

UK local elections: Low turnout and anti-government vote

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Local council elections in England, Scotland and Wales on Thursday were characterised by widespread abstention, as less than a third of those eligible turned out to vote. In the inner cities especially, turnout was much lower, with figures of just 10 and even 8 percent reported in some wards.

Two years into the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition's austerity measures, unemployment is rising along with greater economic hardship for the vast majority. The UK is officially in a double-dip recession. But with only 6 percent of the government's austerity measures having fed through, the situation is set to worsen significantly.

Those who voted did so largely to record a protest against the coalition. The Tories fared poorly in the 4,700 seats up for election in England's 128 councils, losing 329 seats and falling some nine points since these same councils were contested in 2008. The party suffered especially in the south and Midlands, losing control of key councils such as Southampton, Plymouth, Birmingham, Great Yarmouth and Harlow, and even a seat in Prime Minister David Cameron's Witney constituency.

Tory voters appear to have switched to the anti-European Union United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), whose vote increased by an average of 13 percent. Its success was helped by the British National Party losing most of the 12 seats it was defending. As the media speculated that the result would increase pressure on Cameron to call a referendum on Britain's membership of the EU, there were immediate calls from leading anti-EU Tories for the party to move sharply to the right and even ditch the coalition. Former parliamentary secretary Stewart Jackson said that "Cameron is on notice", while MP Gary Streeter complained that the Tory ranks were "gagging" for

traditional right-wing policies.

The Tories had sought some good news in the win for Boris Johnson over Labour's Ken Livingstone in the London mayoral election. Essentially a right-wing, media driven beauty contest, the result on a 37 percent turnout was far narrower than predicted. A power cut and missing ballot boxes delayed the result for hours, with Johnson finally being declared the winner with just some 60,000 votes in it, and the Green Party candidate pushing the Liberal Democrat into fourth place.

As results in the capital's local elections confirmed declining support for the Tories and Liberal Democrats, Johnson's success in the Mayoral contest was largely attributable to public distaste for Livingstone, an inveterate political opportunist, and the Tory mayor's own efforts to distance his campaign from the Conservative's record in government. While Johnson's victory was the one slither of good news for the Conservatives, in the longer term it is seen as consolidating the mayor's position as a potential leadership challenger to Cameron.

The best that had been hoped for by the Liberal Democrats was that they could do no worse than last year, when they lost 41 percent of their seats. Instead they lost 44 percent of their contested seats and returned less than 3,000 councillors—the lowest number since the party was formed in 1988.

The Liberal Democrats lost control of Cambridge, were reduced to single figures in many areas and were wiped out in places such as Plymouth, Knowsley and Manchester. In Manchester, the party had been defending 11 seats and lost them all as the party faced what one councillor described as "meltdown mark two".

Afterwards, Mark Ramsbottom, head of the Liberal

Democrat group on Manchester city council, stated tersely, “I’m still committed to the Liberal Democratic party and I’m certainly not angry with [leader] Nick Clegg or the national party.” Others were not so reticent. With many forecasting that the party would not be able to contest a general election, former Liberal Democrat MP Lembit Opik called on Clegg to resign while Liberal Democrat peer Lord Oakeshott opined, “For me what matters is whether we can fight the next election as a nationwide, powerful independent force. If we have another year like this, we won’t be able to.”

The coalition was further damaged by overwhelming rejection for its plans to introduce directly elected mayors, which are aimed at further weakening the democratic accountability of local authorities. Referendums were held in 10 cities but the plans were thrown out in nine—in Manchester, Coventry, Nottingham, Bradford, Sheffield, Birmingham, Newcastle, Wakefield and Leeds. Only Bristol passed the measure on a turnout of just 24 percent.

Labour was the main beneficiary from the anti-coalition vote, gaining just over 530 seats in England. In Wales, where all 21 unitary authorities were up for ballot, the Liberal Democrat’s collapse and poor results for Plaid Cymru saw Labour make gains in Cardiff, Swansea, Caerphilly and Newport.

The pattern was repeated in Scotland, where 32 unitary authorities were up for election on a system of proportional representation. In Edinburgh, the Liberal Democrat vote fell by 50 percent with Jenny Dawe, Liberal Democrat leader of the city council, losing her seat. Again on a record low-turnout, both Labour and the ruling Scottish National Party saw an increase in their share of the vote across the country. But while the SNP remains the largest party in Scotland, it failed to win control of its major target, Glasgow City Council, from Labour.

Labour leader Ed Miliband claimed the results showed that his party was “regaining ground”. However, the results translate into a national vote increase of just a few percentage points. It is a measure of widespread hostility to the main parties that the verdict of several media commentators on Labour’s result was that Miliband’s leadership might be safe for a little while longer. Last month, opinion polls showed that the three main party leaders were collectively the least popular in the history of polling, with their

negative ratings coming in cumulatively at minus-121 percent.

In his blog, the BBC’s Political Editor Nick Robinson noted, “When offered a chance to vote for someone other than the UK’s big three parties, more and more have chosen to vote Green or UKIP or Respect.”

The Green Party averaged 9 percent of the vote in the 454 wards it contested. In Bradford, George Galloway’s Respect party took five wards from Labour, unseating Labour council leader Ian Greenwood.

Neither of these organisations represents a genuine alternative to Labour. In Brighton, where the Greens are the largest party on the council, it has pushed through a cuts package, which includes axing more than 100 jobs and making reductions in spending on housing, education and other vital services.

As for Galloway, who won a surprise victory in the Bradford West parliamentary constituency last month, he is seeking to use his success in Bradford to make a rapprochement with Labour. Speaking after the result, he claimed that it would force the Bradford Labour Party to be placed in “special measures”, and that Labour will “be forced to become more like us”.

The Socialist Equality Party ran Stephen Woodbridge in Bretton North, Peterborough and Danny Dickinson in St. Helens Town Centre ward, Merseyside. Calling for a political rebellion against the Labour Party and the trade unions and the building of a genuine socialist and internationalist alternative, our candidates polled 2 and 3 percent of the vote respectively.



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