
The Local Elections

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EIGHTEEN YEARS of Conservative government ended as it had begun—on the first Thursday in May, local election day. Only twice in history have the general and local elections been held simultaneously. On the first occasion in 1979 the Labour Prime Minister, James Callaghan, had little choice over the election date. His party's pact with the Liberals had crumbled, leaving a minority government vulnerable to an opposition vote of no confidence. The Conservatives under Mrs Thatcher swept to power, winning not only a Commons majority but also political control of many local authorities across Britain. Now, with a pleasing symmetry the wheel has turned full circle. John Major decided that local election day 1997 offered the Conservatives their best chance of securing a fifth successive term, but instead it proved to be their electoral nemesis. Inevitably, in both 1979 and 1997 the local election campaign was overshadowed by the general election. Yet these 'forgotten elections' provide unique opportunities to further our understanding of electoral behaviour and the development of party competition in Britain.

In this article we shall examine a number of different aspects of the 1997 local elections. First, we review the results and, crucially, frame our discussion within the context of what has been a decade long Conservative decline in local government. The party now begins a period in opposition in far worse shape in local government than ever before. Second, we will use the fact of simultaneous elections to look for evidence of differential voting. Did some parties perform better in one form of election than another? Was there a consistent pattern of voting or were there local variations? Did voters turn out to vote in equal numbers for both types of election? Although only parts of Britain had local elections the contests were sufficiently widespread to allow such comparisons. Finally, we shall identify the main changes in the pattern of voter behaviour between 1979 and 1997, and assess what they might tell us about political attitudes and party loyalties.

The local election results in 1997

Ordinarily the seats up for re-election in 1997 would have been in the shire counties, last fought in 1993. But the electoral cycle has been

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severely dislocated by structural changes to some local authorities. There were, for example, no elections in Wales because there the former two tier system of eight county and 37 district authorities was wholly replaced in 1996 by 22 new unitary councils. In England the process of change has been piecemeal. At the same time the administrative counties of Avon, Cleveland, Humberside and Isle of Wight were abolished and replaced with unitary authorities. Since then the body charged with reviewing structure, the English Local Government Commission, has made further recommendations resulting in the abolition or alteration of further counties. The administrative county of Berkshire no longer exists while Hereford and Worcestershire, an amalgamation forged in 1973, has been replaced by a separate unitary authority of Herefordshire and a two-tier county of Worcestershire. The creation of other unitary authorities in largely urban areas such as Derby, Leicester, Portsmouth, and Stoke-on-Trent has had an equally significant impact on other counties. The scale of this quiet revolution can be gauged from the fact that in only 14 of the original 39 English counties did the electoral battle in 1997 reflect precisely the previous contests of four years before. Overall, 1997 brought elections for 34 shire counties, 19 new unitary authorities and one substantially revised district council (Malvern Hills). Additionally, there were partial council elections in the unitary authorities of Bristol and Kingston upon Hull.

Local elections in Britain have never been easy to understand but the process of piecemeal structural change has complicated matters still further. These changes and the redrawing of some local ward boundaries meant it was difficult to estimate how many seats and councils each party was defending going into the elections. Direct comparisons with previous contests were not always feasible and so adjustments had to be made to take account of the reconfiguration of some county councils and the creation of new unitary authorities. Only after making such adjustments could we provide a benchmark from which to judge the outcome of the 1997 local elections. Before the elections took place it was felt that while the Conservatives might lose the general election the party would make gains in the local contests. Most seats and councils were last contested in 1993 or 1995 and on both occasions the Conservatives performed badly, polling a projected 31% national equivalent vote in 1993 and a record low 25% in 1995. It followed that should the Conservatives do better in 1997 then that would bring its reward in additional seats and more council control. Furthermore, the coincidence of the local elections with the general election was thought to be to the Conservatives' advantage because one explanation for previous local election disappointments was that the party's supporters had chosen to abstain.

Table 1 shows, however, that Conservative gains, in what was once regarded as the party's heartland, were extremely modest. Across the counties, there was a net gain of only 121 seats, although a number of

1. The 1997 local election results

Seats*

	Counties			Unitaries			Total
	Before	After	Net +/-	Before	After	Net +/-	
Conservative	760	881	+121	126	226	+100	+221
Labour	739	746	+7	575	541	-34	-27
Lib Dem	678	495	-183	216	195	-21	-204
Ind/Other	101	81	-20	18	15	-3	-23

Note: * Figures are approximate and net changes do not sum to zero because of alterations to boundaries/councillor numbers.

Council control*

	Counties		Unitaries	
	Before	After	Before	After
Conservative	2	9	0	2
Labour	7	8	12	10
Liberal Democrat	6	2	4	2
No overall control	19	15	1	3

Note: * Figures refer to situation when new authorities assume responsibilities in April 1998.

county councils, including Cambridgeshire, Kent, Surrey and West Sussex returned to Conservative control. In the new unitary authorities, where the disastrous elections of 1995 were the base for comparison in most cases, the number of Conservative councillors increased by just 100. Only in Bracknell Forest and Wokingham were the gains sufficient to give the Conservatives an overall council majority. Labour lost overall control in two unitary authorities but was compensated by victory in Cumbria. Conservative advances, such as they were, drew mainly from the Liberal Democrat party which lost just over 200 seats overall and saw its majority evaporate on four county councils and two unitary councils. But the outcome might have been much worse for the Liberal Democrats. In recent years Liberal Democrat candidates have performed well in local elections. Indeed, throughout the 1990s the party has consistently polled about a quarter of the national equivalent vote in such elections. In 1997 the special circumstances thought to favour the Liberal Democrats in local elections were missing. Turnout, particularly amongst Conservative-leaning voters, was expected to be higher than normal because of the general election. Resources, always a problem, would be stretched as the party struggled to make a breakthrough at Westminster and Liberal Democrat activists, normally canvassing for the local vote, were concentrated in the national party's key target seats. Finally, the party was not expected to improve on its 1992 general election share and its expected local vote would certainly be lower than that achieved in the mid 1990s. Indeed, those three conditions were met but the Conservative party did not benefit. Turnout in the local elections did rise considerably, above 70% compared with less than 40% for the two previous sets of county elections. The Liberal Democrats did concentrate resources on its key seats and the party's overall support did decline. Yet the Conservatives were unable to

capitalise on those circumstances and to understand why we need briefly to examine recent critical changes in the nature of party competition and local voting behaviour.

The long-term decline in Conservative support 1990–97

While in opposition between 1974 and 1979 the Conservatives benefited from the pattern of protest voting characteristic of local elections. Once in power the party found itself exposed to those same forces, but managed to limit losses in both seats and council control from 1979 to 1989. The 1990 local elections, popularly known as the 'poll tax' elections, changed all that and, although the party recovered sufficiently to win the 1992 general election, significant damage had already begun to be inflicted on its local government base. The process of decline accelerated from 1993 onwards. That year saw the party lose almost 500 seats and political control of county councils which had been in Conservative hands for a century. The decline was greatest in southern England with an average fall of nine per cent in the Conservative vote. Senior party figures, including the party chairman, anticipated gains not losses at the 1994 local elections. The reason for this optimism was the belief that the equivalent elections in 1990 had been so awful that Conservative fortunes could only improve. That view was misplaced and the party went on to sustain further heavy losses in seats and control of no fewer than another 21 local authorities, including nine London boroughs. Ominously, the decline in Conservative support was, once again, greatest in the south of England.

These results were poor for the Conservatives but they could not compare with what happened to the party in 1995. Conservative councillors seeking re-election in this year had formerly been regarded as the most fortunate in electoral terms. This was because of the national party's past willingness to use this phase of the electoral cycle, when the largest single number of council seats fell vacant, to signal both in 1983 and 1987 the imminence of a general election which, in turn, brought a corresponding increase in party support. It was expected in 1995 that the anti-government protest vote would begin to scale down and that the elections might mark the beginning of the Conservatives' long-awaited recovery. Instead, the reverse happened as the Conservatives lost a further 2,000 council seats and political control of another 61 local authorities. The party's national equivalent vote, just 25%, represented its lowest ever poll share. Local elections were also held that year for the new unitary authorities in Scotland and Wales. In both countries Conservative candidates fared badly and, significantly, the party failed to win control of a single council. With hindsight we should view these elections as a dress rehearsal for the general election. Conservative support had fallen to dangerous levels, to the point where it became penalised by Britain's first-past-the-post electoral system. The party lost many more seats than had uniform swing been in evidence.

The explanation for this lies with the impact of tactical campaigning by Labour and Liberal Democrat parties in different wards. Each of those parties has, in recent years, developed a more efficient strategy of targeting vulnerable Conservative controlled wards.¹ As a result the party best positioned locally to unseat the Conservatives saw its candidate's vote share rise the most. In effect local Conservatives found themselves caught in a pincer movement which had a devastating impact.

Further Conservative losses occurred in the 1996 local elections and although this slide was halted in 1997 there is no doubting the damage incurred. Table 2 contrasts party representation in local government between 1979 and 1997. There has been a three-fold collapse in the number of Conservative councillors and an eleven-fold reduction in the number of councils controlled. Labour has benefited, now controlling almost half of all councils and council seats in Great Britain but the Liberal Democrats have also advanced with more councillors and controlling more than twice as many local authorities as the Conservatives. Closer inspection of the Conservative retreat from local government reveals that currently there are more than 50 councils administering services for some six million electors where not a single Conservative sits in the council chamber. In many other local authorities responsibility for arguing the Conservative position lies with a single councillor. Quite simply, the Conservative voice in local government has become muted following a decade of electoral decline.

2. Seats and council control in Great Britain, 1979 and 1997

	1979				1997			
	seats	%	councils	%	seats	%	councils	%
Conservative	12,222	48.2	244	47.2	4,449	19.9	23	5.2
Labour	7,410	29.2	109	21.1	10,643	47.7	206	46.8
Lib Dem	1,059	4.2	2	0.4	4,756	21.3	50	11.4
Nationalists	301	1.2	4	0.8	301	1.4	4	0.9
Ind/Other	4,388	17.3	82	15.9	2,153	9.7	24	5.5
No overall control	-	-	76	14.7	-	-	133	30.2

Note: The overall number of seats and councils has altered because of local government reorganisation.

The Conservatives' decline as a force in local government has been truly dramatic, particularly in urban areas. For example in 1945, the only previous occasion on which Labour has achieved a parliamentary majority of over 100, Birmingham council was hung with no single party having overall control but with the Conservatives still a major force. Following recent elections Britain's second city has just 13 Conservative councillors, with a Labour administration and Liberal Democrats making up the official opposition. Liverpool, Conservative controlled between 1945 and 1954, now has a solitary Conservative councillor. The Conservative position is much worse now than in the early 1960s when the party was coming to the end of another long period of office. In the more urban borough councils, for example, at the end of the

Macmillan government the Conservatives still averaged around 30% of seats. In contrast at each of the last three elections in the metropolitan boroughs the party share of seats has not risen into double digits. The Conservatives control no councils in Scotland and Wales and the party has also disappeared from some of the English regions. In the North, Yorkshire and Humberside, East and West Midlands there is currently no local authority with a majority Conservative administration and in two other regions, North West and South West, the party's presence is limited to a single authority. In effect, the party has seen its local government base narrowed to the point where almost one in five of Conservative councillors sits on the 23 authorities it controls.

Split-ticket voting 1979 and 1997

How far do British electors 'vote the party ticket' at local and national elections? As we have noted the only previous chance to compare votes cast simultaneously at local and general elections occurred in 1979. In a study of the two types of election in 100 parliamentary constituency areas, Waller concluded that whereas in urban constituencies few differences emerged 'in rural areas there can be no doubt that the correlation between ... [the] results is much less close'.² Such a divergence in behaviour, according to Waller, seemed to be a function of the personal popularity of individual candidates, the existence of salient local issues, and a greater willingness to cast a vote for other than the Conservative and Labour parties in a local as opposed to a general election. A more limited study by Game of four highly politically competitive towns—Cambridge, Gillingham, Gloucester and Watford—similarly showed that thousands of electors split their parliamentary and local votes between different parties.³ In a detailed examination of parliamentary and local elections in Liverpool, Cox and Laver show that voting for the Liberals in the city as a whole was twice as high at the local as at the general election, with two votes being taken from Labour for every one lost by the Conservatives.⁴

Since 1979 there has been growing, though necessarily indirect evidence that a significant minority of voters do not behave the same way in local and general elections. Miller has conducted two discrete pieces of survey research which help to throw light on what may be happening. In May 1986 he found that '80% of respondents had local choices for Conservative, Labour or Alliance that were exactly in accord with their party identification—and 83% in accord with their current parliamentary preference'. In other words approximately one in five voters are admitting that they make different choices for national as opposed to local elections. Moreover, whilst there was little direct exchange between Conservative and Labour preferences at the two levels, according to Miller, 'the Alliance gains more than it loses in local elections from the willingness of people to desert their national political choice'.⁵ In a later study Miller compared how respondents had voted

in the May local elections with their parliamentary vote five weeks later during the 1987 general election campaign. The degree of correspondence between the parties varies, but once again the analysis depicts a sizeable level of split ticket voting. Some 87% of 'local' Conservatives stayed with the party at the general election as did 80% of Labour supporters and 63% of those of the Alliance.⁶ This has been confirmed by a recent analysis of British Election Study Panel data which compared the reported behaviour of voters at the 1992 general and 1994 local elections. Nearly half the sample—including a majority of Conservative and Liberal Democrat supporters—said they had voted in 1994 with local rather than national considerations uppermost in their minds. The Liberal Democrats particularly appeared to benefit from being seen as a 'localist' party and reaped an especial advantage in the few cases where they were perceived to be in control of the council.⁷

In 1997 almost half the electors in England had the opportunity to vote either for their county council or for one of the new all-purpose, unitary authorities. Following increased political competition at local level,⁸ each of the major parties contested almost 90% of the county vacancies. A survey in these areas a few days before polling day, conducted by MORI jointly for the Local Government Association and Local Government Chronicle, revisited the issue of 'split-ticket' voting. MORI found that at least 10% of Conservative and Labour general election supporters intended to vote Liberal Democrat at the locals (see Table 3). This pattern accounts for the fact that according to this survey the Liberal Democrat local vote was seven per cent higher than the party's general election vote, with the Conservatives down by four per cent and Labour by five. Looked at the other way, whereas more than 90% of respondents who intended to vote either Conservative or Labour at the local elections would also support that party at the general election, fewer than three in five 'local' Liberal Democrats were likely to remain loyal—such 'deserters' favouring Labour over the Conservatives in the ratio 4:3.

3. Support for parties at local and national level

Distribution of local election 'votes' by general election 'vote'

General election vote for 1997		Local election vote 1997				Ind	
		Con	Lab	Lib Dem			
32	Con	79	3	11	6	100%	
47	Lab	2	84	10	4	100%	
16	Lib Dem	2	10	77	11	100%	
3	Ref	58	16	16	8	100%	

Distribution of general election 'votes' by local election 'vote'

Local election vote for 1997		General election vote 1997				Ind	
		Con	Lab	Lib Dem			
28	Con	91	4	1	4	100%	
42	Lab	2	94	3	1	100%	
23	Lib Dem	17	23	57	2	100%	
7	Ind	29	26	26	16	100%	

Source: MORI for Local Government Association/Local Government Chronicle, April 1997.

Survey data compiled from a national sample cannot, however, accurately reflect the impact of particular electoral contexts on voters' behaviour. In order to discover how far such expressed intentions were matched in the ballot box, we have collected local election results for 30 constituencies in England where the county divisions can be aggregated into an exact match with parliamentary boundaries. We will, in time, add the results from another 35 constituencies of this type, together with about 25 cases where constituency and unitary authority ward boundaries coincide. These will prove particularly complex to analyse as multiple vacancies at the local level mean that some parties do not field a full slate of candidates and electors can split their vote not only between the parliamentary and local contests but within the local election as well. For the moment, therefore, our findings should be considered indicative rather than conclusive.

4. Aggregate general and local election voting in selected constituencies

All 30 constituencies						
	Con	Lab	Lib Dem	Ref	Ind	Turnout
	%sh	%sh	%sh	%sh	%sh	%
Local	34.1	39.4	23.4	-	3.1	73.0
General	36.0	43.1	16.2	3.3	1.3	74.0
	Con (ge)	Lab (ge)	Lib Dem (ge)	Ref	Ind (ge)	Turnout
	-Con (le)	-Lab (le)	-Lib Dem (le)	share	-Ind (le)	ge-le
	1.9	3.7	-7.3	3.3	-1.8	1.0
With Ref candidate	1.7	4.2	-8.2	4.3	-2.0	0.6
No Ref candidate	2.7	2.0	-3.5	-	-1.1	1.2
High	11.8	13.2	9.4	8.1	1.8	4.3
Low	-4.9	-7.6	-22.3	2.3	-14.6	-2.0
20 constituencies with full local party slate and local Ind vote < 3.0%						
	Con	Lab	Lib Dem	Ref	Ind	Turnout
	%sh	%sh	%sh	%sh	%sh	%
Local	34.6	39.4	25.2	-	0.8	73.1
General	36.3	44.4	14.8	3.6	1.0	73.8
	Con (ge)	Lab (ge)	Lib Dem (ge)	Ref	Ind (ge)	Turnout
	-Con (le)	-Lab (le)	-Lib Dem (le)	share	-Ind (le)	ge-le
	1.7	5.0	-10.4	3.6	0.2	0.7
With Ref candidate	1.1	5.3	-10.9	4.3	0.2	0.7
No Ref candidate	4.8	3.0	-7.8	-	0.0	1.0
High	9.1	13.2	-2.7	8.1	2.5	3.6
Low	-1.9	0.1	-22.3	2.3	-2.1	-2.0

The information presented in Table 4 supports a number of propositions. Both the Conservative and Labour parties attracted more support at national rather than local level whereas, and as expected from our earlier analysis, the Liberal Democrats are demonstrably more successful at garnering local votes. This is true both of our entire sample of 30 constituencies and also of the restricted analysis of 20 cases where each major party fielded a single candidate in each of the county divisions and where the intervention of Independents amounted to no more than three per cent of the total local vote in the constituency. Nor does it

appear to be the case that the differences in votes are the consequence of some voters choosing to participate in one type of election but abstaining from the other. The average difference in turnout for the general and local elections is no more than one per cent and there are even instances where local turnout is higher. This amounts to clear *prima facie* evidence that the same voters split their ticket on 1 May.

The extent to which each party's local and general election votes diverge is, of course, the product of the aggregation of a variety of individual chopping and changing. A particular conundrum surrounds the source of the Referendum party's vote for it fielded no local candidates at all. Reading the MORI data in association with our own figures would suggest that the Liberal Democrat local vote dispersed to the almost equal overall benefit of Conservatives and Labour, and that a proportion of the Conservative local vote moved to the Referendum party. The fact that the Liberal Democrat local vote share dropped less significantly where there was no Referendum candidate, however, does indicate that some people who voted Lib Dem in the county contests switched to the Referendum party at the general election.

What happened in individual constituencies is fascinating. Although some of the more dramatic variations between local and general election votes appear to be the product of the dispersal of support for local Independent and minor party candidates (as in the 11.8% rise in the Conservative vote in Fareham and the 9.5% Labour increase in Exeter), others cannot be accounted for except by vote switching on a massive scale. In Cambridge, where the major parties were opposed by a single unsuccessful Independent, 21,000 people voted Labour and just over 18,000 Liberal Democrat at the local elections. In the parliamentary contest, which actually attracted a slightly smaller turnout, Labour polled in excess of 27,000 and the Liberal Democrats fewer than 9,000. In Pendle the Liberal Democrats slipped from a good second place locally to a poor third at the general election as their vote slumped from nearly 16,000 to just 5,460. In Canterbury, where the Liberal Democrats started the campaign as clear challengers to the Conservatives at both national and local level, not only was their local share of the vote sharply down compared with 1993 but their general election performance was even poorer leaving them third in the constituency.

Indeed, in most cases Labour appears to have been the prime beneficiary at the general election of a reduction in Liberal Democrat local support. However, where there was no Referendum candidate the issue is less clear cut. One prominent eurosceptic, Tony Marlow in Northampton North, looks to have 'shared' the Liberal Democrat windfall with Labour and another, Ann Winterton in Congleton, rarely among Conservatives at this election harvested the lion's share of local 'deserters'. In Great Yarmouth, where each party had a full local slate and where neither Independent nor Referendum candidates were present, the local and national votes were quite similar. The sole instances

of the Liberal Democrat general election vote being higher were where the party had contested only a minority of county divisions. The interest in these cases centres on the turnout. In Bromsgrove where the Liberal Democrats contested two of the ten divisions only 495 more people voted nationally than locally, and in Wellingborough where none of the nine divisions featured Liberal Democrats the total local turnout was just 1,028 less than that for the general election. Even without a candidate from 'their' party to support it seems that most people are keen to use their vote once they have arrived at the polling station.

Conclusions

Even from this limited evaluation it seems clear that many more electors cast votes for different parties at the 1997 general and local elections than had done so at the comparable contests in 1979. We have long suspected, using evidence from the annual local elections, that for many voters making a choice of party at local level is something to be done independently of, and even in contradiction to, their national party preference.⁹ We now know that to be true. The extent of split-ticket voting is consistent with recent evidence of a decline in party identification amongst former Conservative supporters, coupled with more effective local campaigning by both Labour and Liberal Democrat parties. From 1992–97 there has been a significant decline in the number of Conservative identifiers.¹⁰ Some Tory voters at the general election did not support the party's candidates at the local elections. Such voters would have been the subject of targeting by the main opposition parties. Split-ticket voting now happens in both rural and urban constituencies, and it happens almost regardless of an objective interpretation of the tactical conditions prevailing in a particular constituency. What voters appear to respond to is the campaign waged by the parties, together with their own assessment of which party is best fitted to provide representation for the tier of government being elected. The combination of these two factors had hurt the Conservatives at every local election since 1993 and now they came into play at a general election too.

The appearance of such detached electors, even as a government was being chosen, must give the Conservatives, in particular, food for thought. Notwithstanding the fact that the party made gains in both seats and councils, the Conservatives suffered a worse result at the local elections than they did nationally. Even among the die-hard minority still prepared to vote Conservative at the general election, some were not sufficiently committed to support the party in local contests held at the same time. If their loyalty could not be counted on in such circumstances, what chance that they will return to the party in the 1998 or 1999 local elections?

The Conservatives may take comfort from the argument that the Labour government will enjoy an initial honeymoon with the electors, but come a period of 'mid-term blues' (discussed later by Rose) voters

will return home to the Conservatives again. Here the positioning of the Liberal Democrats becomes crucial. They have established themselves as the second party of local government able to attract support at this level far in excess of their national opinion poll ratings. The party's candidates in local elections have demonstrated a strategic awareness of the prevailing electoral conditions and used that awareness to exploit, rather than be exploited by, the electoral system. At times the party has proved less popular in its overall share of the national vote than the Alliance parties during the 1980s but it has been much more successful in getting its local candidates elected. In turn, this has meant more local authorities where there is a direct Liberal Democrat input into the policy making process, either running a majority administration or involved in a power sharing arrangement on a hung council. Consequently, the Liberal Democrats have become a much more visible presence in local government and, if and when the Labour government becomes unpopular (as Rose suggests), they rather than the Conservatives may be strategically best placed to exploit any discontent on the ground. The Liberal Democrat party has already displaced the Conservatives, and become virtually the sole opposition to Labour, in urban areas such as Islington, Liverpool, Norwich and Sheffield. Current circumstances suggest that process could be extended.

Such success would further hamper the Conservatives' chances of national recovery. The general election defeat confirmed a spiral of decline that has left the party ill-suited to deal with its immediate problems. Since 1993 the party has lost thousands of council seats. The abrupt end to so many local Conservatives' political careers has also robbed the party of many of its leading activists. The stalwarts of many local Conservative constituency associations were often also the area's leading councillors. Their departure has deprived the Conservative party of a voice in local politics at precisely the wrong time. An increasingly detached electorate with weakened party ties makes it difficult for parties to communicate their message. A party without a voice in local government will be forced to make its electoral appeal principally from the national stage. When voting behaviour appears increasingly linked to electoral context that form of communication will prove a weakness since it will fail to take proper account of the prevailing local conditions. The market for votes is becoming more competitive and the Conservatives, with a depleted local power base and an ageing and declining membership, will struggle. Many have claimed the 1997 general election represents a watershed in British politics. For students of local electoral politics it merely confirmed a pattern that had long been in the making and a new order of party competition which may be hard to overturn.

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