

## Local elections

The Liberal Democrats were surprise winners in the 2022 local elections, gaining more seats than any other party. **John Curtice** analyses what happened.

# The Liberal Democrat performance in the 2022 local elections

**T**HE LIBERAL DEMOCRAT performance was the surprise package of the local elections held in May in England, Scotland and Wales. Much of the commentary before polling day focused on how much of a reverse the Conservatives might suffer in the wake of ‘partygate’ and how much might Labour benefit as a result. In the event, however, it was the Liberal Democrats, not Labour, who gained most seats. For a party that has spent much of the last decade in the electoral doldrums, such a surprise was especially welcome. But what lessons should the party take away from the result if we examine it more closely?

The need for some careful scrutiny becomes clear once we break down the headline results a little. True, as Table 1 shows, the party made net gains in all corners of Britain. Overall, it registered 224 net gains of seats, well ahead of Labour’s more modest tally of 108, most of which were in Wales. But those successes were much greater in England outside London than they were elsewhere. Here the party made just over 160 net gains of seats, whereas its combined tally elsewhere was little more than 60 seats. This imbalance was not simply a reflection of the number of seats being contested in each part of the country. Less than 40 per cent of the seats being contested were located in England outside London, yet over 70 per cent of the party’s net gains of seats (as well

as all of its gains in councils controlled) were in the English provinces. In truth, it appears that the performance may have been somewhat patchy.

However, while politically important, the outcome of any election in terms of seats is not necessarily a good guide to how well a party has done. The figures of gains and losses can be affected by (i) when the seats in question were last contested (in Scotland and Wales this was 2017, whereas in most – though not all – of England it was 2018), (ii) differences in the electoral system used (in Scotland the elections were held using the single transferable vote, in London and Wales all the council seats were up for grabs in a multi-member plurality election, while in most – though again not all – provincial England only one seat was being contested in a first-past-the-post race in each ward), and differences in the sizes of wards (those in rural areas tend to have fewer electors). We are thus well advised to examine the actual pattern of votes cast – albeit these are not always immediately easily available for analysis. Most of the analysis here is based on the results collected by the BBC in a sample of just over 900 wards in 49 local authorities in England, most of which were wards where all of the Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats stood a candidate in 2022 and previously, most notably in 2018 (when most of the seats at stake were last contested) and (outside London) in 2021



Liberal Democrat leader Sir Ed Davey celebrates with Lib Dems in Hull after the party won control of Hull City Council, 9 May 2022 (photo: Hull Liberal Democrats)

(where comparison with what happened last time gives us an indication of the change in the parties' standing over the past year).

One reason why the BBC collects these statistics is to enable it to calculate a 'projected

national share' for each party. This is an estimate of the share of the vote that each of the parties would have won if the pattern of local voting (in England) had been replicated across Britain as a whole. The statistic is designed to make it

**Table 1 Net gains and losses of councils and seats, 2022 local elections**

	<i>Net change in councils controlled/seats won</i>							
	<i>London</i>		<i>Rest of England</i>		<i>Wales</i>		<i>Scotland</i>	
	<i>Councils</i>	<i>Seats</i>	<i>Councils</i>	<i>Seats</i>	<i>Councils</i>	<i>Seats</i>	<i>Councils</i>	<i>Seats</i>
Conservatives	-2	-80	-8	-256	-1	-86	n/c	-63
Labour	n/c	+12	+3	+10	+1	+66	+1	+20
Liberal Democrats	n/c	+33	+3	+161	n/c	+10	n/c	+20
Greens	n/c	+7	n/c	+19	n/c	+8	n/c	+16
PC/SNP	-	-	-	-	+3	-6	+1	+22
Independent/ Other	+1	+28	n/c	+29	-2	+8	n/c	-15

Source: BBC. Change in council control is as compared with the position immediately prior the election. Change in seats is as compared with the last regular election (in most cases 2018). In the case of local authorities where there were ward boundary changes the comparison is with an estimate of what the outcome in seats would have been if the new boundaries had previously been in place.

## The Liberal Democrat performance in the 2022 local elections

possible to compare the performances of the parties from one election to the next, even though which councils see elections held varies from one year to the next. According to this year's calculation, the Liberal Democrats' local election performance was the equivalent of the party winning 19 per cent of the vote nationwide. This, of course, was well above the party's average standing in the national polls at the time of the local elections (10 per cent), let alone what the party has achieved at any of the last three general elections.

However, this is not the right comparison to make. The Liberal Democrats always perform better in each annual round of local elections than the party's standing in the polls. More instructive is to compare this year's projected national share of 19 per cent with the party's estimated performance in previous rounds of local elections. This comparison suggests that, with one exception, this year's results represented the party's best local election performance in any set of annual local elections since the party entered into coalition with the Conservatives. The one exception is 2019, when the party was also estimated to be on 19 per cent. Those local elections, of course, occurred at a time when Theresa May was floundering in her attempts to deliver Brexit while Labour were not at that stage committed to holding another EU referendum, a

combination of circumstances in which the party proved able to flourish.

In short, it can be argued that the party's performance in 2021 was its best since 2010 for an election when Brexit was not dominating the political agenda. That said, it should be noted that the performance was still well short of what the party regularly achieved between 1993 and 2010, during which period its projected national share varied between 24 per cent and 29 per cent. While the outcome of the 2022 local elections may be regarded as evidence of improvement, it also confirms that the party still has a long way to go to recover the standing it enjoyed with the electorate before the coalition with the Conservatives between 2010 and 2015.

Of course, one of the party's aims since 2019 has been to try and persuade voters that it has put the battle over Brexit behind it, in the hope that this will enable the party to win back the lost support of Leave voters in Leave-inclined constituencies (not least in the South-West of England). Table 2 addresses how much success the party may have had in the local elections in realising this ambition by showing the average change in the party's share of the vote from three different baselines – 2016, 2018 and 2021 – broken down by the share of the vote won by Leave locally in 2016. This analysis certainly suggests that the party was able to record some kind of

**Table 2 Mean change in Liberal Democrat vote since 2016, 2018 and 2021 by outcome of EU Referendum vote 2016**

% Leave vote 2016	Since 2016	Since 2018	Since 2021
Less than 42	+4.1	+2.3	+2.8
42–48	+4.2	+3.9	+4.0
48–52	+2.0	+2.1	+2.6
52–60	+2.3	+1.2	+2.5
More than 60	+4.1	+1.9	+2.2

Source: Sample of 906 wards in 49 local authority areas in England whose results were collected by the BBC. Analysis confined to those wards that were fought by Conservative, Labour, and the Liberal Democrats on both occasions.

% Leave is an estimate of the outcome of the 2016 referendum in a ward compiled by Jon Mellon on the basis of data originally created by Chris Hanretty.

In London boroughs where new ward boundaries were introduced, change since 2018 is based on an estimate by Jon Mellon of what the outcome would have been in 2018 if the new boundaries had been in place then.

advance irrespective of the outcome of the 2016 Brexit vote locally. The party's vote increased in Leave as well as Remain-voting wards.

At the same time, however, there is no consistent evidence that the party was making more progress in strongly Leave voting areas than elsewhere – if anything, there is some hint that the opposite may have been the case, though this did not extend to mostly Remain-voting London, where its share of vote across all 32 boroughs increased since by just +1.3 points. Meanwhile, it should be noted that the party's share of the vote tended to be higher in Remain voting areas than elsewhere. On average in our sample of results outside London, the party won 23 per cent of the vote in wards where 52 per cent or more voted Remain in 2016, compared with just 14 per cent on those wards where more than 60 per cent backed Leave. Although the party may have begun to demonstrate an ability to do well in parliamentary by-elections held in strongly Leave-voting areas, as indicated by the results in North Shropshire and in Tiverton & Honiton, it would be wrong to assume on the evidence of these local elections that the party has necessarily put all of the legacy of Brexit behind it.

Of course, those two by-election successes were both in constituencies being defended by the Conservatives. No such equivalent success has been registered in by-elections in more Labour-inclined territory. Of this difference there is an echo in the local election results. As compared with any other recent round of local elections, the party found it easier to progress in wards that were being defended by the Conservatives than it did in those being defended by Labour. Compared with the outcome in 2018, for example, the party's share of the vote increased by +4.3 points in wards being defended by the Conservatives, while it advanced by only +1.2 points in wards where Labour were the local incumbents. Equally, as compared with 2021 the equivalent figures were +3.7 and +1.1 points respectively.

This pattern is not unique to the Liberal Democrats. Labour too found it easier to advance in wards that the Conservatives were defending than in wards where they themselves were

the incumbents. Both opposition parties profited from a marked tendency for Conservative support to fall more heavily in wards where the party was previously strongest – a sign perhaps of the extent to which 'partygate' had upset many a previously loyal Tory supporter. However, what is certainly the case – and is crucial – is that both opposition parties found it easier to advance in those Conservative-held wards where they were previously in second place.

This is illustrated in Table 3, which compares the performance of the parties as compared with both 2018 and 2021 in the two sets of circumstances. Conservative support fell by not dissimilar amounts irrespective of who was in second place. But in wards where Labour started off in second place, the Liberal Democrat advance was much more modest – between two and three points as compared with both 2018 and 2021 – than it was where the party began in second place – where it registered nine point increases. Meanwhile, Labour actually saw its vote fall slightly as compared with 2018 in wards where the party started off in third place, but advanced by two points where it had previously been second. Similarly, what was only a one point increase in its support as compared with 2021 in wards where it had been third, Labour saw its support increase by six points where it was the better placed challenger to the Conservatives.

These divergent patterns strongly suggest that some voters were willing to vote tactically for which ever opposition party was better placed to defeat the Conservatives locally. No such pattern was in evidence in last year's local elections. It may well be that in the wake of 'partygate' some voters now felt sufficiently antipathetic to the Conservatives that they were to engage in anti-Conservative voting for the first time. In so far as such behaviour depends on the willingness of Labour voters to vote Liberal Democrat, it may well be a sign that they are now willing to forgive, if not necessarily forget, the Liberal Democrats' involvement in the 2010–15 coalition. The pattern also implies that unhappy former Conservative supporters now see the Liberal Democrats as an effective way of expressing their dissatisfaction,

## The Liberal Democrat performance in the 2022 local elections

<b>Table 3 Party performance compared with 2018 and 2021 in Conservative-held wards by tactical situation</b>		
	<i>Change in % vote since 2018</i>	<i>Change in % vote since 2021</i>
<i>Conservative-held wards where Labour second in 2018/21</i>		
Conservatives	-8.1	-8.0
Labour	+2.0	+6.3
Liberal Democrats	+3.2	+1.7
<i>Conservative-held seats where Liberal Democrats second in 2018/21</i>		
Conservatives	-10.1	-8.9
Labour	-1.0	+1.3
Liberal Democrats	+8.6	+9.0
Source: Sample of over 900 wards collected by the BBC. Analysis confined to those wards that were fought by all of Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrats at both elections. See also notes to Table 2.		

much as had often appeared to be the case before the coalition. If so, the party may now be better placed to realise its ambition of making gains in so-called 'blue wall' Conservative-held constituencies at the next general election.

As we noted earlier, the elections in both Scotland and Wales were for seats that were last contested in 2017. This makes comparison of the party's performance in those two parts of the UK with that in England rather difficult, especially as the 2017 elections in England were mostly for county councils rather than for any of the district and borough councils where elections were held this year. However, it appears that in both cases the party registered only modest progress. In Scotland, the party's share of the first preference vote across the whole country was just 1.7 percentage points above what it achieved in 2017. If we confine our attention to just those wards where all four principal parties contested the ward in both 2017 and 2022, the average increase was even slightly lower, +1.5 points, though in similar vein to England that increase was in evidence in the less strongly Remain parts of Scotland as well as elsewhere. Meanwhile, at 8.5 per cent, the party's overall share of the vote was still well down on the 12.7 per cent it achieved in the first round of local elections to be held under STV in 2007 – before the 2010–15 coalition – while, in sharp contrast to the position in England, it was only marginally above

its current standing in the opinion polls. While the heavy geographical concentration of the party's vote enables the party to win a number of seats north of the border, there is little reason to anticipate from these results that it is set to erode significantly the SNP's dominance of Scotland's representation at Westminster at the next UK election.

Local elections in Wales are not fought as systematically by the parties as they are in most of England and Scotland. But the party's overall performance – 7.0 per cent of the Wales-wide vote, just 0.2 of a point up on 2017 – does not point to any significant advance in the party's popularity. Again, the performance is well short of what the party was able to achieve before the 2010–15 coalition – in the 2008 local elections, for example, the party won 13.0 per cent across the whole of Wales.

In short, the results in both Scotland and Wales confirm the message from England that while progress has been made, and the party may be well placed to profit from any continuing Conservative unpopularity under the new Prime Minister, it still has a long way to go if it is to present once again a strong challenge to the Westminster two-party system, of the kind that it was able to mount in the nineties and the noughties.

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# Reports

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## The 1992 General Election

Evening meeting, 31 January 2022, with Alison Holmes and Dennis Kavanagh. Chair: Lord Foster.  
Report by **Gianni Sarra**

**T**HE MEETING'S CHAIR, Don Foster, had of course a unique connection to the talk's topic. His victory in Bath, over Conservative Party Chair Chris Patten, was one of the better results for the party in the 1992 vote. The election overall was summed up by Lord Foster rather aptly: 'Paddy Ashdown won the campaign, Neil Kinnock won the polls, John Major won in the end'. Despite Ashdown's personal popularity buoying the party and serving as a major asset, and polls predicting the Tories being returned to the opposition benches, the Conservatives ultimately returned to power with a surprising, albeit reduced, majority.

The first speaker, Dr Alison Holmes, was able to give a rather unique 'inside outsider' perspective. She began her comments by remembering

absent friends, including Paddy Ashdown and Richard Holme, who led the 1992 manifesto. Holmes had been working in Ashdown's office when Des Wilson, who was to run the campaign, appointed her to serve as the campaign coordinator. Appointed in December 1990, she acknowledged that, as a '26-year-old Yank' who had been in the country for less than three years, she was a somewhat unconventional choice on the surface.

Three themes animated the campaign. First was the time itself. There was a new zeitgeist, giving a dramatic backdrop to everything that was being done. This included, most dramatically, foreign affairs. The world was in turmoil and upheaval, but liberals saw hope for a potentially radical shift in global politics in the light of this. Thus, there

was a global tone that coloured everything about the Lib Dem campaign. The second theme was that every campaign fights the lingering battles of the last campaign through the prism of the new election. For the Liberal Democrats, this meant navigating the wounds of a painful 1987 campaign and a difficult merger between the Liberals and Social Democrats. The third was that the 1992 election occurred amid a seismic shift in the fundamentals of political campaigning. Technologies were adapting, as was the culture. Spin, professionalisation of politics, the 'Americanisation' of politics; these were all things the party had to adapt to.

The scars of the 1987 election were still felt. It had been a messy campaign, bitter and acrimonious, with many candidates refusing to return to the fray. This had been followed by an even messier merger process, mixed with relaunches and renamings, and some awful polling and election results. As Tim Clement-Jones put it, at one point the party was within the margin of error of not existing in the opinion polls. It was perhaps a blessing in disguise that the party had