

Britain Five things we have learnt from the local election results

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Dave Kellaway looks at the local election results.

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1 - Tories less likely to win the next general election

Johnson's Conservatives lost around 500 seats, more than any other party with a projected national vote share of around 30% which would mean defeat in a general election. Most of the Tory share of the vote was lost in the South, down by 7.1%, this In its so-called 'blue wall' seats. Only about a percentage point was lost in the North and Midlands. Losing a second place in Scotland to a slightly improved Labour performance. The Liberal Democrats were the main beneficiaries of a decline in support in the South of England although Labour did regain ground in places like Southampton.

In the crucial 'red wall' seats in the Midlands and North, the message was mixed. Holding up the good result in 2018 means Labour should be able to regain some seats it lost in 2019 but the Tories held on in enough of its new bases to make those MPs think twice about dumping Johnson yet.

However, does this mean Johnson will have to go soon or sometime before the next election? Given that the previous local elections in 2018 were a high point for Labour, then the results were not catastrophic enough to spark a renewed surge in no-confidence letters submitted by Tory MPs. Miliband and Corbyn both did very well in similar mid-term elections but both lost the subsequent general elections. Turnout was only slightly down in previous local elections. Only about 35% of voters turn out for these contests. This is a reflection of both people's alienation from the political system and the grossly unfair first past the post electoral system. Therefore it is difficult to extrapolate entirely from such results even if they do constitute a huge snapshot of current opinion.

Clearly, Johnson's dishonesty and incompetence were a factor on the doorstep as well as the cost of living crisis. His blatant attempt to expropriate the brave resistance of the Ukrainian people and parade as warmonger-in-chief had less effect on these local elections. Most economists think the cost of living situation will worsen and it is unclear if dog-whistle policies on wokeism, against

migrants or efforts to rekindle an-anti European Brexit coalition, will be enough to turn things around. What happens in Ukraine may give Johnson some sort of boost but the effect has been limited so far.

History has shown that Johnson really is the 'greased piglet'. You think he is ready for the spit then he slips from your grasp. His friends in the Tory press are doing an efficient job slamming Starmer's alleged breaking of Covid rules with 'beergate' to deflect attention from his own rampant partying in Downing street. The general timidity and moderation of the Labour opposition and over-focussing on partygate also lets Johnson off the hook. Labour policy on bringing the energy utilities into public ownership is diluted down to a windfall tax which even some Tories are now urging on the government.

2 - Labour are more likely to win the next election but may need a coalition

At a 35% projected vote share Labour are on course to be the biggest party at the next general election. They could gain a few more percentage points and given the vagaries of first past the post this might even turn into a small majority for them. These elections did not show a wave of enthusiasm for a Labour alternative. Conservative losses also went to the Liberal Democrats and the Greens. Focussing on policing, crime and security did not win masses of new voters. Abstention did not drop in areas where Labour was competing.

Some leadership spokespeople still tried to blame 'long Corbyn' for the modest progress made - we are still struggling to rebuild trust and so on. Most of them had to be reminded by Political Scientist John Curtice, the BBC electoral guru that the 2018 local election highpoint was achieved under Corbyn:

Although at 35% its projected share is six points up on last year, it is no better than what the party achieved in 2018 when Jeremy Corbyn was still leader. The party did no more than maintain its 2018 vote in London, secure a small increase in the South of England, but was down three points in the north of England. Its tally of just over 50 gains (most of them in London) is a reflection of the decline in Conservative support rather than of an electoral advance by Labour since 2018

Early results in London did see some stunning victories in Tory flagship councils such as Wandsworth, Westminster and Barnet. Later on, though we saw Labour lose Harrow, Tower Hamlets and Croydon.

Tower Hamlets was also a consequence of the way John Biggs, the Labour mayor had performed. He failed to support the local Bangladeshi woman MP, Apsana Begum when the local council unsuccessfully prosecuted her for housing benefit fraud. Biggs also used the disgraceful fire and rehire policy against the council workforce.

Ironically Labour often did best where Corbynism was strong - in London and Wales where Mark Drakeford, a friend of Corbyn, is the leader. Success in Worthing is also partly down to the influence of Corbyn activists and a changing demographic in some Southern blue wall areas. The community wealth building flagship councils of Preston and Salford held onto or slightly increased their support too. The long term effects of mostly right-wing Labour councils in the north and midlands - identified by the electorate as not doing much for working people - are still evident in the failure to advance there. The Liberal Democrats took Hull.

These elections also marked a big difference from the 2019 general elections in terms of the mobilisation of activists, particularly younger ones, working door to door to get out the vote. This

was very obvious in London. Of course, as we have seen with the continuing witch-hunt of the left by the Starmer leadership, this does not mean Labour cannot win elections with fewer activists. Johnson is the best Labour canvasser at the moment and it is likely that the Tories will lose the general election as much as Labour wins it. Winning big though may be more difficult with less of an infantry.

3- The Liberal Democrats have recovered

Some projections after the voting had closed forecast a general election tally of 50 seats to the Lib Dems – quadrupling their current group. They were the big casualties of Johnson’s Brexit coalition, particularly in the South West and rural areas. With negative aspects of Brexit becoming clearer by the day it is easier for the Lib Dems to rebuild their traditional bases of support.

The anti-democratic first past the post system means that in many areas of the South and South-West a vote for Labour is not very effective so the Lib Dems become the repository of opposition to the Tories – although the Greens are also becoming competitive in some of these constituencies today.

In some Labour-held areas where the council has been Labour for a long time, the Lib Dems can take on the mantle of an alternative in the eyes of many voters. This is easier to do if the policies of the Labour party are increasingly little different to your own. In fact, on some local issues, the Lib Dems can appear more radical. Hence their progress in places like Sheffield and Hull.

Indeed it looks very likely that Starmer will come to a nod and a wink deal with the Liberal Democrats at the next election to maximise the anti-Tory vote. Basically, Labour will not put any resources into those seats the Lib Dems could win from the Tories and there would be a quid pro quo in winnable Labour seats. It is significant that the Lib Dem deputy leader more or less explicitly ruled out any coalition that would keep the Tories in power after the next election.

It is one thing to acknowledge this arrangement is going to happen but another to openly embrace it as a political strategy. Some ginger groups in Labour such as Compass advocate such a coalition approach as a good thing. This would limit any future Labour government from implementing radical policies. Nevertheless, the left should welcome an agreement on one issue – a proposal on proportional representation. This could be the price of Lib Dem support for a minority or coalition government. Proportional representation would give the radical left a chance to break from its eternal dilemma of being inside or outside the Labour Party.

4 - The Greens are growing and picking up support among ex-Labour supporters

Proportionate to their current number of councillors the Greens were the biggest winners with a gain of 84 councillors taking their national tally well over 500. Their polling over the last few years consistently gives them over 5% nationally and often had them level pegging with the Lib Dems on 7 to 9%. In these elections, they averaged a vote share of around 12%.

Green candidates won in all parts of the country, in Tory or Lib Dem councils in rural areas and small towns as well as in the metropolitan strongholds of Labour. Greens campaign strongly on local environmental issues – which have a greater purchase in local elections – and have benefitted from the continuing mobilisations of Extinction Rebellion which keep green questions on the agenda. So

in Tory dominant areas, their more radical national policies on Trident and Green New Deal are put a bit in the background in favour of the hot local questions. In Labour areas their radical policies attract former Corbyn supporters disillusioned by Starmer's decisive shift to the right.

In Hackney and Islington, Green candidates gained seats and it is difficult to interpret these votes as purely opportunist, reactionary, an anti-Labour reaction. The voters they are attracting are the same who give thumping majorities to Labour candidates throughout London. They want a more radical line on the environment and other issues that Starmer is failing on. In other European countries, they could be part of a Red-Green alliance and coalition. The arguments against a national agreement with the Liberal Democrats do not, in my opinion, hold for an agreement with the Greens. Is Starmer's Labour is anyway more of a challenge to capital than the Green's? Does the trade union affiliation to Labour make such agreements wrong?

Despite the mainstream mass media scandalously keeping the Greens frozen out most of the time, the Greens look likely to continue to grow their support. Just today there was an announcement that water companies discharged sewage into our rivers and seas hundreds of thousands of times each year. No wonder people are turning to the Greens.

5 - Scotland, Wales and the Six Counties are not part of a United Kingdom

Other contributors to our site will hopefully provide a detailed analysis of the situation in these places. Here we will make some summary comments only.

The Scottish Labour Leadership made a huge song and dance about coming....second. Their actual vote share only slightly increased and even then was less than that of the SNP. Before the vote, I saw Anas Sarwar (Leader of the Scottish Labour Party) going on and on about the fact that Scottish voters were much more interested in the cost of living crisis than constitutional matters. This is the same old Unionist line that Labour has been peddling for decades and it has had little effect. For Scottish people to continually reject the Tories, but to have to put up with austerity and Brexit and Johnson is a constitutional matter and it has everything to do with bread and butter issues like the cost of living. You cannot sidestep the independence issue. Otherwise it is difficult to explain how a party in government for more than a decade is still winning elections.

In Wales the Labour Party led by the pro-Corbyn, Drakeford, has taken a much more pro-devolutionary position, demanding more powers are taken from Westminster. This line is paying off with Labour making its best gains here. Yet Starmer holds a strong Unionist line in both Scotland and Wales.

Results in the Six Counties confirmed the pre-election polls that gave Sinn Fein the biggest vote share. A split in the Unionist vote and the increased support for parties like the Alliance have facilitated this advance. Certainly, the question of a poll on a United Ireland is back on the agenda. The Brexit fudge of the Protocol to prevent the erection of a hard border between the north and the south remains a hot question that has no solution that does not produce another problem. Johnson may relish a showdown with the EU over the issue as a way of resuscitating his Brexit coalition but this vote may make that harder.

Finally on the left inside Labour

For socialists inside the Labour Party, these elections reinforce the dilemma they are facing as Ian Parker recently pointed out on our site.

Much effort has been spent trying to maintain or increase the number of left Labour councillors. As Michael Chessum has pointed out in a recent article for Novara Media [1], it is very difficult as a left councillor to avoid having to implement cuts, whatever your best intentions. I have seen people elected who subsequently move to the centre, embracing the lesser evil position. The crucial question is whether you have a real local base – even around one issue – that will support you if you go into conflict with your local council leadership. The rules now are very tight indeed, any deviation from the whip and you are out. You have to be prepared to stand up to any threat of expulsion. Alan Gibbons and a half dozen other Liverpool councillors have done just that. They have formed a new left community group and will be expelled from Labour. From local reports, you can see that they do have grassroots support.

Does that mean we should all leave and nobody on the left should put themselves forward as a councillor? No. The political contest is everything. In Tory majority areas you are in the opposition anyway and you are not managing cuts. Any decision should be the result of a collective decision by a well organised left. You must think through what you will do if this or that happens. A strategy is needed. If Starmer is not going to let you have a different view from his on NATO then he is not going to tolerate councillors straying from the new party line.

Leaving the party completely is another issue altogether. It depends on how many activists still work inside your local party. Having a vote may help keep some left Labour MPs in post. Such MPs do help with campaigns and support workers' struggles. Local campaigns can benefit from the legitimacy of local Labour Party support. There are still thousands of people who consider themselves socialists or even anti-capitalists still inside Labour. Probably more than are organised in the independent left groups. Useful political discussions can still be organised in some constituencies. While we should emphasise campaigning independently from Labour Party structures there are still lots of places where it is useful to still participate inside Labour. As somebody remarked recently, keep your membership card in your back pocket.

Dave Kellaway

P.S.

- Anti*Capitalist Resistance. 09 May 2022
<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/five-things-we-have-learnt-from-the-local-election-results/>
 - Dave Kellaway is on the Editorial Board of Anti*Capitalist Resistance, a member of Socialist Resistance, and Hackney and Stoke Newington Labour Party, a contributor to International Viewpoint and Europe Solidaire Sans Frontieres.
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Footnotes

[1] <https://novaramedia.com/2022/05/04/does-it-even-matter-how-labour-does-in-the-local-election-s/>