

Flattered to Deceive? The Performance of the Liberal Democrats in the May 2026 Local and Devolved Elections

THE LOCAL AND devolved elections held across Great Britain on 7 May comprised the biggest scheduled test of the parties' mid-term electoral popularity in the current parliament. In London every seat on the 32 borough councils was up for grabs, while outside the capital a mixture of whole and partial council elections was held in 104 metropolitan, unitary, county and district councils, with the latter disproportionately concentrated in the more urban half of provincial England. Meanwhile, in Scotland and Wales all the members of the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Senedd were elected anew, in both cases via a form of proportional representation.

In this article we assess the performance of the Liberal Democrats in these elections. They took place two years after the party had secured a record-breaking high, winning 72 seats at Westminster, its highest tally for a hundred years. At the same time, the combined Conservative and Labour share of the vote fell in the 2024 general election to its lowest level since 1922. The local and devolved elections therefore seemingly opened up an opportunity to undermine further the Conservative-Labour duopoly that has dominated

post-war British politics. But did the results of the elections suggest that the Liberal Democrats have made further progress towards achieving that end?

The analysis is in two parts. First, we analyse the party's performance in the English local elections. Then we turn to the devolved elections in Scotland and Wales. In conclusion, we tie the threads of the two halves together to form an overall assessment of the implications of the results for the Liberal Democrats.

Local elections in England

At first glance, there was every reason for the Liberal Democrats to take modest pride in the outcome of the local elections. As Table 1 shows, the party made a net gain of just over 150 seats, enjoying a healthy net balance of gains both inside and outside London. The party also made a net gain of one council, while it secured majority control of two new unitary councils that were being established in Surrey. It was the eighth set of local elections in a row at which the party recorded a net gain of council seats in England. All in all, the results seemingly represented clear evidence of steady, if modest, advancement.

Table 1 Seats outcome of the May 2026 English local elections						
	London		Provinces		All	
	Seats	+/- 2022	Seats	+/-	Seats	+/-
Reform	79	+79	1375	+1373	1454	+1452
Labour	696	-460	372	-1038	1068	-1498
Lib Dem	243	+63	601	+92	844	+155
Conservative	407	+3	394	-566	801	-563
Greens	279	+261	308	+180	587	+441
Other	93	+34	189	-21	282	+13
<i>Source: BBC. Change is on when seat last regularly contested. In the provinces this was variously 2021, 2022, 2023 or 2024. London accounted for 36 per cent of all the seats contested, while 22 per cent of the seats were accounted for by elections in the provinces where the seats were last contested in 2022, 13 per cent in 2021, 12 per cent in 2024, and 11 per cent in 2023. Where ward boundary changes took place, change is as compared with estimate of what the results would have been last time on the new boundaries.</i>						

Table 2 Mean change in Liberal Democrat share of the vote since 2021-24		
Previous year/election	Mean change in % share of vote	No of wards
2021	-0.5	587
2022 London	-1.5	288
2022 Provinces	-4.9	516
2023	-4.5	565
2024	-2.9	602

However, Table 2 tells a different story. Using the detailed ward-by-ward voting figures collected by the BBC for a sample of 57 of the 136 councils where an election was held in 2026, it shows the average difference across all wards between the Liberal Democrats' percentage share of the vote in 2026 and that in each of the four annual rounds of local elections held between 2021 and 2024. (Note that not all the 1,315 wards in the sample had an election in all these years, though two-thirds did have one in 2022, the year when 65 per cent of the 5,046 seats up for grabs were previously contested. In some instances, recent ward boundary changes made it impossible to compare the results with one or more earlier years, while the sample necessarily does not include any of the 20 councils outside London where new ward boundaries were

introduced in 2026. In the case of London, 2022 was the only year in which the wards had previously been fought. There were very few places where the ward-level results this year could be compared with those for last year (2025).)

Far from suggesting that the party's performance in 2026 represented further progress, the table indicates that, on average, the party's share of the vote outside London was lower than its tally in every one of the four sets of local elections between 2021 and 2024 – and especially so as compared with both 2022 and 2023. Meanwhile, the party's average vote in the London borough elections was also down on the last time these seats were fought four years ago. Far from indicating a modest step forward, these figures suggest that the party took a step backwards.

Table 3 Mean change in Liberal Democrat share of the vote since 2021–24 (a) by Liberal Democrat share of vote in the previous year and (b) in seats won by Liberal Democrats in the previous year

	<i>Mean change in Liberal Democrat % share of vote since ...</i>				
<i>Lib Dem % vote in previous year</i>	<i>2021</i>	<i>2022 London</i>	<i>2022 Provinces</i>	<i>2023</i>	<i>2024</i>
0–10	+1.2	–0.2	–0.2	–0.4	+0.1
10–20	+0.1	–2.7	–3.9	–2.7	–3.0
20–40	+0.7	–0.9	–6.3	–4.4	–2.9
> 40	–6.3	–3.4	–11.8	–13.2	–9.0

Figures based on wards fought by Liberal Democrats in 2026 and the relevant previous year.

Table 4 Mean change in Conservative and Labour share of the vote since 2021–24

<i>Previous year/election</i>	<i>Mean change in % share of the vote</i>		<i>No. of seats</i>
	<i>Conservative</i>	<i>Labour</i>	
2021	–20.5	–13.4	552
2022 London	–4.8	–15.9	286
2022 Provinces	–12.1	–19.9	482
2023	–9.6	–19.3	533
2024	–8.1	–18.1	572

Table based on wards fought by all of Conservative, Labour, and Liberal Democrats in 2026 and the previous year.

The party has, of course, taken pride in recent years in its ability to perform better in places where it was already a credible challenger locally. Indeed, focusing its campaigning efforts on such places was one of the foundations that underpinned the party's success in winning a record 72 seats in the 2024 general election – even though it registered little increase in its share of the vote. However, there was no sign of this pattern in this year's local elections. In Table 3, we show the average fall in Liberal Democrat support since each of 2021 to 2024 broken down by the party's share of the vote at the relevant previous election. In general, the higher the party's share of the vote last time, the more heavily its share fell in these elections. The decline in the party's support was especially marked in wards where it had previously won more than 40 per cent of

the vote. Only in London was this pattern less immediately apparent, though even here it was not entirely absent.

Given this performance in terms of votes, how was it possible for the Liberal Democrats to have recorded modest net gains of seats? The key lies in the performance of the two parties which have hitherto been the Liberal Democrats' main competitors for votes and seats, that is, the Conservatives and Labour. For, as Table 4 shows, while the Liberal Democrats may have suffered some loss of support at these elections, the reverse suffered by the party was small compared with that endured by the Conservatives and (especially) Labour. On average, Labour suffered double-digit losses of support compared with all the annual rounds of local elections between 2021 and 2024, while in the

case of the Conservatives the average fall in their support since each of the four previous rounds was greater than that suffered by the Liberal Democrats.

How many seats a party wins under the first-past-the-post electoral system depends not on the absolute share of the vote it wins, but rather on how well it has done compared with its opponents. Even if a party’s share of the vote falls, it can still record a gain in terms of seats if the fall in its support is less than that suffered by its opponents. The sharp declines in both Labour and Conservative support – which in both cases represented one of their worst-ever performances in English local elections – served to mask the decline in Liberal Democrat support.

Crucially, as Table 5 shows, this even proved to be the case in those wards the Liberal Democrats won last time around. The average change in the party’s support in such wards is shown in the penultimate row of the table. Some of these were wards where the Liberal Democrats won less than 40 per cent of the vote previously, so the average falls recorded in that row are somewhat lower than those shown in the last row of Table 3 above. Meanwhile, the first row of Table 5 shows the average fall in Conservative support in wards where the Tories had previously been second to the Liberal Democrats, while the second row shows the average fall in the Labour vote

where that party had previously been the Liberal Democrats’ closest rival.

Irrespective of the year in question, the average fall in Labour support in wards where they started off second to the Liberal Democrats was always much bigger than the average fall in the Liberal Democrat vote. Compared with the Conservatives, however, the position was more nuanced. Outside London, the average fall in the Liberal Democrat vote was at least on a par with that in the Conservative vote. However, this was not true of the change in 2021. And, crucially, the places (many of them county councils where the elections had been postponed last year) where the seats up for grabs in 2026 had last been contested five years ago were disproportionately in traditionally Tory shire England where Liberal Democrat/Conservative contests were most numerous. Meanwhile, the Tories also posed little challenge in seats the Liberal Democrats were defending in the capital.

A similar analysis (not shown) of the performance of the parties where the Liberal Democrats were starting off in second place shows an even more striking picture. The Liberal Democrats were not alone in finding that their share of the vote fell more heavily in places where they were previously strongest – the same fate befell both Labour and the Conservatives. Indeed, given the scale of the loss of support those two parties suffered, such a

Table 5 Mean change in Conservative, Labour, and Liberal Democrat share of the vote since 2021–24 in wards won by Liberal Democrats in the previous year					
Mean change in % share of vote	2021	2022 London	2022 Provinces	2023	2024
Conservative (in LD/Con wards)	–17.9	–10.4	–10.5	–9.2	–8.3
Labour (in LD/Lab wards)	–16.7	–11.9	–18.6	–17.9	–18.0
Liberal Democrats (in all LD wards)	–5.1	–0.5	–10.8	–12.1	–8.0
No. of LD wards	123	49	145	157	159

Table 6 Mean change in Green and Reform share of the vote since 2024				
<i>Previous year/ election</i>	<i>Mean change in Green % share of vote regardless of previous candidature</i>	<i>No. of seats</i>	<i>Mean change in Reform % share of vote regardless of previous candidature</i>	<i>No. of seats</i>
2021	+9.1	642	+27.5	655
2022 London	+11.7	282	+10.7	289
2022 Provinces	+10.3	576	+25.8	589
2023	+9.0	613	+26.5	626
2024	+7.8	653	+25.9	666
<i>In each case table is confined to wards the party contested in 2026, but irrespective of whether it contested the ward the previous year.</i>				

Table 7 Mean Green and Reform share of the vote, 2026, by estimated % Leave vote 2016				
<i>Estimated % Leave vote 2016</i>	<i>Greens</i>		<i>Reform</i>	
	<i>London</i>	<i>Provinces</i>	<i>London</i>	<i>Provinces</i>
	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>
Less than 40	25.8	32.6	8.4	10.9
40–48	18.9	17.1	12.8	19.3
48–52	15.2	16.4	14.9	24.4
52–60	12.1	16.2	23.2	28.8
More than 60	*	12.5	*	39.4
All wards	23.1	17.2	10.8	27.6
<i>* Too few wards to calculate. Figure in previous row is for all wards where the % Leave vote was greater than 52 per cent.</i>				

pattern was arithmetically more or less inevitable. Either way, it meant that, while typically down, the fall in Liberal Democrat support where the party started off second was, for the most part, but a shadow of the drop suffered by the defending Conservative or Labour candidate, thereby helping the party to register some gains.

By now it is evident that while the Liberal Democrats were sometimes the beneficiaries of Conservative and Labour misfortune, the origin of their principal opponents' difficulties lay elsewhere – in record performances registered by Reform UK and the Greens. In Table 6 we show how much on average those

two parties' shares of the vote represented an increase on whatever they achieved locally between 2021 and 2024. Note that included in this calculation are wards these parties did not contest at the relevant previous election – which in the case of Reform was the position in most wards.

While both parties enjoyed substantial increases in support, their biggest advances – and thus their highest vote shares – were recorded in very different kinds of places. As Table 7 shows and in line with the origins of the party, Reform did best in places which voted most heavily for Brexit in 2016. In contrast, the Greens' best performances were

Table 8 Mean change in party support by change in Green % share of vote 2022 and 2024				
Change in Green % vote	Labour	Reform	Conservatives	Lib Dems
Mean change in % vote since 2022: London				
Fell	-7.3	+13.1	-3.8	+3.2
Up 0-10	-12.5	+12.2	-6.1	+0.6
Up 10-20	-16.5	+9.8	-4.3	-3.7
Up 20+	-26.9	+8.3	-4.6	-3.2
Mean change in % vote since 2022: Provinces				
Fell	-11.4	+26.8	-13.0	-2.6
Up 0-10	-16.7	+29.2	-13.6	-5.7
Up 10-20	-23.4	+25.0	-12.6	-4.2
Up 20+	-33.7	+14.2	-8.4	-4.5
Mean change in % vote since 2024				
Fell	-13.0	+27.3	-7.7	-1.0
Up 0-10	-16.8	+27.4	-8.9	-3.3
Up 10-20	-22.8	+24.8	-7.7	-2.4
Up 20+	-24.6	+16.1	-5.8	-3.5
In the case of Reform and the Greens the change in vote is irrespective of whether they previously contested the ward. In the case of the other parties the figure is based on the wards they contested on both occasions.				

Table 9 Mean change in Green share of vote by Labour share of vote in previous election, 2021-24					
	Mean change in Green % share of vote regardless of previous candidature since ...				
Labour % vote in previous year	2021	2022 London	2022 Provinces	2023	2024
0-20	+4.8	+3.5	+3.8	+2.8	+2.1
20-45	+9.7	+7.3	+8.8	+8.0	+7.7
45+	+16.9	+17.0	+15.4	+13.6	+11.6

heavily concentrated in wards where less than 40 per cent voted Leave, though beyond that group of wards the relationship between support for Brexit and the party’s performance was less strong than for Reform. These patterns help explain why, on average, the Greens won 23 per cent of the vote in the capital but a more modest 17 per cent elsewhere, while Reform only won 11 per cent in London and 27 per cent in the provinces, though in their case their support in the ethnically and culturally

diverse capital was lower than in the provinces even after taking into account how much a ward had backed Brexit.¹

As we might anticipate, given these patterns, the rise of the two challenger parties also differed in their impact on the Conservatives (hitherto primarily a pro-Brexit vote) and Labour (whose support has been higher among supporters of EU membership). A sharp rise in support for the Greens was typically accompanied by especially sharp falls

in Labour support, while it made relatively little difference to the performance of the Conservatives. Meanwhile, there was little consistent impact on the performance of the Liberal Democrats, while, as by now is already evident, these were not places where Reform prospered. These patterns are illustrated in Table 8 by showing how the performance of all four of the Greens' opponents varied according to how much support for the Greens was up on 2022 and 2024, but the results for other years are similar.

Moreover, Table 9 demonstrates that the geographical pattern of the Greens' performance meant the party's support increased most heavily in places where Labour had previously been strongest. Labour's particular difficulty in retaining its support in its former heartlands owed a lot to losses of support to the Greens.

In contrast, where Reform's support rose most sharply support for the Conservatives fell heavily. This is illustrated in Table 10, which shows, for each of 2021, 2022 outside

London, and 2024, the mean change in support for each of Reform's four main competitors, broken down by how much Reform's vote increased on the relevant previous year. As compared with 2021, for example, the fall in Conservative support was nearly five times higher in wards where support for Reform was 30 points up on five years ago than it was in places where Reform advanced by ten points or less. The difference in the Conservative performance between these two sets of wards was less dramatic compared with 2022 or 2024, but these were elections where the party's share of the vote in 2026 represented less of a drop in its support across the board (see Table 4). But even as compared with 2022 and 2024, it was still the case that the more that Reform advanced, the more heavily the Conservative vote fell.

In the case of Reform and the Greens the change in vote is irrespective of whether they previously contested the ward. In the case of the other parties the figure is based on the wards they contested on both occasions.

Table 10 Mean change in party support by change in Reform % share of vote 2021–24				
<i>Change in Reform % vote</i>	<i>Labour</i>	<i>Greens</i>	<i>Conservatives</i>	<i>Lib Dems</i>
<i>Mean change in % vote since 2021</i>				
Up 0–10	–26.8	+25.3	–5.3	–1.2
Up 10–20	–15.3	+12.0	–13.7	+1.3
Up 20–30	–11.1	+8.2	–21.7	–0.1
Up 30+	–13.2	+6.6	–25.6	–1.6
<i>Mean change in % vote since 2022: Provinces</i>				
Up 0–10	–29.2	+20.3	–5.2	–3.9
Up 10–20	–17.9	+11.8	–7.0	–4.3
Up 20–30	–17.8	+9.0	–13.8	–5.2
Up 30+	–20.9	+7.3	–17.4	–5.3
<i>Mean change in % vote since 2024</i>				
Up 0–10	–14.8	+13.4	–2.0	+0.2
Up 10–20	–14.9	+9.6	–5.3	–2.7
Up 20–30	–17.2	+6.7	–8.8	–3.0
Up 30+	–22.5	+6.2	–11.4	–3.8

This pattern also played some role in accounting for the tendency for the Conservatives to lose ground more heavily in places where they were previously strongest. For example, in provincial England the average increase since 2022 in support for Reform in wards where the Conservatives won over 40 per cent of the vote in 2022 was, at +29.4 points, notably higher than the +20.8 point figure in wards where less than 20 per cent had done so. That said, at +28.2 points, the uplift in Reform support where the Conservatives had won between 20 per cent and 40 per cent in 2022 was only a little lower than in those places where the Tories had registered more than 40 per cent. The sharp fall in Conservative support in their heartlands was less obviously markedly tied to the challenge from Reform than the heavy drop Labour suffered in their strongholds was to the challenge from the Greens.

Meanwhile, and in contrast to the Conservatives, there is little consistent evidence in Table 10 that Labour's vote fell more heavily where Reform advanced most. Indeed, compared with 2021 and 2022, Labour's vote fell most heavily in wards where the rise in Reform support was less than ten points – these were, of course, places where the Greens were recoding their biggest advance. Only as compared with 2024 – where the variation in Green performance was less dramatic – is there some sign that Labour might have suffered in the wake of a better than average Reform performance. Meanwhile, there was at most only a modest link between Reform performance and how well the Liberal Democrats fared.

The Conservative and Labour duopoly found itself under greater challenge in the English local elections than at any point since 1945. But that challenge came not from the Liberal Democrats, but from Reform and the Greens. Liberal Democrat support actually fell back somewhat on what the party had achieved in recent years – performances

which themselves had all been relatively modest in terms of votes compared with what the party routinely achieved in English local elections before it entered into coalition with the Conservatives in 2010. Yet, in a not dissimilar vein to what happened in the 2024 election, the party was still able to make gains in terms of seats because of the poor performance of their principal opponents. As a result, the first-past-the-post electoral system that once made life for the party so difficult once again worked to its advantage – not least because in the wake of the heavy decline in Conservative and Labour support in their heartlands, the party's vote outside London was now the most geographically concentrated of any of the parties.² But while the Liberal Democrats might have again overcome their past difficulties with the electoral system, the party found itself little more than a bystander as Reform and the Greens posed a major threat to the traditional 'mould of British politics' that the Liberal/SDP Alliance had once aspired to break.

Devolved elections: Wales

In Wales, in contrast, the first-past-the-post system could no longer be either the party's friend or foe. The last remnants of its use were swept away in the wake of the decision to replace the additional member system under which 40 MSs were elected in single-member constituencies and just 20 secured election through a top-up party list system. Instead, an expanded Senedd of 96 members was elected by a closed party list system in which each of 16 constituencies elected six members.

This change was not particularly advantageous for the Liberal Democrats. Under the previous system, each of five regions elected 12 members to the Senedd, eight via first-past-the-post and four via the top-up lists. That meant a party that failed to win a constituency seat in a region would still be very likely to claim a top-up list seat if it won a little over 7

Table 11 Results of Devolved elections in Scotland and Wales, 2026

	Scotland					Wales		
	% constituency vote	+/- since 2021	% list vote	+/- since 2021	Seats	% vote	+/- since 2021	Seats
SNP/PC	38.2	-9.5	27.2	-13.2	58	35.4	+14.7	43
Reform	15.8		16.6	+16.4	17	29.3	+28.2	34
Labour	19.2	-2.4	16.0	-1.9	17	11.1	-25.1	9
Con	11.8	-10.1	11.8	-11.7	12	10.7	-14.3	7
Green	2.3	+1.0	14.0	+5.9	15	6.7	+2.4	2
Lib Dem	11.4	+4.4	9.4	+4.3	10	4.5	+0.1	1
Other	1.3	-0.3	5.0	-0.2	0	2.3	-6.0	0

Source: BBC. In Scotland, Reform did not contest any constituencies in 2021, while the Greens only contested 12 constituencies in 2021 and six in 2026. In Wales, the change in vote share is as compared with the list vote in 2021.

per cent of the list vote – and might even succeed on a little less than that. In 2021 the party's Welsh leader and only elected MS, Jane Dodds, scraped home by taking the last seat in Mid & West Wales on just 6.8 per cent of the list vote.

Under the new system each region only elects half as many members. Inevitably this means that the threshold for winning a seat is now higher – it is potentially as much as 14 per cent of the vote. Estimates of what would have happened if the new system had been in force in 2021 suggested that Jane Dodds would have not won a seat in the new Brycheiniog Tawe Nedd constituency which, with an estimated 10.6 per cent share of the list vote for the party in 2021, seemingly represented its best prospect.

In the event, a marginal uplift in the Liberal Democrat vote in the constituency to 11.8 per cent was enough for Ms Dodds to secure election once again, picking up the fifth of the six seats in the constituency. But this was the one and only bright spot in what was otherwise a dismal performance. Across Wales as a whole, the party won just 4.5 per cent of the vote. This represented only a marginal

increase on the 4.3 per cent of the list vote the party won in 2021 – its worst ever performance in Wales.

Yet, as Table 11 shows, of all the elections in May, this was the one where the Conservative-Labour duopoly was not just severely challenged but arguably appeared to be broken. Labour's share of the vote fell by 25 points compared with the party's list vote in 2021. It was left with just 11 per cent – the party's lowest share of the vote at any Westminster or Senedd election since 1906. Equally, the Conservatives suffered a 14 point fall in support, leaving them with a little less than 11 per cent, their worst Westminster or Senedd performance since 1918. Rather than a Conservative/Labour duopoly, the election was primarily a battle between Plaid Cymru (who recoded their highest ever share of the vote) and Reform. Indeed, according to a post-election poll by YouGov, as many as 45 per cent of those who voted Labour in 2024 switched to Plaid Cymru at this election, while 40 per cent of 2024 Tories backed Reform; in part, at least, Wales was seemingly simply replacing one two-party duopoly with another. In any event, with the Greens also recording a modest

advance, the Liberal Democrats found themselves falling to sixth place in a part of the UK that was once part of a 'Celtic fringe' that in the 1950s had helped sustain the Liberal Party through its darkest days.

Devolved elections: Scotland

If the outcome of the elections on 7 May in both England and Wales were disappointing, in Scotland (where the election was once again fought under the additional member system) the party did make some notable progress. As Table 11 above shows, support for the party across the country was up by four points on the record low tally it registered at the last election in 2021. Indeed, its 11.4 per cent of the constituency vote and 9.4 per cent of the list vote represented its best performance at any Westminster or Holyrood election since 2010. Though those levels of support were still lower than at any Westminster or Holyrood election in Scotland between 1983 and 2010, in contrast to England and Wales, at least, they did represent evidence of progress in reversing the adverse electoral fallout from the party's role in the 2010–15 coalition at Westminster. That said, between them the rise of Reform (albeit more muted in anti-Brexit Scotland than in Wales or provincial England) and a further advance by the Greens ensured that, despite gaining six seats, the party finds itself for the first time as just the sixth largest party at Holyrood. It still looks like a bystander at an election in which (not dissimilarly to Wales), Labour won its lowest share of the vote at any Westminster or Holyrood election since December 1910 and the Conservatives suffered their worst result ever.

Meanwhile, the Liberal Democrat advance was heavily geographically concentrated. There were ten constituencies where the party claimed first or second place. One of these was the Shetland Isles, which the party lost to the SNP – a result to which we will return. In the

remaining nine constituencies (seven of which the party won), the party's vote increased on average by +15.2 points on the constituency vote and by +13.6 points on the list. Elsewhere (leaving aside the Shetland Isles) the equivalent figures were just +2.7 and +2.8 points respectively. Although the party registered at least some increase in its share of the vote (however small) in every constituency (again excepting Shetland), the election was more obviously a successful exercise in focusing campaigning effort on winnable constituencies rather than a demonstration of a significant Scotland-wide revival in the party's popularity.

Being locally popular has always been a key asset for successful Liberal Democrat candidates north of the border. At the last Holyrood election in 2021, the share of the constituency vote won by the four Liberal Democrat MSPs who managed to defend their seats in the face of the party's lowest ever Scotland-wide vote was, on average, 26.2 points higher than the list vote for the Liberal Democrats in their constituency. Consequently, when an incumbent Liberal Democrat MSP decides not to defend their seat – as the Shetlands Isles incumbent, Beatrice Wishart, did this time – retention of the seat is potentially put at risk. And in the Shetland Isles, where the SNP nominated a member of a well-known island family as its candidate, support for the Liberal Democrats on the constituency vote fell by –14.3 points – and was only 3.7 points higher than the party's list vote in the constituency. It was the first time that someone other than a Liberal Democrat had won a Westminster or Holyrood seat in the Northern Isles since Jo Grimond first won the Orkney & Shetland Westminster seat in 1950.

But where the Liberal Democrats were successful in winning a constituency seat, once again the vote for the local candidate was well above that for the party itself on the list vote – though at 18.0 points the average difference was less than in 2021. A comparison

of the difference between the constituency and the list vote in these seven seats and the equivalent difference in the 63 seats where the Liberal Democrats were neither first nor second suggests that this 'additional' support on the constituency ballot came from across the political spectrum and was not simply the result of anti-SNP tactical voting by supporters of the Union. According to this measure, while the Labour constituency vote was on average around six points lower than we might otherwise have expected, so also was the SNP's, while the equivalent figures for the Conservatives and Reform were a little under four and two points respectively. Where the Liberal Democrats are able to make themselves electorally credible in Scotland, the party has the potential to appeal to a broad church.

Conclusion

The twelve months leading up to the May 7 elections saw Reform take the lead in the polls for much longer than the Liberal/SDP Alliance were ahead in 1981/2. Following the election of Zack Polanski as their leader, the Greens reached unprecedented levels of popularity for them too. From the autumn onwards, support for the Conservatives and Labour combined was persistently below 40 per cent, the first time that has happened.

Yet Liberal Democrat support changed little – if anything, by the time of the local and devolved elections it was a couple of points down on May 2025 and no higher than the 12.5 per cent the party won in 2024 – a figure far below its standing up to and including the 2010 election.

The outcome of the local and devolved elections on 7 May confirmed all these messages from the polls. Reform's performance in provincial England and in Wales was fully consistent with its lead, while the Greens achieved unprecedented levels of success in anti-Brexit England. Both Labour and the Conservatives

suffered record-breaking losses of support in the English local elections and in the devolved elections in Scotland and Wales. Indeed, the outcome helped precipitate the downfall of Sir Keir Starmer as Labour leader and Prime Minister, though, so far, his replacement by Andy Burnham has only partially reversed the heavy loss of support the party has suffered since 2024.

Yet despite the severe travails that befell both the Conservatives and Labour, the Liberal Democrats – who have traditionally profited when these two parties have fallen on hard times – were barely treading water. Modest gains of seats in England camouflaged a not insignificant loss of votes. In Wales, the party barely registered any recovery at all from a previous record low. A somewhat better performance in Scotland was heavily reliant on success in a relatively small number of constituencies. Much as was the case after the 2024 election – despite its haul then of 72 seats – the party still looks to be struggling to re-emerge as the significant player it once was across the length and breadth of Britain. The question it should perhaps now be asking itself is whether it might have missed the boat? ■

John Curtice is Professor of Politics, University of Strathclyde, and Senior Fellow, National Centre for Social Research. The author acknowledges the support of Patrick English, Stephen Fisher, Robert Ford, Lotte Hargrave and Stuart Perrett in undertaking the analysis on which this article is based.

- 1 The Liberal Democrat share of the vote tended to be somewhat higher in places that voted less heavily for Leave, but the relationship between the party's performance and how a ward voted in 2016 was not as consistent as that for the Greens or Reform.
- 2 The standard deviation in Liberal Democrat support in wards outside London was 16.4. The equivalent figure for the Conservatives and Labour was 12.5 and 11.7 respectively, while that for Reform and the Greens was 11.6 and 11.8. In the BBC sample there were seven councils where the Liberal Democrats won an overall majority of the seats that were being contested, two more than for both the Conservatives and Labour.