

## THE ADMINISTRATION OF STANDARDS OF CONDUCT IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

A Research Report

£17.50

Alan Parker · Aidan Rose · John Taylor  
Department of Administrative and Social Studies,  
Teesside Polytechnic

In the ten years before 1974, 16 elected members of local authorities in Britain and 22 officials were convicted of offences related to corruption. It was in response to such events that the Redcliffe-Maud (1974) and Salmon (1976) inquiries reported on aspects of the conduct of members and officers of local authorities in situations involving conflict of interests.

*The Administration of Standards of Conduct* is a new report, based on carefully planned research involving 61 per cent of local authorities, designed to examine, among other things, the extent to which local government abides by the National Code of Local Government Conduct.

In setting out the ranges of contemporary practice on such matters as registers of councillors' and members' interests, and rules affecting relationships with the private sector and the receipt of gifts and hospitality, this report offers local authorities a means of measuring their approach to the maintenance of good standards of public administration.

"... a valuable supplement to the Widdicombe Report."

*Local Government Chronicle*

CHARLES KNIGHT PUBLISHING  
Tolley House, 2 Addiscombe Road, Croydon, Surrey CR9 5AF  
(tel. 01-688 4163)

COLIN RALLINGS and MICHAEL THRASHER  
*Centre for the Study of Local Elections,*  
*Plymouth Polytechnic*

## Party Competition and Electoral Volatility: The Case of Local By-Elections, 1983-1987

### INTRODUCTION

Between the June General Elections of 1983 and 1987 we recorded details of over 1400 local government by-elections throughout Great Britain. From July 1984 onwards the *Local Government Chronicle* has carried a regular analysis of these results which has helped illustrate the variable nature of electoral behaviour at the local level<sup>1</sup>. Some of these by-elections have proved crucial in determining the political future for a particular local authority either when the council has either been hung or where a party's majority has been slender. Such instances are critical for the inhabitants of the area concerned but interest does not necessarily extend much further beyond the authority's boundaries. However, national media attention to local by-elections has certainly risen since it was demonstrated that there is a close association between a party's performance in such contests and their showing in the national opinion polls<sup>2</sup>. This is not to say that local elections are solely fought on national issues – indeed there are numerous instances when the result locally runs counter to the prevailing national political trends – but rather that if a sufficiently large number of by-elections are sampled there is the likelihood that specifically local factors are evened out. Throughout this period an average of 70 by-elections in each quarter were contested by candidates from the three main party groups and aggregating the results of these has produced some interesting findings. Below we will examine the nature of the relationship between polls and by-elections, but first it would be useful to summarise what local by-elections were able to tell us about party competition and political fortunes between 1983 and 1987.

### *Party gains and losses*

In terms of seats gained and lost throughout the period 1983 to 1987 (see Table 1) it was the Alliance who had most to celebrate, while the Conservatives proved to be the major victims of this success. Without doubt, the senior party of the Alliance were the Liberals with twice as many gains as the Social Democrats, although the latter's relatively recent entry into local politics might partly explain the disparity. Overall, the

Table 1. Summary of by-election results: June 1983–June 1987

	Gains	Held	Lost	Net
Conservative	68	334	294	-226
Labour	99	381	100	-1
Liberal	236	114	36	+200
SDP	103	15	16	+87
Independent	18	28	85	-67
Others	14	8	7	+7

Conservatives experienced a net loss of more than 200 seats, but it was significant that their performance improved as the General Election approached<sup>3</sup>. In terms of by-election outcomes Labour were beset by two sets of circumstances. First, many of the party's seats – like their Parliamentary equivalents – are very safe and in areas of relative socio-economic deprivation. The result is often taken for granted and Labour finds its performance being 'artificially' depressed by complacency among its own supporters. Indeed, Labour safely defended more council seats than any other party but with an average turnout of 33.5% compared with one of 37% for all contests. A second factor depressing Labour's showing in local by-elections was the squeeze on its share of the vote by the Alliance in both its own marginal seats and in those areas where it had previously polled respectably.

Table 1 illustrates the static nature of Labour's local electoral performance over this four-year period with a net loss of 1 seat for the party of official opposition. Labour's performance in the May elections was often much better, but this failure more consistently to win seats from the Conservatives in by-elections proved symptomatic of the party's much larger failings. Also showing a net loss were Independents whose overall decline in local government has been hastened over the last few years. This is largely a function of the intensified party competition which now characterises local elections and which leads to growing pressure from the established parties, particularly the Conservatives, for 'Independents' to declare their true party political allegiances or risk a partisan challenge.

#### Seat transfers between the major parties

More detailed evidence of the movements between the main parties can be seen from Table 2. Labour lost a total of 92 seats to its main rivals but of these no less than 74 went to the Alliance. Of Labour's gains most were at the expense of the Conservatives. Thus we have a very clear presentation of Labour's vulnerability as it tried to fight on two fronts simultaneously. Each by-election victory against the Conservatives seemed to be matched by a corresponding defeat at the hands of the Alliance. Closer examination of the Alliance's gains from Labour demonstrates a much greater equality between the Liberals and the Social Democrats (42 gains compared with 32

Table 2. Seat transfers between major parties in local by-elections 1983–1987

	Party gains				Total losses
	Con.	Lab.	Lib.	SDP	
Party losses					
	Con.	53	155	66	274
	Lab.	18	—	42	32
	Lib.	17	18	—	35
	SDP	4	9	—	13
Total gains	39	80	197	98	

for the SDP) whereas the ratio for Alliance gains from the Conservatives was much more weighted in the Liberals favour.

Such figures present a picture of considerable electoral volatility. Approximately one in three by-elections resulted in a transfer of political control, but the extent of volatility was not evenly distributed. Table 3 highlights the propensity for by-elections at the district council level to result in a change of political control. Whereas 42.5% of contests involving district councils brought a change of control, in the shire counties the figure was 28.0% while for the more densely populated London Boroughs and Metropolitan Districts one in four seats changed hands.

The transfer of seats between Conservative and the Alliance parties was heavily skewed towards the district councils. While the Conservatives lost 20 county divisions to the Alliance, they also made 13 gains of their own – a net loss of just 7. In the shire districts the comparable figure was a net loss of 165. Such figures demonstrate the effectiveness of Alliance campaigning techniques when the size of the electorate is relatively small, but clearly when the seat has a higher profile and when the number of

Table 3. Seat transfers according to type of local authority: June 1983 to June 1987

	CC	DC	LBC	MBC	Scot.
Con. ex Lab.	8	4	4	—	2
Con. ex All.	13	8	—	—	—
Con. ex Ind.	2	24	—	—	—
Lab. ex Con.	—	39	6	6	2
Lab. ex All.	2	17	2	4	2
Lab. ex Ind.	2	12	—	—	1
All. ex Con.	20	173	14	8	6
All. ex Lab.	7	42	11	11	3
All. ex Ind.	3	37	—	—	2
% of total seats	28.0	42.5	24.1	24.1	16.5

voters to be persuaded to switch their allegiance is greater than the Alliance ran into more serious problems. For Labour the pattern of seat transfers was perhaps even more disappointing. In all they lost 8 shire seats to the Conservatives without making a single gain of their own. In London they lost four while gaining six. Once again it was in the shire districts – the tier of local government with arguably the least power – where the Conservatives performed badly against the opposition.

Having noted that the district councils presented the best opportunities for the Alliance to take seats away from the two main parties, it was also the case that their successes were concentrated in certain parts of the country. As Table 4 shows, no less than 43% of Alliance gains were in the South East, with the South West a distant second. However, another method for examining these data is to consider the Alliance's gain and strike rates respectively. The gain rate refers to the proportion of all seats contested which Alliance candidates gained from other parties. Once again, it was the South East with a gain rate of 27.1% which led the way, closely followed by the South West and the Yorkshire and Humberside region. The strike rate is a slightly different statistic and takes account of seats defended by the Alliance in by-elections. Unlike the 'gain rate' it is a measure of the proportion of ALL seats contested which the Alliance won. As can be seen from the table, in the South East and South West approximately four out of ten by-elections resulted in an Alliance candidate being returned. Leaving aside the East Anglia region, the Alliance's worst performance was better than one seat won for every five contested.

Table 4. *The Alliance performance in the regions: June 1983 – June 1987*

	Gain from Con.	Gain from Lab.	% of gains	% of contests	% Gain rate	% Strike rate
East Anglia	3	–	1.0	3.3	7.0	11.6
East Midland	21	4	8.5	9.5	20.2	22.6
North	8	7	5.1	6.1	19.0	27.8
North West	16	11	9.2	9.5	21.8	29.8
South East	100	28	43.4	36.3	27.1	39.5
South West	33	4	12.5	11.1	25.7	39.6
West Midland	15	3	6.1	7.3	18.9	27.4
York & Humb.	17	6	7.8	7.0	25.3	36.3
Scotland	6	3	3.1	5.9	11.7	23.4
Wales	2	8	3.4	3.9	19.6	25.5

#### *Local by-elections and political trends*

The regularity of local by-elections means that political trends often manifest themselves at this level almost before they become apparent nationally. Every party experiences periods of unpopularity and adverse

by-election results may well be among the first indicators of a fall from favour. The decline in Conservative support in the first quarter of 1986, for example, (see Fig. 1) reflected the impact of the Westland affair and the concurrent row within the party over rate support grant. In January and February they held only 6 of 30 local council seats being defended and made no gains. The overwhelming beneficiaries were the Alliance parties who made impressive advances in previously solid Conservative territory. In seats which had been fought as recently as May 1985 it was not unusual for the Conservative share of the vote to be halved. Although the Alliance were indisputably the most successful group in terms of local election advances since 1983, it should not be thought that even their vote was invulnerable to political controversy. Their 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 their 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.

Local elections may also be used to chart a party's changing fortunes within a specific region or locality. At the last General Election Labour lost seats in London at a time when progress and not decline had been expected. Analysis of London Borough election results from May 1986 onwards, however, demonstrates a steady waning of Labour's fortunes in the capital. In the May 1986 elections, when all the London authorities faced the electorate, Labour achieved first place with 38% of the vote, a position it had not reached in either of the two previous General Elections. By the Autumn of that year, however, the tide had begun to turn and a poll showed that the Conservatives were now the choice of the largest single group of Londoners. Five local by-elections held in London in November, all in unpromising territory for Labour, produced an average decline in share of the vote for the party of some 3%. In 1987 the spotlight fell even more sharply on those elements of the London Labour party labelled 'extremist'. The Greenwich Parliamentary result was certainly interpreted as a warning against this kind of image by many in the Labour party itself. It is also however a fact that in London Borough by-elections held in early 1987 Labour's share of the vote fell by an average of 11% compared with May 1986. A seat in Newham was lost to the SDP three weeks before Greenwich, and Labour's vote in a Hackney by-election in March declined by 16%.

Local by-elections, therefore, can perform a function in alerting political commentators to either general shifts of public opinion or more localised fluctuations in a party's support. It is crucial, of course, not to confuse these two sets of events. Labour's ill fortune in London was not replicated in other parts of the country. Similarly, the Alliance have a habit of posting good results in certain localities even when their national stock is low.

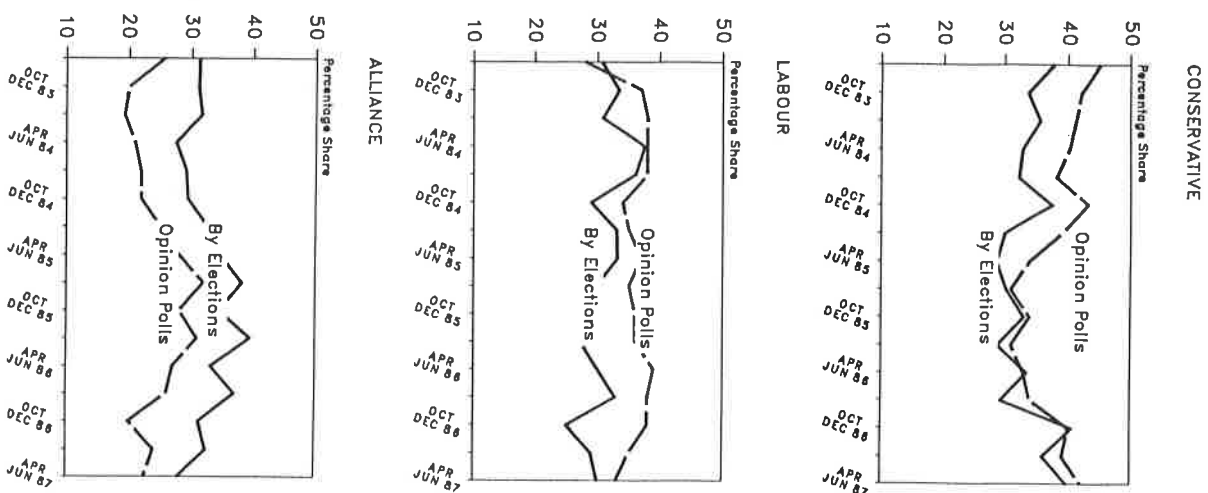


Figure 1. Comparison of party performance in by-elections and opinion polls

More generally, MORI, among others, have noted that opinion poll respondents seem more willing to say they will vote Labour or Alliance in a local election than in a putative General Election. By-elections may provide us with valuable data, but interpretation of these results has to be judicious.

#### *By-elections and May elections*

There is always the danger, therefore, that what is being examined is so out of the ordinary that it becomes less than useful as the basis for identifying and examining political behaviour. Many forms of electoral behaviour may be captured by the term 'the by-election phenomenon' including changes in voter participation, different patterns of party competition and electoral volatility. Such changes have been examined with respect to Parliamentary by-elections but how far do similar patterns exist at the level of local government?<sup>4</sup>

Table 5. Party shares of total vote in local government and parliamentary by-elections: June 1983 – June 1987

	Local by-elections		Parliamentary by-elections % share	
	All contests	3-Party contests	% Share	Vote
Con.	30.1	861,799	33.3	755,531
Lab.	32.5	931,106	31.2	706,336
All.	31.8	910,513	32.8	743,733
	N = 1444		N = 1024	N = 16

One of the most distinctive aspects of Parliamentary by-elections is their use as a platform for electoral protest against the party in power at Westminster. During the last Parliament the Conservatives suffered a relatively small number of defeats, but as Table 5 demonstrates their share of the vote was depleted when compared with the previous and subsequent General Elections. It was the Alliance, however, who dominated Parliamentary by-elections, just as they had performed most impressively in their local government equivalents. In this respect local by-elections appear, in general, to be performing a similar role to those for Westminster. Confirmation of this view can be found by comparing the results of by-elections in individual wards with those at the relevant May elections. This procedure enables us to compare like with like and thereby overcome any discrepancies in performance which are purely a reflection of the electoral cycle of different local authorities. Table 6 illustrates the differences, where appropriate, in a party's by-election vote compared with its

Table 6. Comparing party performance in identical wards at by-elections and general local elections

		Mean % share of the vote in wards contested			
		May 1985	May 1985	May 1985	By-elections 1985-1987
<i>a) County Council Elections</i>					
By-elections 1983-1985					
Con.	41.6	→	38.3	→	40.1
Lab.	34.9	→	37.7	→	27.8
All.	28.5	→	32.8	→	33.5
<i>b) Metropolitan Borough Elections</i>					
May 1983			By-elections 1983-84	May 1984	
Con.	32.7	←	27.3	→	26.9
Lab.	45.2	←	41.9	→	45.6
All.	24.7	←	32.3	→	28.7
May 1984			By-elections 1984-86	May 1986	
Con.	32.2	←	25.1	→	26.3
Lab.	46.6	←	44.4	→	47.0
All.	22.9	←	30.4	→	27.6
May 1986			By-elections 1986-87	May 1987	
Con.	24.1	←	21.6	→	27.5
Lab.	51.5	←	47.5	→	47.6
All.	24.5	←	30.7	→	25.4
<i>c) London Borough Elections</i>					
By-elections 1983-1986			May 1986	May 1986	By-elections 1986-1987
Con.	30.1	→	32.1	→	42.0
Lab.	35.4	→	35.8	→	22.4
All.	32.2	→	26.5	→	34.4

performance in the same wards at the preceding or subsequent set of May elections. In the counties, for example, the Conservative vote held up quite well prior to the May elections but Labour staged something of a recovery in these particular county divisions in time for the May 1985 elections. After the 1985 elections there was some evidence of 'plateauing' for the Alliance vote with the Conservatives recovering some lost ground at the

expense of Labour. Possibly, the most significant aspect of these data is the relative lack of movement between by-election results and the May contests.

In the case of the metropolitan districts the frequency of May elections is such that we are able to look backwards and forwards with each crop of by-elections. Thus the by-elections between May 1983 and May 1984 can be compared with those two sets of May elections. The pattern for the Conservatives begins as one of a decline in their share of the vote in both by-elections and subsequent May elections compared with the previous May. This trend is broken, however, between 1986 and 1987, when after a series of poor by-election results the party recovers in time for the May 1987 contests, and, of course, for the following General Election. Labour's form remained rather static; it invariably performed below its average for May in by-elections but between the May elections of 1986 and 1987 actually went into reverse showing a 4% decline in its share of the vote. The Alliance over the same period were able to show an increased level of electoral support between the various May elections. While this growth was not spectacular their performance in by-elections was on average 7% higher than in the previous May elections and just under 4% higher than in the subsequent general contests. This increase appeared to be taken from both of the main parties.

In London it is interesting to note, again, just how much better the Alliance appear to do in by-elections. Moreover, Labour's collapse after its May 1986 victories in the capital and a forewarning of what was to happen to the party in the General Election is graphically illustrated by a comparison of its May results with its subsequent by-election performance.

#### CONCLUSIONS

There was a considerable amount of political uncertainty between the General Election of 1983 and that of 1987. Nationally, the Conservatives, with their large Parliamentary majority, were always going to withstand the pressures of a divided political opposition. Locally, however, many of these national political currents became reflected and magnified in by-elections. Protest votes against the incumbent party in power at Westminster became the norm as Alliance councillors were swept to power in the Conservative strongholds of the south. In the north, particularly in the densely populated urban areas, Labour held its own ground against the Alliance but never really threatened the few Conservative seats to fall vacant in these authorities. Once again, it was the Alliance, which threatened the Conservatives most in the metropolitan districts and London boroughs, and indeed was equally successful against Labour itself.

There can be little doubt that the Alliance was the beneficiary of voters unable or unwilling to vote for either of the traditional parties. Nevertheless, this is but a part of the overall story. The discrepancy between the Alliance's showing in the national opinion polls and local by-elections was

a fairly consistent 5%. Part of this discrepancy can, perhaps, be explained by the ability of Liberal and to a lesser extent Social Democrat candidates to raise the level of electoral interest in by-elections. Their participation in the contest tended in itself to increase turnout and this was especially apparent in those by-elections which were closely fought and often narrowly won by the Alliance. It must be stated, however, that apart from their spectacular showing in the 1985 County council elections the Alliance invariably failed to follow up these successes in the May round of local elections, and, of course, in the last General Election. The electorate's flirtation with the Alliance was confined to the relatively safe environment presented by a by-election.

Does this mean, therefore, that local by-elections should be regarded as rather unreliable indicators of electoral opinion? The situation here is analagous to those who would wish to make wild claims about opinion polls. As we have seen polls fluctuate considerably between General Elections but they have a habit of settling down as the crucial voting test draws near. Their value between elections is not so much their ability to predict the composition of the next Parliament but rather to comment on the current state of support for the various political parties. Similarly, local by-elections chart the broad streams of political opinion but additionally they may also illustrate purely local circumstances which, as in the case of London, may be indicative of wider developments to come. The monitoring of local by-elections might also contribute towards a better recognition of the role and purpose of this level of government in our society. In the current political climate that feature alone takes on added importance.

## NOTES

1. Our compilations of the results of local elections in May of each year have been published by the Centre for the Study of Local Elections at Plymouth Polytechnic. Volumes currently available are those for the English Counties 1985; the Metropolitan Boroughs, 1986; and the Metropolitan Boroughs, 1987. We intend to publish the results of the 1988 Metropolitan Borough and shire District council elections in September 1988. Details of all these publications are available from the authors. It is, of course, possible that some by-elections were not recorded by us, but our data set contains all those of which we were aware.
2. See Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher, 'The Gulf between Intention and Ballot' *The Guardian*, 18 July 1986, and Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher, 'Local Elections in Britain: Myth and Reality' *Parliamentary Affairs*, vol. 41, no. 2, 1988.
3. In the six months following the 1983 General Election the Conservatives lost a net total of 13 seats in local by-elections; in the six months preceding the 1987 General Election they made a net gain of two.
4. A recent summary of the literature and examination of new data is A. Mughan, 'Toward a Political Explanation of Government Vote Losses in Modern Byelections' *American Political Science Review*, vol. 80, no. 3, 1986.

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Democracy Rediscovered, Margaret Simey, Pluto Press, 1988, pp. 138, £14.95.**

Margaret Simey's book is described as a study in police accountability, but it is more than that. Indeed one remarkable feature of the book is how much is included in the one hundred and twenty seven pages that make up the main text. So many strands make up the book that it is hard to record them all. Yet, the book is held together by two themes – the experience of the Granby Ward lying at the heart of Toxteth in Liverpool and the dilemmas of accountability in present society as experienced by the former chair of the Merseyside Police Authority. The book's dynamic is the growing contrast between the inadequacy of the forms of accountability, particularly in relation to the police force, and the realities of the conditions of policing and much more in the Granby Ward.

It is written as a personal memoir and that gives it its power as a record of changing experience, but it is more than memoirs, for on the basis of that experience Margaret Simey has built an approach to the accountable society that has relevance beyond Granby, beyond Merseyside, and beyond the police service.

The book starts with 'The Creation of a Ghetto' of the Granby Ward of Liverpool. It records 'the disintegration of body and soul' which 'runs rampant through what used to be an eminently desirable neighbourhood, bound together by the anxious passion of the common commitment to respectability'. It is against the background of a disintegrated society, that Margaret Simey, first as a ward councillor and then as a member of the Police Authority for the Metropolitan County saw the 'futility of meeting violence with violence' as the police met defiance of authority. Margaret Simey records the helplessness felt by herself and other members of the committee as they saw 'the building of a bonfire'.

Margaret Simey became chair of the Police Authority in 1981. Barely two months later the bonfire had broken out in the Toxteth riots. The experience moved for her, from a feeling of utter helplessness to what she describes as a conversion on the road to Damascus. She saw her previous role as persuading the deprived to tolerate the imposition of government. Now 'she must be on the side of those who suffer injustice