

UNIVERSITY OF  
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Institute of Local Government Studies

# The 2014 local elections – a preview

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## The 2014 local elections – a preview

### So do you actually have a local vote this year?

Two EU countries this May will hold local elections that coincide with their European parliamentary elections: Greece and the UK – or, more specifically, England and Northern Ireland. On Sunday 25 May Greeks vote in the second, ‘run-off’ round of elections to all their 13 regions and 325 municipalities. England, though nearly five times as populous as Greece, also has 325 lower-tier and unitary authorities (if you cheat a little and exclude the City of London Corporation). We, however, will elect mostly only fractions of fewer than half of our councils, yet still it takes seven lines of Table 1 to summarise the 161 authorities whose voters on Thursday 22 May will probably have both a local and Euro vote – and in some of the non-met districts that’s still only a ‘probably’.

We bemoan our disappointing local turnouts, and we’d be ecstatic if we got within 20 points of the 62% in the recent French municipal elections that represented their lowest turnout in 50 years. But we don’t make the system exactly voter-friendly.

**Table 1: Local elections in the UK – May 22, 2014**

	Seats up	Present control			
		Cons	Lab	LD	NOC
<b>32 London boroughs</b>	All	11	16	2	3
<b>36 Metropolitan boroughs</b>	Third	2	29	-	5
<b>2 Unitary authorities</b>	All (1)	-	1	-	1
<b>17 Unitary authorities</b>	Third	4	11	1	1
<b>2 Non-met districts</b>	All (2)	-	-	1	1
<b>7 Non-met districts</b>	Half	3	3	1	-
<b>65 Non-met districts</b>	Third	33	17	3	12
<b>5 Elected mayors*</b>		-	(3)	(1)	(1 Ind)
<b>11 (new) NI districts</b>	All (3)				
		53	77	8	23

**Key:**

All (1) = Boundary changes: Slough (41→42) (Lab); Milton Keynes (51→57) (NOC).

All (2) = Boundary changes: Three Rivers (48→39) (LD); Hart (35→33) (NOC).

\* = Hackney, Lewisham, Newham (Lab); Watford (LD); Tower Hamlets (Ind).

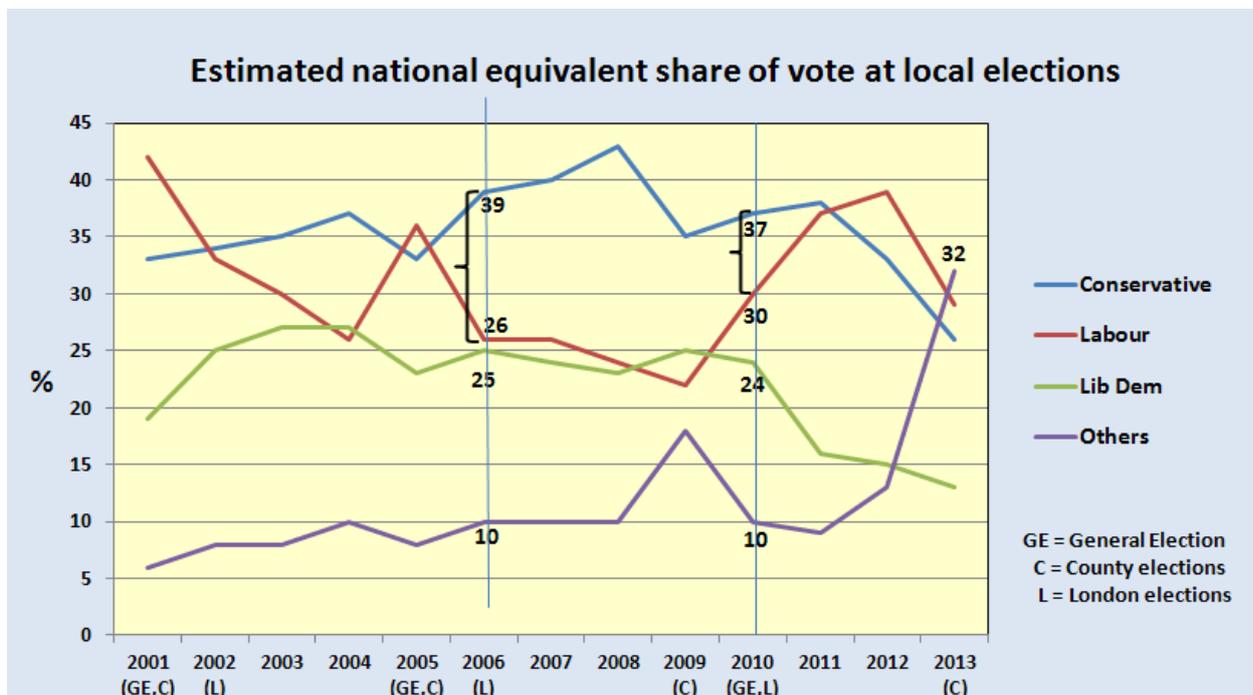
All (3) The number of Northern Ireland councillors will be reduced from 582 to 462.

## The London boroughs

### *The baseline: what happened last time*

Inevitably, the Euro elections will dominate the campaign, and London will dominate the local results. The latter may seem unfair, but in all-out elections things necessarily change and often dramatically. Most other councils voting this year elect by thirds, and particularly in many already strong Labour authorities, Labour would still be in control on 23 May even if it lost every single vote cast. In this preview too, therefore, London's all-out elections are accorded priority, as elsewhere are all-out elections over election by fractions – to the particular cost, I regret to admit, of the shire districts.

May 2010, when most of this year's retiring councillors were elected, was Labour's second worst parliamentary election performance in 80 years. Given a different context, though, the party's local and particularly its London election performance would have been justifiably celebrated – three boroughs won directly from the Conservatives (Ealing, Enfield and Harrow), seven more from No Overall Control (Brent, Camden, Hounslow, Islington, Lewisham, Southwark, Waltham Forest), and more London seats than the Tories (875 to 717) for the first time since 1998, albeit on only a 0.6% higher vote share.



There's no mystery about the national-local discrepancy – just two big reasons: the four-year local electoral cycle and the General Election-boosted turnout. The seats up in 2010 were those contested in 2006, when – as illustrated in the chart<sup>1</sup> – Labour's estimated 26% of the national vote barely topped the Lib Dems' 25% and was way adrift of the Conservatives' 39%. By 2010 that 13% national vote gap had almost halved, bringing big Labour gains in both votes and councils – thanks partly also to hugely increased turnouts of over 60%, benefiting the large parties, especially Labour, at the expense of minor ones.

Of nearly 1,600 minor party and independent candidates in London, just 23 were elected: 2 Greens, down from 12 in 2006 (Camden, Lewisham); 1 Respect, down from 15 (Tower Hamlets – now 2); no BNP, and no UKIP – though the party has since reached double figures, mainly through Tory defections. This year turnouts will be down again, and minor party representation – including, but not only, that of UKIP – equally certainly up.

London is not a **UKIP** priority, and its best prospects may be in those boroughs where it already has defectors – Hounslow, Merton and Havering (from the Conservatives), Barking & Dagenham (from Labour) – plus maybe Hillingdon. But UKIP influence – countrywide but particularly in London, where electors have potentially three local votes – will also be more subtly felt through vote-splitting, helping Labour to gain control, or possibly the Lib Dems to retain it, where they might not otherwise have done so.

### ***Labour's 'battleground boroughs'***

With its long-term opinion poll lead – the last Conservative lead was recorded over two years, or roughly 450 national voting intention polls, ago<sup>2</sup> - it is again Labour that will be expecting to win councils as well as seats. Back in early January, Sadiq Khan, Shadow Minister for London, announced the party's 'suburban mindset' strategy, and its five Outer London 'battleground boroughs' – Conservative-controlled Barnet and

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<sup>1</sup> Chart based on figures in House of Commons Library Research Paper 13/30: *Local Elections 2013*, p.11.

<sup>2</sup> UK Polling Report, 'Voting intention since 2010' - <http://ukpollingreport.co.uk/voting-intention-2>.

Croydon, and the currently hung Harrow, Merton and Redbridge – presumably in genuflection to Boris Johnson’s successful mayoral campaigns<sup>3</sup>.

The latter are the proverbial low-hanging fruit. In **Harrow** Labour actually won a majority in 2010, but then lost it through splits and defections, handing control to the current Conservative minority administration<sup>4</sup>. In **Merton** it took minority control, strengthened it through Conservative defections to UKIP, and achieved a good result in last summer’s Colliers Green by-election. In **Redbridge** the Conservatives and Lib Dems signed a partnership agreement just as their leaders were doing the same at Westminster. In all three boroughs Labour will be aiming for majority control, in Merton for the first time since 2006, in Redbridge for the first time ever.

In **Croydon** the Conservatives narrowly retained a 4-seat majority through an electoral system rewarding nearly 19% of Lib Dem voters with no councillors at all. Here too a modest swing would give Labour an equally workable majority, and more than justify the party’s decision to employ a full-time agent.

**Barnet**, though, seems an altogether tougher proposition. Numerous issues have incensed residents – from the ‘One Barnet’ mass privatisation of council services, through the closures of libraries and children’s centres and the scrapping of sheltered housing wardens, to the ever-contentious increased parking charges. But Labour has never won more seats than the Tories, and to do so this time would require a nearly 10% swing plus the Lib Dems clinging on to their three very marginal Childs Hill seats. The party’s election year, moreover, got off to about the worst possible start, as, within a couple of weeks of Sadiq Khan producing his target list, a senior Barnet Labour councillor, Ansuya Sodha, crossed the floor and joined the Conservatives. She had issues, as they say, and she aired them: “The party is not the same party I joined all those years ago. It is no longer the party for equality and

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<sup>3</sup> London Evening Standard, ‘Labour to target outer boroughs as election background’, 3 January, 2014 - <http://www.standard.co.uk/news/politics/labour-to-target-outer-boroughs-as-election-battleground-9036883.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Chris Game, ‘Who’ll work with the Lib Dems?’ – INLOGOV blog, 20 September, 2013 - <http://inlogov.wordpress.com/2013/09/20/wholl-work-with-the-lib-dems/>.

justice, especially when it comes to the Asian, Indian community”<sup>5</sup> – and plenty more in the same vein, that Labour canvassers may have to get used to hearing thrown back at them on the doorstep.

### ***Other London boroughs***

Another of Labour’s problems is that, while having a ‘suburban mindset’ strategy certainly sounds pretty impressive, it does mean your targets are all – how to put it – in the suburbs. This was picked on by Harry Phibbs, a London journalist, blogger for the *ConservativeHome* website<sup>6</sup>, and also a councillor in the inner London and not terribly suburban borough of **Hammersmith & Fulham**. H & F was majority controlled by Labour for 20 years, until in 2006 it lost 15 seats (including Phibbs’) to the Conservatives, giving them control of this entirely two-party council. It was one of four that switched directly from one party to the other – along with Bexley, Croydon and Ealing. Ealing returned comfortably to Labour in 2010, while Bexley’s 40-seat Conservative majority does indeed look formidable. But in Hammersmith & Fulham a 6% swing from 2010 would give Labour the 9 seats required for a majority and a couple to spare. So you can see Phibbs’ point that, with the exception of Barnet, part of Labour’s strategy seems to involve expectation management and setting the bar quite low.

With the Lib Dems’ local election performance having collapsed almost as grimly as its national poll ratings, the party’s two majority-controlled London boroughs are bound to be under scrutiny. **Sutton** they’ve held since 1990 and, although they lost one councillor to Labour – over the siting of a waste incinerator, rather than disaffection with the national Coalition – arithmetically at least they look safe for another term. In **Kingston upon Thames**, though, with one councillor resigning to sit as an Independent plus the loss of the by-election following their disgraced leader’s imprisonment, their 2010 six-seat majority now hangs on a single seat. Four wards

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<sup>5</sup> This is Local London, ‘Labour Councillor Ansuya Sodha defects to Conservatives’, 22 January, 2014 [http://www.thisislocallondon.co.uk/news/10953947.Labour\\_Councillor\\_Ansuya\\_Sodha\\_defects\\_to\\_Conservatives/?ref=rss](http://www.thisislocallondon.co.uk/news/10953947.Labour_Councillor_Ansuya_Sodha_defects_to_Conservatives/?ref=rss).

<sup>6</sup> ‘Labour’s London targets in the council elections’, *ConservativeHome*, 11 February, 2014 - <http://www.conservativehome.com/localgovernment/2014/02/labours-london-targets-in-the-council-elections.html>

already have split Lab Dem-Conservative representation, so, even without any possible UKIP effect, this one really is impossible to predict.

### **Elected mayors**

Labour's last London target is the **Tower Hamlets** mayoralty, held by the controversial Independent and Labour expellee, Luftur Rahman. Opponents have accused him of everything from dubiously selling off and granting planning permission for the hotel conversion of the listed Poplar Town Hall to trying to buy his own re-election, but little of the mud really seems to stick and it may, if anything, boost his support. *Panorama*, however, couldn't think of any more original way of making a programme on elected mayors, and Eric Pickles, never one to miss out on a punch-up, is sending in his inspectors – though not to report back until well after the May elections. Rahman's Labour challenger, John Biggs, points out that the Mayor won in 2010 in a low turnout election with the votes of only 13% of the electorate; he doesn't mention that this was more than twice Labour's vote share or that Rahman is one of the minority of mayors elected outright on first preference votes.

The other four mayoral contests all involve incumbents who were elected in 2002 and are now seeking their fourth consecutive terms: Jules Pipe (Hackney), Steve Bullock (Lewisham) and Robin Wales (Newham), all Labour, plus the Lib Dem Dorothy Thornhill in Watford. Collectively, they could be said to illustrate what our local government landscape might have looked like today, had rather more councils back in 2001/02 opted for elected mayors, or had Ministers been more prepared to ensure that public consultation exercises were scrupulously conducted and accurately reported.

All four have their policy initiatives and successes, but only one could be said in addition to have totally recast the politics of their town and council. **Watford** in 2002 was a Labour-run town and had been ever since local government reorganisation in the 1970s. Yet its voters chose as their mayor a Lib Dem councillor and assistant head teacher, Dorothy Thornhill, whose party coattails have since transformed the council chamber to the extent that two-thirds of members today are Lib Dems.

## **All-out elections following boundary reviews**

The other all-out elections are those caused by boundary reviews, two resulting in slightly enlarged unitary councils and two in smaller district councils. **Milton Keynes** is one of those quite rare authorities to have been run in the relatively recent past by all three major parties: first Labour, then the Lib Dems, and since 2011 by a minority Conservative administration. Numbers on the outgoing council are: Conservatives 19, Labour 16, Lib Dems 15, UKIP 1 – no, not an electoral breakthrough, but a disgruntled Conservative defection. Labour will be aiming to become at least the largest party on the new, enlarged council. The **Slough** result, by contrast, is in no doubt whatever – Labour already having a higher proportion of members than on any unitary apart from Leicester, Nottingham and Halton.

In **Three Rivers** the Lib Dems will be hoping to carry over the majority control they've held since 1999 into the new and considerably smaller council. The Conservatives are the main challengers, although the last time they had majority control was nearly 30 years ago. Labour too has its areas of support, which is more than can be said in **Hart**, where you have to be quite an elderly party member to recall when Labour last won even a ward – in 1976. The Conservatives lost their overall majority in the 2012 elections, and there was some talk of the Lib Dems and Community Campaign Hart (CCH), the local residents' association, joining an all-party administration. It didn't materialise and the Conservatives formed a minority administration, but CCH were the net winners then and it could be that the momentum, so cherished by all sports commentators, is still with them.

## **Metropolitan boroughs**

Holding majority control already in 29 of the 36 mets, Labour has little need of a target list here. Of the two Conservative councils, **Trafford** looked the more vulnerable even before the recent shock resignation of Matt Colledge as both council leader and councillor – and with almost immediate effect. The Tories' majority had previously been cut to 3 following a by-election loss in the Broadheath ward, so now it's down to 2. If in May Labour were to take the third Broadheath seat, the majority would go altogether, and a further three net gains would make Labour the largest

party for the first time in ten years. The **Solihull** Conservatives look securer, partly because they have a comparatively comfortable majority of 5 over a multi-party opposition, but partly too because defection has become almost a Lib Dem mania. First Labour was the beneficiary, then the Greens and in sufficient numbers that the council now boasts the second largest Green group (after Brighton & Hove) on any upper-tier or unitary council – and one that could possibly supplant the Lib Dems as the official opposition.

The West Yorkshire trio of Bradford, Kirklees and Calderdale have all been hung since at least 2000, but this could be about to change. In **Bradford** Labour's 2012 hopes of turning its minority control into a majority were thwarted by the coattails effect of George Galloway's parliamentary by-election victory for Respect. The coattail councillors all resigned last October to become Independents, and Labour should make it this time, although UKIP will be hoping to sweep up the protest vote in what is one of its main northern targets.

**Kirklees** and **Calderdale** have shown a striking parallelism in their recent politics. Five years ago, both boroughs were run by Conservative minorities, which were replaced by Labour-Lib Dem coalitions, which were succeeded in turn by Labour minority administrations – the key difference being that in Kirklees the changes all took place in a somewhat frenetic 2009, while in Calderdale it took rather longer, the two-party coalition lasting there until last year. In both boroughs all three main parties have groups numbering at least double figures – a measure of the difficulty any one party has in trying to win an overall majority. Arithmetically **Kirklees** looks the more attainable for Labour, but the party – now under a new leader after Mehboob Khan stepped down to become a political adviser at the LGA – would probably have to take seats from the Conservatives, Lib Dems and Greens. That's in addition to holding on to all those it already has – something it signally failed to do in a recent by-election in which the Lib Dems delivered a trouncing, though possibly assisted by campaigning with pink street posters, rather than their more usual, and recognisable, orange/yellow. In **Calderdale**, of the seats being defended that require swings of less than 10% to change hands, Labour was in second place in 2010 in three and the Conservatives in ten, which suggests that, if there are going to be changes, Labour is unlikely to be the only, or even the main, beneficiary.

In **Stockport**, the Lib Dems have since 2011 had only minority control of their metropolitan flagship, and Labour, despite never having been the largest party, is now very much the main opposition. It gained five seats in 2012, including that of the then Council Leader, Dave Goddard, and very nearly that of his successor, Sue Derbyshire. With the Lib Dems defending 12 of their 29 seats, they could be vulnerable, but not necessarily to Labour, who finished second in only two of them in 2010.

In **Walsall** Labour is already the largest party, with four more seats than the controlling Conservative-Lib Dem coalition. If it won the same wards as in 2012, but without this time losing a couple of others to Independents, the party could gain majority control for the first time this century. As for the Conservatives, they will be looking over their shoulders not only at Labour but at UKIP, who have been contesting seats for several years now and who finished a strong second in last year's Aldridge by-election.

### **Unitaries by thirds**

In contrast to the metropolitan boroughs, the Conservatives either control or are involved in running as many as 22 of the 55 unitaries, although only four of them have elections this time round. **Wokingham** is the authority Communities Secretary, Eric Pickles, likes to compare with Newcastle, which may be a bit more deprived than Wokingham, but, even after all the budget cuts, still has much more to spend per household on responding to its deprivation than Wokingham does. Wokingham in fact isn't terribly deprived, as its politics suggests, the last Labour councillor having disappeared over ten years ago. Best chance of a reappearance is probably in Lib Dem Bulmershe & Whitegates, where in 2012 the Labour candidate pushed the Conservative into third place, but I doubt if anyone's holding their breath.

In **Southend**, by contrast, the party's majority is knife-edge, and indeed has had to be regained twice since the 2012 elections, first through a defection from the Independent group and more recently through a narrow by-election victory over the Lib Dems. This is an authority with exceptionally few safe seats, and as many as 13 of the 17 being contested – including 6 Conservative and 5 Lib Dem – would be

vulnerable to a swing of less than 8% from the 2010 winner to the party in second place. The Conservatives' overall majority, therefore, is definitely under threat, if not its continued domination of the council.

During its early years as a unitary authority **Swindon** was overwhelmingly Labour and it was the largest party until 2003, since when the Conservatives have been in mostly majority control. Since 2007, though, Labour has chipped away steadily at that majority, and now just one net gain would topple it and four would give it one of its own. There are far more safe-looking seats than in Southend, but not so many for it not to be a serious goal.

In **Peterborough** the Conservatives' arithmetical majority isn't that much more secure than in Swindon, the big difference being a much greater fragmentation of the opposition, thanks to Peterborough Independents differentiating themselves from other Independents, and Liberals from the Lib Dems. With 11 seats to the Conservatives' 31, Labour isn't about to take control, but in 2012 it gained five seats direct from the Conservatives, and if it won the same wards again this year, the council would become hung, Labour a strongly placed second party, and the negotiations required to form an administration well worth watching. And again one has to emphasise, that's without any mention of UKIP, who didn't contest a single seat in 2012, but then suddenly, 12 months later, had 12 Cambridgeshire County Councillors.

Finally, returning to Table 1, the single unitary in the Lib Dem column of the table is **Portsmouth**. The 2012 elections were good for the Lib Dems. Far from losing their overall council majority, as some had predicted, they increased it to 10 by taking three seats from the Conservatives, and gave Lib Dems everywhere a sign that, however bad the national polls, they could still do well in their established strongholds. Unfortunately, since then things have turned rather sour. Within six months, one of their new victorious councillors, having been quickly elevated to the cabinet, equally quickly decided to defect to Labour, over the amount of money the council was putting into the Pyramids entertainment complex. Then early this year another councillor left the group over its refusal to remove Mike Hancock, also MP for Portsmouth South, from the cabinet following a council report into his personal

and sexual conduct – and a couple of weeks later Hancock did resign from the cabinet and now sits as an Independent. They're back almost to where they were two years ago, with a paper-thin majority, again defending the bulk of the seats up for election, and now with a cesspool of embarrassing publicity. Oh yes, and, like the Peterborough Conservatives, facing the prospect of new UKIP candidacies on the back of the party's 10 county councillors up the road in Winchester. It can surely only be harder the second time around.

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