

<b>Better Value for Public Money</b> 1-day course, price \$130 plus VAT, held in London, CMA, 63 Portland Place, London, W1N 4AB. Tel: 01-637 2311.	<b>25 March</b>
<b>Employment legislation and Industrial Relations</b> 3-day course, price \$144, held in Rugby ID15, 17-19 Clifton Road, Rugby, CV21 3PY. Tel: 0788 60121.	<b>7-10 April</b>
<b>Fixed Term Contracts</b> Half-day course, price \$84 plus VAT, held in London, Industrial Society, Peter Rungge House, 3 Carlton House Terrace, London, SW1Y 5DG. Tel: 01-839 4300.	<b>8 April</b>
<b>Data Protection Registration Workshop</b> 1-day workshop, price \$149.50, held in London, CMA, 63 Portland Place, London, W1N 4AB. Tel: 01-637 2311.	<b>8 April</b>
<b>Changing the Terms of the Contract</b> Half-day course, price \$84 plus VAT, held in London, Industrial Society, Peter Rungge House, 3 Carlton House Terrace, London, SW1Y 5DG. Tel: 01-839 4300.	<b>8 April</b>
<b>Introduction to Finance for Managers</b> 3-day course, price \$210, held in Dunblane, Tack Training International, Tack House, Longmoore Street, London, SW1V 1JJ. Tel: 01-834 5001.	<b>9-10 April</b>
<b>Finance for Senior Executives</b> 5-day residential course, price \$695, held in Stratford, Tack Training International, Tack House, Longmoore Street, London, SW1V 1JJ. Tel: 01-834 5001.	<b>14-18 April</b>
<b>Law and the Welfare Function</b> 1-day course, price \$156 plus VAT, held in London, Industrial Society, Peter Rungge House, 3 Carlton House Terrace, London, SW1Y 5DG. Tel: 01-839 4300.	<b>17 April</b>
<b>Drafting Contracts of Employment and Written Procedures</b> Half-day seminar, price \$69, held in London, Industrial Society, Peter Rungge House, 3 Carlton House Terrace, London, SW1Y 5DG. Tel: 01-839 4300.	<b>18 April</b>
<b>Computerising Personnel Systems</b> 1-day course, price \$150 plus VAT, held in London, Industrial Society, Peter Rungge House, 3 Carlton House Terrace, London, SW1Y 5DG. Tel: 01-839 4300.	<b>23 April</b>
<b>Accounting Standards and the Law</b> Half-day course, price \$65 plus VAT, in Newcastle, CAET, PO Box 244, 29 Lincoln's Inn Fields, London, WC2A 3EE. Tel: 01-242 6855.	<b>24 April</b>
<b>The Law of Unfair Dismissal and Redundancy</b> Half-day workshop, price \$55 plus VAT, held in London, London Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 69 Cannon Street, London EC4N 5AB. Tel: 01-489 0391.	<b>8 May</b>
<b>The Secretary in Personnel Management</b> 2-day course, price \$196 plus VAT, held in London, Institute of Personnel Management, IPM House, Camp Road, Wimbledon, London, SW19 4UW. Tel: 01-946 9100.	<b>12-13 May</b>
<b>Accounting Standards and the Law Update</b> 1-day course, price \$65 + VAT, held in Chester, CAET, PO Box 244, 29 Lincoln's Inn Fields, London, WC2A 3EE. Tel: 01-242 6855.	<b>13 May</b>
<b>Forecasting - Making the Best of Uncertainty</b> 1-day course, price \$130 + VAT, held in London, CMA, 63 Portland Place, London, W1N 4AB. Tel: 01-637 2311.	<b>15 May</b>
<b>Selecting the Right Candidate</b> 5-day course, price \$578 plus VAT, held in London, IPM, IPM House, Camp Road, Wimbledon, London, SW19 4UW. Tel: 01-946 9100.	<b>19-23 May</b>

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## Assessing the Electoral Performance of the Alliance

### LIBERALS AND THE SDP IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS, 1983 TO 1985

The scant attention paid in the recent past to local elections and electoral behaviour has, as often as not, concentrated on the impact of the Alliance and the lessons to be learnt for future Parliamentary contests<sup>1</sup>. Much of this work, and other studies of national elections, has concluded that there is little to choose between the Liberals and the SDP in terms of their success in capturing either votes or seats. Crewe's report on the 1983 General Election and Currice and Steed's recent pamphlet both claim that neither partner did significantly better than the other<sup>2</sup>. Indeed, although the Liberals averaged 27.4 per cent in seats fought in 1983 and the SDP 24.5 per cent, the performance of the Alliance candidates clustered much more closely about the mean than was the case for Conservative and Labour<sup>3</sup>.

In this article we wish to present evidence of a different type drawn from local government. Since the 1983 General Election we have systematically collected and analysed the results of over 850 local by-elections<sup>4</sup>. These comprise a valuable resource for further analysis of the relative fortunes of political parties in actual elections in different types of authority. We would argue that the frequency and range of these elections over a period of more than two years gives a sufficiently strong basis for using them to present a surrogate picture of party strengths and weaknesses. To many, the table of gains and losses set out below will not be a surprising one. Indeed, it confirms the story of the balance of opinion polls since the last election - a sharp decline in Conservative support; a modest climb-back for Labour; and the clear ability of the Alliance parties to attract mid-term dissenters.

Given our earlier comments about the Alliance performance at the last General Election one of the more significant features of Table 1 is the apparently uneven performance of the Liberals and the SDP. Although Liberals have contested more seats in the ratio of 6:4, they have also won more elections than the SDP in the ratio of almost 4:1. Put another way the Liberals have been successful in 207 contests from 470 attempts - a 'strike rate' of 44 per cent; the SDP on only 56 occasions from 301 contests - a 'strike rate' of 19 per cent. The purpose of this article is to explore some of the reasons for this seeming disparity.

Table 1. Gains and Losses in Local By-Elections June 1983 to September 1985.

	Gains					Gain Total	
	Con	Lab	Lib	SDP	Ind		Other
Con	-	9	7	3	16	1	36
Lab	38	-	13	2	7	1	61
Lib	100	24	-	-	18	2	144
SDP	32	18	-	-	4	-	54
Ind	8	2	2	2	-	1	15
Other	1	3	-	-	1	-	5
Loss	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	179	56	22	7	46	5	315

Table 2. Alliance Performance in 3-Party Contests.

	Lib Contest		SDP Contest		1985
	1983-4	1985	1983-4	1985	
Con	35.1%	29.8% (-5.3)	33.9%	28.7% (-5.2)	
Lab	27.4%	26.2% (-1.2)	38.0%	35.6% (-2.4)	
Lib	34.4%	40.5% (+6.1)	23.5%	32.3% (+8.8)	
N =	243	119	N = 153	89	

Initially, we compared the performance of the Liberals and SDP by examining the share of the vote obtained in the various wards and divisions contested during two time periods. Table 2 shows the share of the vote gained by each party in seats where they were also up against the challenge of (at least) one Conservative and one Labour candidate. This control for differential contestation rates demonstrates that despite impressive upward movements in the performance of both Alliance parties, it is the Liberals who consistently gain a higher average share of the poll.

Next, we examined the types of authority in which each party was likely to be most successful. Both the Liberals and the SDP tended to do best in district council by-elections – the Liberals 'gaining' 47 seats in 201 contests and the SDP 29 from 101 contests. Outside this tier success for the SDP was very thinly spread and it achieved only an extra 8 seats overall from 122 contests. The Liberals, for their part, picked up an additional 25 seats with 12 of them coming from 50 contests in the London Boroughs.

This picture is borne out by Table 3 on share of the vote controlling for type of authority. In the four types where there were sufficient by-elections to make comparisons meaningful, the Liberals are the clear flag-holders for the Alliance. Their superior performance is, significantly, especially marked in London and the Metropolitan Boroughs – the very areas where the SDP have contested a greater proportion of the seats and are seen in some quarters as being the natural challengers to Labour. Our data confirm the strength of both groupings in the districts, but the county figures are a little less reliable given the scarcity of by-elections in 1985.

Table 3. Alliance Performance by Type of Authority SDP/Lib Share of Vote in 3-Party Contests.

	Lib Contest		SDP Contest	
	1983-4	1985	1983-4	1985
<i>London boroughs</i>				
Con	31.3%	31.9% (+0.6)	31.8%	27.0% (-4.8)
Lab	31.6%	27.2% (-4.4)	40.0%	46.2% (+6.2)
Lib	36.7%	41.0% (+4.3)	24.4%	25.4% (+1.0)
N =	37	13	N = 45	14
<i>Metropolitan boroughs</i>				
Con	30.1%	26.5% (-3.6)	26.3%	23.0% (-3.3)
Lab	35.6%	31.9% (-3.7)	50.3%	50.0% (-0.3)
Lib	33.7%	38.7% (+5.0)	21.7%	24.7% (+3.0)
N =	27	17	N = 16	14
<i>District councils</i>				
Con	35.7%	30.0% (-5.7)	36.2%	31.7% (-4.5)
Lab	23.9%	25.0% (+1.1)	31.6%	28.0% (-3.6)
Lib	35.6%	41.9% (+6.3)	26.0%	38.1% (+12.1)
N =	122	79	N = 54	46
<i>County councils</i>				
Con	39.4%	40.1% (+0.7)	39.9%	32.6% (-7.3)
Lab	28.0%	20.8% (-7.2)	37.8%	25.2% (-12.6)
Lib	30.4%	38.9% (+8.5)	20.9%	42.0% (+21.1)
N =	45	5	N = 29	4

The performance of the two Alliance parties in county contests can, however, be gleaned from detailed data available on the 1985 elections<sup>5</sup>. Looking at the sub-set of those 22 English shire counties which did not re-district between 1981 and 1985, yields some interesting and subtle results. The considerable immediate disparity in the performance of the Liberals and the SDP, which held for seats won quite as much as for share of the vote, needs to be interpreted in the light of our more detailed information<sup>6</sup>. There can be no doubt that the SDP was at a considerable disadvantage. As Table 4 shows, a greater proportion of the seats it contested were from a standing start position as far as the Alliance was concerned and those seats it 'inherited' from the Liberals were demonstrably those in which that party had performed worst in 1981. The significant points to note are that the Liberals performed slightly better than the SDP in seats which had not been fought by a Liberal in 1981 (28 per cent mean share as against 25.5 per cent), but that the SDP added a greater proportion of the vote in those admittedly poor seats they inherited (7.2 per cent) than the Liberals did on their own territory (5.6 per cent). This surely provides clear evidence in support of the 'plateau' theory, given that those seats the Liberals fought in both 1981 and 1985 were already their best prospects.

Table 4. Mean Percentage Vote in Seats Contested by Liberals and or SDP: 1981 and 1985 County Council Elections (22 Non-Redistricting English Shire Counties).

	1981	1985
LIBERAL		
Mean Share	27.3 (N=953)	34.7 (N=761)
Seats fought in 1981 and by neither Liberals nor SDP in 1985	24.0 (N=89)	-
Seats fought in 1981 and 1985	31.5 (N=556)	37.1
Seats not fought in 1981 and fought in 1985	-	28.0 (N=205)
SOCIAL DEMOCRAT		
Mean Share	-	26.8 (N=558)
Seats fought by Liberals in 1981 and by SDP in 1985	(20.6)	27.8 (N=308)
Seats not fought by Liberals in 1981 and fought by SDP in 1985	-	25.5 (N=250)

Reverting to our by-election data, we further tested the electoral performance of the Alliance parties by examining the comparative performance of the SDP and Liberals in wards and divisions held at the time of the election by either the Conservative or Labour Party. Our findings show that the SDP fought more seats with a Labour incumbent than did the Liberals, 119 seats as opposed to 80 seats, and attained a disproportionate success in those contests. In those instances where there was at least a three-party contest, and Labour or Conservative incumbents, the Liberals made 72 gains from 249 attempts – all the gains coming in the 169 seats where they fought on Conservative territory: the SDP made 37 gains from 220 attempts – 23 at the expense of the Conservatives and 14 from Labour. Both Alliance parties have progressed at the expense of the Conservatives and the SDP in particular seems to have attracted tactical former Labour voters in areas of Labour weakness.

Perhaps the most striking evidence from Table 5, however, is of how the Labour vote has held up on its own ground. One reason for the poorer SDP showing in by-elections compared to the Liberals is that whereas the latter have benefited more from declining Conservative popularity, the SDP has been held back by the relative stability in the Labour vote. The assumed strategy of the Alliance in fielding SDP candidates in strong Labour areas appears to accord with reality and to reap some dividends, but it has not been strong enough to do more than check a potential Labour advance. It is

Table 5. SDP/Lib Performance by Incumbency in 3-Party Contests.

	Lib Contests		SDP Contests	
	1983-4	1985	1983-4	1985
<i>Con incumbency</i>				
Con	43.1%	39.3% (-3.8)	46.0%	41.8% (-4.2)
Lab	18.1%	18.0% (-0.1)	24.3%	17.1% (-7.2)
Lib	36.1%	40.4% (+4.3)	24.6%	39.4% (+15.2)
N =	120	49	69	32
<i>Lab incumbency</i>				
Con	24.3%	21.7% (-2.6)	23.0%	18.2% (-4.8)
Lab	50.6%	50.1% (-0.5)	51.1%	51.0% (-0.1)
Lib	23.6%	25.0% (+1.4)	22.6%	25.9% (+3.3)
N =	61	19	75	44

conceivable, therefore, that the SDP would do much better given a different national political situation.

#### DISCUSSION

Our various tables suggest that whilst the Alliance parties are currently polling very impressively in local government elections, the performance of the SDP is somewhat less strong than that of the Liberals. Moreover, our data as a whole indicate that the SDP are doing best in exactly the places where the Liberals also do best – hardly a recipe for broadening the electoral appeal of the Alliance. Certainly, there is some evidence that the SDP contest more seats in traditionally Labour areas and are seen as the natural opposition party in these areas, but so far these circumstances have not led to either the level of popular support or frequency of electoral success recently enjoyed by the Liberals. The SDP performance can thus be summarized as 'patchy'.

It would seem that the success of any SDP attempt to target seats in areas of Labour strength has been somewhat undermined by Labour's recovery since 1983 and the recent stability in their local vote. Any transfers between dissatisfied Conservatives and the SDP have usually not therefore been sufficient to dent Labour majorities. For the Liberals, Conservative weakness has been a positive advantage in those areas where they had already established themselves as the clear second party in place of Labour.

The problems experienced by the SDP in coming from nowhere to win cannot, however, fully explain its results. Although the more intensive campaigning tactics of Liberal candidates have been important in many of that party's successes – particularly at by-elections – our data at least suggest that the SDP has suffered the handicap of fighting on less favourable territory. For the Alliance though, it must be a sobering thought that the most fruitful ground for both Liberals and the SDP is the same. As Curtice *et al.* argued in their analysis of the Alliance's first 'nationwide' test nearly four years ago, 'the SDP's new constituency is not sufficiently large to overcome the hand-

icap of a weak Liberal base". There is some evidence of the 'plateau' effect allowing the SPD to increase their vote more than the Liberals over a certain period, but none that any real new ground is being won.

Given the proximity of the May 1986 Metropolitan and London Borough elections, the electoral disparity within the Alliance even in urban areas takes on added significance. If the present allocation of local electoral wards continues largely to pit Liberals against Conservatives and Social Democrats against Labour then, should the Liberals squeeze the Conservative vote whilst the SPD fails to reduce Labour support, many authorities will find themselves with Labour majorities. In such a situation it would be interesting to observe the strains which such a scenario would place upon the Alliance in the run-up to a General Election.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. I. Crewe, 'The Liberal-SDP Alliance and the 1982 Local Elections', *Local Government Studies* 8:1, 1982, pp.13 – 16; J. Currice, C. Payne and R. Waller, 'The Alliance's First Nationwide Test', *Electoral Studies* 2:1, 1983, pp.3–21.
2. I. Crewe, articles in *The Guardian*, 13 and 14 June 1983. J. Currice and M. Steed, *One in Four*, Hebdon Bridge: Association of Liberal Councilors, 1984.
3. D. Butler and D. Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1983*, Macmillan, 1984.
4. See C. Rallings and M. Thrasher, *Local Government Chronicle*, various issues 1984–5. We would like to thank the many people involved in local government for supplying us with these results, especially Tony Greaves and David Cowling. Many thanks also to Stephen Harris for his painstaking coding of the results.
5. This data is derived from an ESRC funded project (E00232117) on the English and Welsh County Council Elections, 1981 and 1985.
6. The Liberals won 237 seats from 761 contests in these authorities in 1985 and the SDP 52 seats from 558 contests.
7. J. Currice *et al.*, 'The Alliance's First Test', p.11.

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## Researching Local Government Law: an unmet need

I work as a chief executive in local government. Every few weeks – I doubt more than three or four times a year – I receive a request from some academic or graduate student to fill in a questionnaire or comment generally about some public administration topic on which we are thought to have some information of value.

I try to reply promptly and properly if I can although I do not insist that my chief officer colleagues do likewise (generally writing 'if you have time' on the letter before I pass it on). They doubtless receive other questionnaires of their own which I do not see, and in any event all these voluntary responses are in addition to the quantities of government returns (some optional, but most compulsory) which we continually receive.

These academic enquiries are not, of course, all centred on purely legal topics, but many are essentially so in that they seek to explore an academic subject of interest in a practical – and often topical – setting. The diversity of local government, not to mention its unfamiliarity to many, if not most, outside observers who can feel comfortable while exploring or explaining national events, makes this a great deal more difficult to achieve. Once you depart from the powers, limitations or procedures to which all local authorities are subject, it becomes increasingly difficult to say anything which can safely and genuinely be regarded as common to all local authorities, and not simply as an empty generality. There are, after all, 454 principal local authorities in England and Wales alone – 333 of them non-metropolitan, or shire, district councils – and many more parishes with councils or meetings.

So what are these academic or graduate questionnaires about? It would be instructive if I started to keep a proper list. The Commissioners for Local Administration – the local Ombudsmen – are popular subjects, perhaps because they are still relatively new, publish easily traceable reports of their formal inquiries, and appeal to the popular little-man-against-the-big-battalions theme of much that is happening in public law today. As you would expect, there is an interest in topics of the day which, for whatever combination of reasons, suddenly become prominent in public concern and so in that sense 'researchable', like homelessness, employment law or (a relatively new one) freedom of information. The last questionnaire I have received is a good example – describing itself as 'probably the most com-

\*The views expressed in this article are personal and in no way reflect the views or policies of, or represent, the author's employing authority.