

The elections on 3 May this year were probably the most important annual round of spring elections in this Westminster Parliament. **John Curtice** analyses the outcome.



ELECTIONS 2007

A NEW SCOTTISH Parliament and Welsh Assembly were elected. Local elections were held in nearly the whole of England outside London, with voting taking place in no less than 312 councils overall. Meanwhile, as well as its parliamentary election, Scotland had local elections for all of its thirty-two local councils too – using, for the first time, the Single Transferable Vote system that the Liberal Democrats have long advocated. Professor John Curtice, of Strathclyde University, analyses the results of the May 2007 elections.

Real power was at stake in these elections. In Scotland, the devolved election marked the end of a period of eight years during which the Liberal Democrats had been in power as a junior coalition partner, a role they might have hoped to continue. In Wales, Labour entered the election as a minority government and if they had failed to restore their majority, the Liberal Democrats might have had the opportunity to be part of a coalition government, just as they had been between 2000 and 2003. Meanwhile the party was defending overall

control of twenty-seven councils in England and one in Scotland, as well as a share of power in many other local authorities.

Important as they may have been in their own right, these elections also provide some important clues and pointers about the future of Westminster politics. Their results give us a guide to the Liberal Democrats' chances of securing at least a share of power at the next UK general election, while the outcome of the post-election bargaining in Scotland and Wales has important lessons should similar negotiations take place at Westminster. Meanwhile the party's performance under the proportional systems used in the elections in Scotland and Wales provides some important pointers to its prospects should it ever succeed in securing electoral reform for the House of Commons. It is on these clues and pointers that this article focuses.

The outcome of the elections in terms of seats did not make easy reading for the Liberal Democrats. In England, the party suffered a net loss of four councils and nearly 250 councillors – over 10 per cent of the seats it was defending. In Scotland,

the party emerged with one less seat in the Scottish Parliament and nine fewer seats in Scotland's local councils, and it lost control of the one council it had previously held. Only in Wales did the party emerge with as many seats as it was defending – but although Labour fell well short of securing a majority, the Liberal Democrats remain on the opposition benches following the Labour – Plaid Cymru deal agreed in July.

Of course, outcomes in terms of seats can be deceptive, especially where the first-past-the-post system is in use, and in view of the complexities of the local election cycle in England. But a look at votes cast confirms that support for the Liberal Democrats ebbed in these elections. Perhaps the most telling statistics come from England, where the BBC collected the detailed voting results in over 800 wards from fifty councils across the country. In each case the results could be compared directly, ward by ward, with the outcome of last year's local elections. On average the party's support in this BBC sample fell by 1.4 points. In contrast both Labour and the Conservatives managed to hold their own, with average

increases in support of 0.3 and 0.4 points respectively.

True, such a drop is far from pronounced. However, it does confirm the message of the opinion polls that the party has taken at least one step back electorally after its first full year with Sir Menzies Campbell in charge. Moreover, if we look back a little further the decline is even more marked. Compared directly with what happened in the same wards in the 2004 local elections, the party's vote in the BBC sample was on average 2.5 points lower, while in those wards (which constitute around half the total) where the same ward boundaries were also in force in 2003, the fall since that date was no less than three points. There can be little doubt that in England, at least, the party is currently in a weaker position than it was at this stage in the last Westminster Parliament.

Given this record in England, it was perhaps remarkable that the party did not lose more ground than it did in either Scotland or Wales. Nevertheless, the party did fall back. In Scotland, the party's share of the list vote under the two-vote Additional Member System in use in the parliamentary election was half a point lower than what it achieved at the last election. Preliminary estimates suggest that, in a majority of Scotland's councils, the party's share of the STV first-preference vote was less than its share of the vote four years ago. Meanwhile, in Wales, the party's share of the list vote was also down a point on four years previously.

Of course, in England at least, the party can argue that some losses were always likely. Most of the seats being contested this year were last fought over in 2003 and 2004, both high-water marks for the Liberal Democrats. The party's local election performance was estimated by the BBC still to be worth the equivalent of winning 26 per cent of the vote across Britain in

a general election – on a par with its performance in local elections in the 1997–2001 Parliament. Moreover, that 26 per cent estimate is three points up on its actual vote three years ago – and the party can point to its success in topping the poll in a number of parliamentary constituencies, such as Derby North, Hull East and Manchester Gorton, which it currently does not hold.

However, the Liberal Democrats always do better in local elections than they do in parliamentary elections – even when they are held on the same day. When, as has been the case at the last three general elections, county council elections have been held on the same day, the party's local election performance has been between five and nine points better. Any estimate of what the party's local election performance means in terms of a national share of the vote has to be adjusted by that kind of amount in order to ascertain how well the party might have done in a general election held the same day. So however one looks at the results, the party currently seems on course to fall back to the 19 per cent or so of the vote that it won in 2001 rather than to maintain the 23 per cent it secured in 2005.

Moreover, there are some signs that the party may now be losing some of the ground it gained in territory previously held by Labour – one of its particular successes in the 2005 election. In the BBC sample, Liberal Democrat support fell most heavily in wards where Labour was previously strong (that is, had over 40 per cent of the vote last time around). The Liberal Democrat vote fell on average compared with last year by 2.7 points in such wards – twice the national average. Meanwhile, there was confirmation that the party has also lost some of the support it had previously secured amongst Muslim voters in particular, the signs of which were already evident in last year's local elections. Compared with

2004, the party's vote was down by twice as much in wards where 5 per cent or more of the population say they are Muslim than it was elsewhere.

Nevertheless, even if the party currently seems on course to suffer some losses at the next general election, it may still end up in a more powerful position in the next Parliament than it holds in this one. True, when extrapolated into a possible outcome in terms of seats in the House of Commons, the local and devolved elections together point to a narrow Conservative overall majority of some ten seats or so – just enough for David Cameron to run the country without any help from anyone else. However, just as we have to bear in mind that the Liberal Democrats always perform better in local elections than they do in national contests, the opposite is true for Labour in particular. In practice, if there had been a general election in May this year, the outcome would almost undoubtedly have been some kind of 'hung' Parliament in which no party had an overall majority.

If that does happen, the Liberal Democrats could well be courted by other parties in the hope of securing Liberal Democrat support for and perhaps participation in a new government. In that event, the party will have crucial decisions to take about whom it will talk to and what its bottom lines for any possible deal will be – not least on electoral reform. Yet the fall-out from the elections in Scotland and Wales – both of which produced 'hung' outcomes – raises serious questions about how well prepared the party is for such negotiations.

This is most obviously true in Wales, where indecision at a crucial moment resulted in the party throwing away the very real prospect of both ministerial office and electoral reform. With the twenty-eight day deadline by which the National Assembly was required to elect a First

Even if the party currently seems on course to suffer some losses at the next general election, it may still end up in a more powerful position in the next Parliament.

Minister looming, and having already pulled out of talks with Labour, the party negotiated a deal to form a 'rainbow alliance' with both Plaid Cymru and the Conservatives, a deal that reportedly included electoral reform for Welsh local elections. However, a crucial meeting of the Welsh party's executive failed to endorse the deal, allegedly because of discomfort at going into government with the Conservatives. The rainbow was shattered.

Two days later Rhodri Morgan was re-elected First Minister at the head of a minority Labour administration. Then, the day after that, a Liberal Democrat conference overturned the executive's failure to back the deal and the rainbow looked as though it might yet be put together again. But clearly aware that he faced the prospect of losing office, Rhodri Morgan used the second chance he had been given to try to save his skin – and eventually struck a deal with Plaid Cymru, which was in due course endorsed by conferences of both parties. The Liberal Democrats were kept out of power, and the Labour – Plaid 'One Wales' programme makes no provision for electoral reform.

There are two crucial lessons for the party to learn from this experience. First, internal division and disagreement about coalition negotiations can fatally undermine the party's negotiating position. Second, the party has to be clear whether it is willing to strike a deal with the Conservatives at Westminster should Mr Cameron's party ever be willing to come to some accommodation on electoral reform – as they were in Wales. This may be thought highly unlikely, but the trajectory taken by the Conservative Party in Wales shows that a leopard may eventually change its spots. One wonders how ready the Liberal Democrats are at UK level to confront these issues.

In Scotland, meanwhile, the party also finds itself out of office – but in this case this was

an outcome largely of its own choosing. Alex Salmond's SNP, who emerged from the election with one seat more than Labour but eighteen short of a majority, wanted to discuss the possibility of forming a coalition, but the Liberal Democrats said no – on the grounds that the SNP would not drop its demand for a referendum on independence in advance of any negotiations. At least this stance had the merit of being firm and decisive. But it has probably come at the cost not only of scuppering the SNP's hopes for any kind of referendum on independence, but also of the Liberal Democrats' hopes of progressing an increase in the powers of the Scottish Parliament within the UK. Arguably in Scotland too, reluctance to do a deal with a particular party has set back the Liberal Democrats' hopes for constitutional reform.

Meanwhile, what happened in Scotland and Wales not only raises questions about the party's ability to use its bargaining power in any future hung parliament at Westminster in order to secure electoral reform, but also raises doubts about how much the party is likely to profit from any such reform. For a long time, the party has claimed that voters are reluctant to support it because under first past the post they feel a Liberal Democrat vote is a wasted vote. That claim has now to be consigned to the dustbin.

One of the striking features of the party's performance in the first three Scottish and Welsh elections has been that in each case it has secured a higher share of the vote in the first-past-the-post constituency contests that form part of the Additional Member System than it did on the list vote to which seats are allocated proportionately. Moreover the gap between the two votes has been growing. In both countries in 2003 the party's vote increased in the constituency contests, but fell back on the list. The same happened again this year. As a result, in Scotland the party won

Yet the fall-out from the elections in Scotland and Wales – both of which produced 'hung' outcomes – raises serious questions about how well prepared the party is for such negotiations.

no less than five per cent more of the constituency vote than it did of the list vote. In Wales the gap was three points.

In both cases much of the difference is accounted for by what happens in those constituencies the party wins or at least comes close to winning; in these constituencies the party's constituency vote often far outstrips its list vote. It seems that, far from suffering from first past the post in Scotland and Wales, at least the party's fortunes are heavily reliant on the ability of individual candidates in particular constituencies to win support on the basis of a personal vote, a trick that the party is unable to repeat on any party list vote.

Of course, under STV all votes are for candidates rather than parties. So if that reform were to be introduced for Westminster, the party could still hope to profit from the popularity of individual candidates. Moreover, initial examination of the pattern of transfers in the STV local elections in Scotland suggests that expectations that the party would profit from transfers from other parties' candidates are indeed likely to be fulfilled. The party often won a large chunk of transfers when the last candidate of another party was eliminated from the count, and especially so when it was a Conservative candidate who was eliminated.

On the other hand, as we have already noted, the party's share of the first preference vote was often less than the vote it had achieved under first past the post in 2003. Once again, the introduction of proportional representation has done little or nothing to encourage voters to back the party. For that to happen, the Liberal Democrats have to appear an attractive option in the first place. And at the moment, at least on that score, the party is not making much progress at all.

John Curtice is Professor of Politics, Strathclyde University.