP was commissioned to conduct a survey for the Widdicombe Inquiry, but it appears as though such research will only be commissioned as and when central government finds it convenient.<sup>2</sup> Faced with these problems of data collection psephologists have been almost exclusively concerned with national elections, while the media, for their part, use the available, rather patchy information to extrapolate from the particular to the general.

This is unfortunate since there is strong evidence to suggest that a rich vein of electoral material remains untapped. To illustrate this

point we will show how aggregate data on local election results can be used to increase our understanding of voting behaviour. In particular, we will examine how and why people participate in local elections; changing patterns of local party competition; the relationship between national and local voting; and the efficacy of using local elections as surrogate indicators of national public opinion. Before discussing these themes, however, it would be helpful to provide brief details about the cycle of local elections in Britain and the relationship between electoral boundaries at national and local levels.

### *The Local Electoral System*

Local elections in Great Britain employ the 'first past the post' or single-ballot, simple-majority system. Unlike Members of Parliament, however, local councillors are elected for a fixed term of four years. In local government there is no equivalent of the strategically-timed election, given the statutory obligation to hold the election in May. The electoral cycle in Scotland is straightforward. Scottish Regional and Island authorities elect a complete council every four years and their next elections are due in 1990. Scottish Districts employ a similar method and their councils come up for re-election in 1988. The situation in England and Wales is more complicated because there are differing cycles for choosing a council. Some authorities have a third of their councillors retiring each year with a blank year every fourth year, whilst others hold elections every four years for the entire council. Of the main spending authorities in England and Wales, the Metropolitan Districts in the six great conurbations use election by thirds, while the shire Counties elsewhere and the London Boroughs elect complete councils. Doubtless, further confusions within the electorate's mind are caused by the fact that individual shire Districts can opt for one or other of these methods. Neighbouring councils, therefore, may well use different electoral systems. Choice is often desirable, but it can become counter-productive if voters are muddled about when they may exercise their local democratic rights. To summarise, 1988 will see elections for the Metropolitan Districts, some shire Districts in England and Wales and all of the Scottish Districts; 1989 will bring elections for County Councils in England and Wales; in 1990 there will be elections for the London Boroughs, the Metropolitan Districts, some shire Districts, as well as full elections for the Scottish Regions; 1991 effectively repeats the pattern of election seen in 1987—that is, elections in all the English and Welsh District Councils together with the Metropolitan Districts.

Further complications to the local electoral system are introduced by the arrangements for constructing electoral boundaries. Once again, Scotland is fortunately exempted from this muddle. Whereas in Scotland District wards aggregate precisely to Regional divisions, this

practice is not followed in England and Wales. In the shires, District wards often bear little relationship to County divisions. It is virtually impossible, therefore, to produce comprehensive data for England and Wales comparing electoral behaviour at the ward and division level. This matter is crucial when we come to aggregate County data to the parliamentary constituencies which are themselves aggregates of District wards. Where County divisions are incompatible with District wards it can be difficult to discuss the implications of a set of County Council results for parliamentary constituencies.

### *Voting in Local Elections*

(a) *The Conventional Wisdom.* The conventional wisdom of voting in local elections presents a picture of an apathetic electorate. A majority abstain, while those that do vote use the opportunity simply to record their satisfaction with the party in power at Westminster. Thus, local elections, for all except local activists and habitual voters, are non-events. Symptomatic of this lack of interest is the level of party competition. Many seats go uncontested, while others fail to attract candidates representing the main political parties. The survival of Independents in local government, far from being applauded, is seen as indicative of a lack of enthusiasm amongst party politicians for a council seat. Such assertions need to be confronted by recent evidence.

(b) *Patterns of Participation.* In his recent study for the Widdicombe Committee, Miller reports on survey evidence about the propensity of individuals to vote in local elections. He argues that the strength of identity with a political party appears to be the most important factor, and that those who vote are "almost perfectly representative of the full electorate in terms of partisanship and issue attitudes."<sup>3</sup> There is little evidence that low turnout involves a systematic skewing of the results in favour of one political party or even class.

Yet, although Table 1 does indeed demonstrate that local turnout varies very little either side of 40% regardless of the year or authorities involved, such bald figures obfuscate huge ward and authority differences which remain to be explained. For example, in the 1985 County Council elections in England turnout varied from 48.7% in the Isle of Wight to 36.5% in Cleveland. In individual County divisions the

1. Average Turnout in Local Government Elections (%)

	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987
Met. Districts		37.6	41.2	38.6		39.3	44.0
London Boroughs		43.8				45.5	
County Councils	43.1				41.5		
District Councils			39.0	35.6	37.2	39.2	39.0
Scottish Regions		42.9				45.6	
Scottish Districts				44.6			

(Data for District Councils represents average turnout in byelections and not the May elections, turnout in Scotland is that for contested seats only.)

highest turnout was 65.1% in Bellingham (Northumberland) and the lowest 20.2% in Peterlee Central (Durham). The 1987 Metropolitan Borough elections encouraged 52% of the electorate in Stockport to vote, but only 32.4% of those in Sandwell.

It is possible to throw some further light on this by matching our data on election results and turnout levels with census information on the socio-economic character of particular wards.<sup>4</sup> This allows tentative judgements to be made about the impact of electoral, social and partisan context on behaviour. The size of the electorate in a ward, the presence of at least one female candidate and the number of parties contesting the vacancy appear to have little impact on turnout. Even more directly political factors such as the marginality of the ward, previously a controversial focal point of research on turnout, produce only weak correlations.<sup>5</sup> One exception to this, however, is that turnout in safe Labour wards—defined as those in which the party enters the election with a majority of more than 20%—is consistently some 5% lower than in its marginal wards held by less than 10%. In our analysis, low turnout is also correlated with low socio-economic status and other measures of poor material well-being—exactly the conditions associated with some of Labour's safest territory.

It has long been thought that the Liberal party has reaped considerable benefit in local government elections from its concentration on vigorous campaigning and publicity at a community level. The success of such tactics should be reflected not simply in winning seats, but also in persuading an absolutely higher proportion of the electorate to turn out and vote. In a study of Liverpool, for example, Laver concluded that "Liberal voting is very strongly related to turnout".<sup>6</sup> A similar, if weaker, relationship holds throughout the country, with gains by both of the Alliance parties relying heavily on persuading additional electors to cast their ballots.

Ultimately, it is possible to consider the combined impact of the political and socio-economic character of a ward in predicting turnout. Using multi-variable analysis, we discover the picture in the Counties and in the Metropolitan authorities to differ slightly. In the shires it proved difficult to construct a model for predicting turnout accurately. Citizens in low status areas were less likely to participate, but whether low turnout was a function of their social status or an effect of their more frequent location in safe Labour wards could not be clearly disentangled. Similarly, electors in divisions with a large Conservative share of the vote were also likely to be discouraged from voting because, despite generally living in areas of high status and thus assumed high predisposition to participate, they too felt their individual vote would be unimportant to the outcome.

Our analysis of the Metropolitan Districts reflects their more solidly industrial and Labour Party base. Indeed, the share of the Labour vote

alone explains between 30% in 1984 and 49% in 1987 of the difference in turnout between wards. In other words, the greater the Labour vote, the lower the likely turnout. The explanation remains the same, but the correlation is stronger than in the case of the Counties simply because strong Labour wards are so much more common and are counteracted by fewer 'safe' Conservative seats.

There are, however, a host of cases where turnout is very considerably above or below the expected level. It is here, of course, that much of the interest lies, but it is here, too, that speculation takes over from statistics. We might hypothesize that where a contest is unusual—characterised by high partisan competition, features intense campaigning by one or more parties, or occurs in an area where local government has been elevated, for whatever reason, to prominence—then turnout often exceeds statistical prediction by a wide margin. In the Isle of Wight, for example, there were turnouts of above 55% in eight of the 43 County divisions in 1985. In the 1987 Metropolitan District elections, more than 50% of the electorate went to the polls in 17 out of 33 wards in Liverpool. In each case it seems that the clearly perceived relevance of the election to local people played an important part in stimulating participation.

High turnouts in local government can be achieved, but they must be won by the parties (and the media) conveying to the electorate an impression of the importance of the contest. Apathy has to be positively countered, but it is almost impossible to account for the circumstances in which it will be in a predictive model of local electoral turnout. In the meantime, it is necessary to counter the conventional wisdom that low turnouts mean that the elections are seen as unimportant or that the voters could not care less who wins or loses. Such an interpretation too rapidly becomes a stick with which local government itself can be attacked.

(c) *Patterns of Party Competition 1983-1987*. The 1983 general election ushered in a new era of party competition. In capturing 26% of the vote, the Liberal/SDP Alliance had gone some way towards 'breaking the mould'. Could it improve still further on this position and fully establish itself as a future contender for government? It was certainly the case that, with the exception of a few Liberal strongholds, the Alliance base in local government was weak. It was therefore obliged to use the post-general election period to build up its local strength as a platform for challenging the entrenched two-party system. Generally speaking, this meant attacking Labour's power base in the Metropolitan Districts while seeking to remove the Conservative stranglehold in the shires. In London neither Labour nor the Conservatives were pre-eminent, and here the Alliance would have to fight on two fronts simultaneously.

The dominance of the two 'old' parties in different parts of the country had, in fact, been established for some years already. The

Independent councillor began to acquire almost 'rare species' status following the reorganisation of local government in 1974. In Metropolitan areas throughout the country no more than one or two per cent of all councillors are now 'Independents', and in the vast majority of the shires in England and Wales party politics has a firm grip. In England in 1985 the Independents attained more than 10% of the vote in only four Counties, their best showing being 33.9% in Cornwall. A further consequence of increased politicisation has been a sharp decline in the number of councillors returned unopposed. Almost every elector is given a choice about who should run the local top-tier authority. Uncontested seats and Independent councillors are more common at the District Council level and particularly in rural areas. The political parties have begun to cast envious glances at this tier too, however, and the Independents lost over 100 seats in the 1987 District elections alone.

## 2. Shares of the Vote in Elections in England (%)

SHIRE COUNTIES	1983:GE		1985:CC		1987:GE	
Conservative	50.2		38.4		50.4	
Labour	21.4		30.0		23.3	
Alliance	27.9		28.0		25.9	
Others	0.6		3.6		0.4	
MET. BOROUGHES	1983:MB	1983:GE	1984:MB	1986:MB	1987:MB	1987:GE
Conservative	33.5	36.1	31.0	26.5	31.7	34.8
Labour	44.7	40.1	48.6	48.1	42.6	45.3
Alliance	20.1	23.2	18.9	23.3	23.8	20.4
Others	1.7	0.6	1.5	2.1	1.9	0.3
LONDON BOROUGHES		1982:LB	1983:GE	1986:LB	1987:GE	
Conservative		43.0	43.9	36.1	46.5	
Labour		30.4	29.8	38.0	31.5	
Alliance		24.6	24.7	24.0	21.3	
Others		2.1	1.6	1.9	0.8	

(GE = General Election; CC = County Council Elections, MB = Metropolitan Borough Elections, LB = London Borough Elections.)

The two Alliance parties have met with only limited success in establishing an electoral base in the Metropolitan areas. Table 2 shows how they could only add 3.7% to their share of the vote between 1983 and 1987, while increasing the number of wards where they finished first from 59 to 101. Both Labour and the Conservatives saw their shares of the vote fall by similar amounts, although it was Labour which lost the most seats. However, such figures disguise the quite considerable variations that can occur at the local level. Comparing the 1986 elections with those for 1987, for example, we find the Conservative share of the vote rising by 8.6% in Manchester whilst falling by 4.1% in Liverpool. Similarly, the Labour vote in the Merseyside conurbation increased during this period but in the West Midlands it fell back substantially—by 14.1% in Wolverhampton and by no less

than 17.8% in Dudley. The Alliance parties on average did better in 1987 than in the previous year, but their vote tended to plateau in authorities such as Liverpool, Kirklees, Stockport and Calderdale, where only a small increment in support might have seen them taking control of the council. Such variations highlight both the potential impact of local issues and the pitfalls of examining aggregated data.

At the 1983 general election the Alliance performance had been particularly strong in the shires, pushing Labour into third place. Its first major opportunity to consolidate this position came with the 1985 County Council elections. In polling 28% of the vote, the Alliance replicated its general election performance. In some areas, notably the West Country, its advance was impressive when compared with the support enjoyed previously by the Liberals alone. In Somerset, for example, the Alliance vote showed a 23% increase on the previous elections held in 1981; in neighbouring Devon it increased its share from 26.1% in 1981 to 40.2% in 1985, topping the poll. It is important to note, however, that even at this level such a result is the aggregate product of often rather different voting patterns in the Districts and wards. For example, in Plymouth the Alliance vote rose by a staggering 25.7%, with both Labour and the Conservatives losing 10% of their support. Conversely, in adjacent South Hams the Conservative vote actually increased, while in Exeter the Alliance vote received only an 8% boost. We have here clear evidence not only of local-national differences in voting behaviour, but that communities within the same authority may behave differently according to their particular characteristics and the saliency of truly local issues.

In all but two of the English Counties the Alliance vote increased, the main effect being a sharp rise in the number of 'hung' councils where no single party had a majority of seats and was therefore able to form an administration alone. Before the 1985 elections in only 10 of 39 counties was there no party in overall control, but with the increase in Alliance councillors from 359 to 643 this figure rose to 25. The Conservatives lost control in 9 Counties and Labour too saw its grip in some of the shires weakened. Thus, the official party of Opposition at Westminster found itself in the unusual position of fighting local elections in the middle of a Parliament and suffering major losses. Overall, Labour lost 85 seats and control in 5 of the 14 Counties it had held previously.

The picture for Labour in the 1986 elections for the London Boroughs was much better. Here the party improved on its 1982 performance by almost 8%, achieving 38% of the popular vote overall. Its advance was largely at the expense of the Conservatives, while the Alliance remained stuck on 24%, almost identical to its performance in 1982 and at the 1983 general election. Labour's reward was to take control of a further four London Boroughs, but

once again the variation in local voting was such that it also managed to lose control of Tower Hamlets. In this particular Borough the Labour vote defied the trend and fell from 47.3% in 1982 to 44.9% in 1986. These were the last full set of elections in London before the general election, but subsequent local by-elections in the capital were to demonstrate the vulnerability of Labour's grip.

### *Local Elections and the National Context*

In 1987, as in 1983, the general election took place exactly five weeks after the local contests. Mrs Thatcher's advisers, and many commentators, clearly interpreted the council elections as a dummy run for the 'real thing'. Attempts were made to estimate which constituencies the various parties would win or lose on the basis of the local figures and the prognostications were thought to be good for the Conservatives. Estimates of their likely overall majority varied from 20 to 50, and the aggregate pattern of voting appeared to accord with the picture presented by the most recent opinion polls. For Labour in particular it was a poor result, with its local vote dropping by some 5% since May 1986. This, too, seemed in line with its currently weak showing in the opinion polls, for it had slipped several points at the time of the Greenwich by-election debacle and had been unable to recover. Particular cause for concern could be found by comparing what had happened to its vote between May and June 1983. As Table 3 demonstrates, Labour lost 7% of its support during the campaign to post its worst performance for fifty years.

3. Party Shares in Local and General Elections (%)

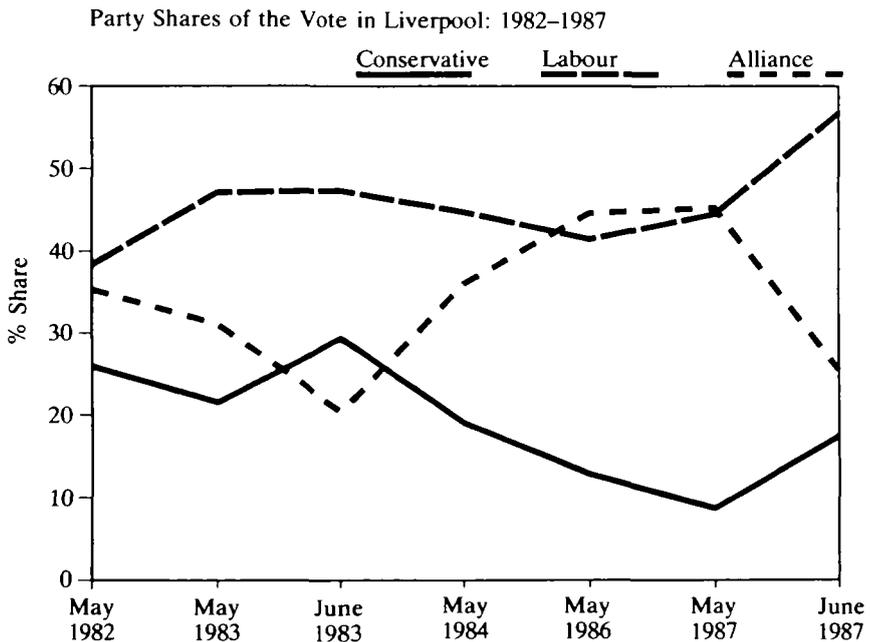
	Local May 1983	General June 1983	Local May 1987	General June 1987
Conservative	41	44	40	43
Labour	35	28	31	32
Alliance	22	26	27	23
Other	2	2	2	2

What is of interest is whether changes in party support between local and general elections can be used to argue that some electors are making consciously different choices according to the level of government. The conventional wisdom that local elections are little more than state-sponsored opinion polls can be disregarded. Variations in performance between parties and candidates are simply too great to explain other than by local people making locally relevant choices. Indeed, when the general election and District Council elections took place on the same day in 1979, Waller was able to report a wide disparity in party support in many places.<sup>7</sup> Yet the notion of specifically local patterns of political behaviour remains one treated with scepticism. Miller, for example, acknowledges that there is "some

slippage between national and local choice” but goes on to argue that “over four-fifths of local voters vote exactly in accord with their national party identification or current national preference”.<sup>8</sup>

However, even if ‘only’ one in five of the electorate are making such a decision, this amounts to some eight million individuals whose votes can have a substantial effect on outcomes. Moreover, it is very likely that in circumstances where the local political temperature has been raised, not only will more people turn out but that they will be more inclined to vote with local affairs at the forefront of their minds.

Again, it is Liverpool that provides the best recent example of this phenomenon.<sup>9</sup> As the graph demonstrates, the Conservative vote has collapsed at recent local elections to the benefit of the Alliance. When, however, the national government is being chosen, many of those Tory deserters return to the fold. Exactly why they do so is a subject for survey research, but that they do and that such change has profound electoral consequences cannot be gainsaid. If local patterns had been repeated at the general election, the Liberals would have gained Liverpool Broadgreen and Liverpool Garston. As it happened their vote in those constituencies—and throughout Liverpool—fell dramatically and they were unable to wrest control even from two self-acknowledged ‘left-wing’ Members of Parliament. Conversely, and also on Merseyside, the Labour vote in Southport was halved between May and June, sufficient to allow the Liberals to gain the parliament seat.



Such change is the product of a multiplicity of factors, but it reinforces one interpretation. Local elections may in aggregate be an accurate indicator of the state of the parties nationally, but at the level of local authority and ward far more complex patterns prevail. Many people do consciously vote for the person or a local policy or on the record of their local council. They will often do so while retaining a national party allegiance in conflict with their current behaviour.

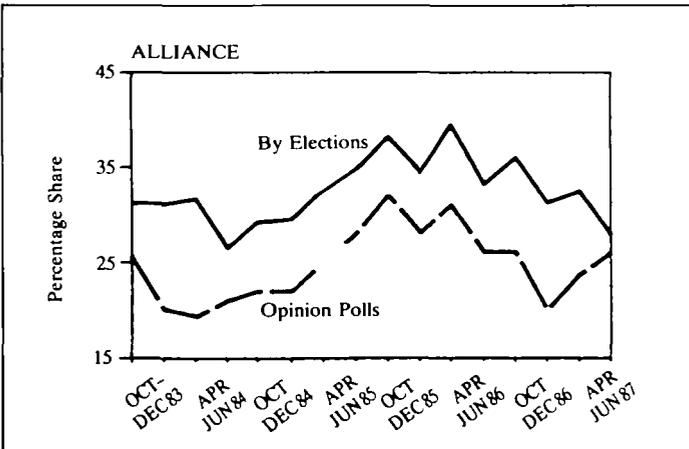
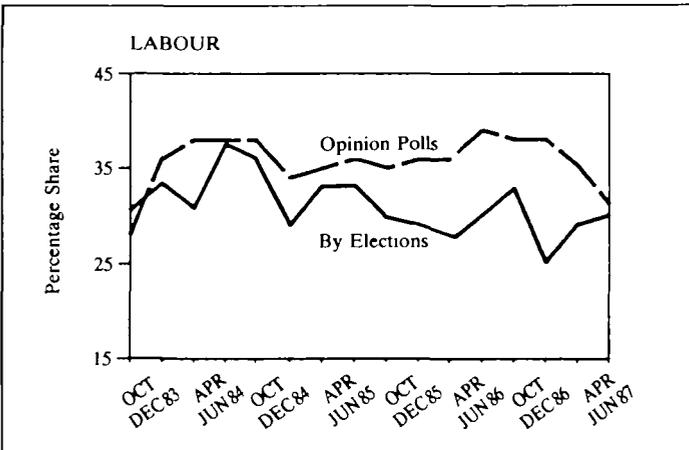
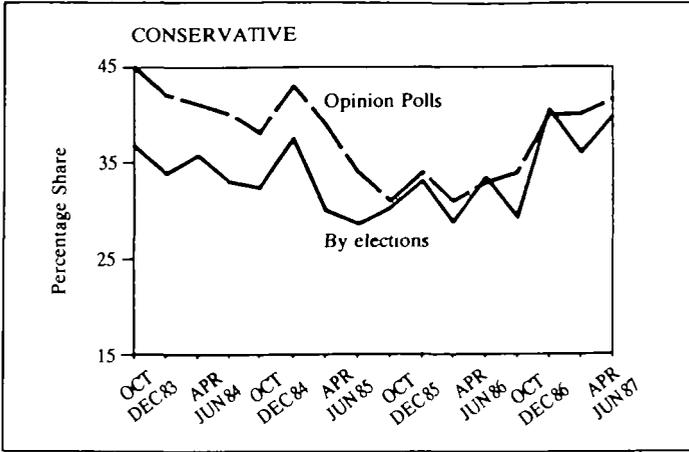
### *Local Byelections as Surrogate Indicators of Political Change*

The graph below suggests there is a close association between a party's aggregated performance at the local hustings and its showing in the national opinion polls. As we have demonstrated, local elections are not solely fought on national issues but if a sufficiently large number of by-elections are sampled, specifically local factors are apparently evened out. On average there are 70 by-elections each quarter fought by candidates of the main parties and aggregating the results of these produces some interesting results. The Alliance, for example, achieved approximately 5% more support in by-elections than in opinion polls, largely, we believe, because of its more efficient campaigning techniques. From mid-1985 onwards the Conservatives' performance on these indicators was more or less similar. In contrast, Labour locally was rarely able to achieve what opinion polls nationally suggested, and between 1983 and 1987 it gained and lost council seats in almost equal proportion. This inability unambiguously to broaden its appeal was carried over into the general election itself. The coincidence of peaks and troughs in what are completely independent indicators is quite impressive. *Prima facie* it would appear that the very factors influencing party popularity in the polls are also present over a series of local by-elections.

Every party experiences periods of unpopularity, and adverse by-election results may well be the first indicator of a fall from favour. The decline in Conservative support in the first quarter of 1986 reflected the impact of the Westland affair and the concurrent row within the party over rate support grant. In January and February Conservatives held only six of 30 local council seats being defended and made no gains.<sup>10</sup> The overwhelming beneficiaries were the Alliance parties which made impressive inroads into previously solid Conservative territory.

Although the Alliance was indisputably the most successful group in terms of local election advances, it, too, was vulnerable to political controversy. Its weakest opinion poll and by-election performance in over two years came immediately after, and presumably as a direct consequence of, the controversy over defence policy at the Liberal and SDP 1986 party conferences. From enjoying net gains in double figures in most months in the first three quarters of the year, the Alliance experienced the shock of losing more seats to the Conservatives than it gained from them in October 1986.

Comparison of Party Performance in By Elections and Opinion Polls



Purists may disagree with the use of local by-election results as surrogate indicators of national political change, but the closeness between the different measures of public opinion and local voting cannot simply be ignored. Opinion polls are, of course, sometimes erratic, but the practice of averaging poll results has proved legitimate. We have shown that as long as sufficient numbers of by-election results are analysed, these too can be a valuable source of information about the current distribution of party political support. Used sensibly, opinion polls are fairly accurate barometers of public attitudes and there appears little wrong in using by-election results in a similar manner.

### *Conclusions*

The absence of proper accountability is often used as an excuse to remove services from local authorities or to further constrain their discretionary powers. Countering such arguments has proved difficult in the first instance because of the absence of full and reliable local electoral data. This position has been partially remedied but much work remains to be done. Analysis of the available data does demonstrate that on average only four out of ten electors bother to vote in local elections. This figure is still higher than that found in elections for the European Parliament and on occasion rivals turnout in some parliamentary constituencies. Fewer and fewer council seats go uncontested or fail to attract candidates from the main political parties. Indeed, the record number of hung councils demonstrates there is more not less party competition in local government than ever before. It is at the local level that some of the political and practical consequences of Britain's now multi-party system have been initially experienced. Such facts are not the basis for a serious attack upon local accountability.

Our analysis has demonstrated that increased party competition helps generate local media interest and ultimately improves the level of turnout. Local elections, however, have to become issues of consuming interest to the national media. The more elevated they become in the minds of the general public, the easier unsubstantiated claims about 'loony left' and irresponsible councils can be rebutted. This is not to deny the manifest weaknesses in our local government but to help restore some balance to the argument. Some may feel the price for presenting local elections as 'national' political events is too high if the value and relevance of purely local factors are ignored. As we have argued, however, local and national factors are both at work in influencing the outcome of local elections and it would be wrong to pretend otherwise.

<sup>1</sup> Since 1974 John Bochel and David Denver (Department of Political Science, University of Dundee) have published a complete record of all Scottish District and Regional elections. The Greater London Council and, for 1986, the London Residuary Body have produced a series of statistical

reports on all GLC and London Borough Council elections. The present authors (Centre for the Study of Local Elections at Plymouth Polytechnic) have published volumes covering the 1985 English County Council and the 1986 and 1987 Metropolitan Borough Council elections.

<sup>2</sup> Committee of Inquiry into the Conduct of Local Authority Business, *Research Volume III The Local Government Elector* (HMSO, 1986)

<sup>3</sup> *Research Volume III*, loc. cit., p. 143

<sup>4</sup> The collection of County election results and the aggregation of census information to County division level was carried out by the authors under an ESRC grant (E00232117) and the data has been deposited with the ESRC Data Archive at the University of Essex.

<sup>5</sup> For earlier discussion on the relevance of such factors, see P. Fletcher, "An Explanation of Variations in Turnout", *Political Studies* 17, 1969, and K. Newton, "Turnout and Marginality in Local Elections", *British Journal of Political Science* 2, 1972

<sup>6</sup> M. Laver, "Are the Liverpool Liberals Really Different?" *British Journal of Political Science* 14, 1984, p. 246

<sup>7</sup> R. Waller, "The 1979 Local and General Elections in England and Wales. Is There a Local/National Differential?" *Political Studies* 28, 1980

<sup>8</sup> *Research Volume III*, loc. cit., p. 169

<sup>9</sup> See W. H. Cox and M. Laver, "Local and National Voting in British Elections", *Parliamentary Affairs* 32, 1979

<sup>10</sup> The present authors record and summarise local byelection results monthly in the *Local Government Chronicle* and periodically in *The Guardian*