

# 2013 LOCAL ELECTIONS

The battlegrounds of the 2015 general election

**Lewis Baston**



**FABIAN  
SOCIETY**

## ABOUT THE FABIAN SOCIETY

The Fabian Society is Britain's oldest political think tank. Since 1884 the society has played a central role in developing political ideas and public policy on the left. It aims to promote greater equality of power and opportunity; the value of collective public action; a vibrant, tolerant and accountable democracy; citizenship, liberty and human rights; sustainable development; and multilateral international cooperation.

Through a wide range of publications and events the society influences political and public thinking, but also provides a space for broad and open-minded debate, drawing on an unrivalled external network and its own expert research and analysis. Its programme offers a unique breadth, encompassing national conferences and expert seminars; periodicals, books, reports and digital communications; and commissioned and in-house research and comment.

The Society is alone among think tanks in being a democratically-constituted membership organisation, with almost 7,000 members. Over time our membership has included many of the key thinkers on the British left and every Labour Prime Minister. Today we count over 200 parliamentarians in our number. The voluntary society includes 70 local societies, the Fabian Women's Network and the Young Fabians, which is itself the leading organisation on the left for young people to debate and influence political ideas.

The society was one of the original founders of the Labour Party and is constitutionally affiliated to the party. We are however editorially, organisationally and financially independent and work with a wide range of partners from all political persuasions and none.

Fabian Society  
11 Dartmouth Street  
London SW1H 9BN  
[www.fabians.org.uk](http://www.fabians.org.uk)

First published May 2013

Head of Editorial: Ed Wallis  
Report Editor: Sofie Jenkinson

This paper, like all publications of the Fabian Society, represents not the collective views of the Society but only the views of the author. This publication may not be reproduced without express permission of the Fabian Society.

# CONTENTS

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Analysis</b>	<b>6</b>
	The best	6
	The adequate	6
	The disappointing	7
	And the kippered	7
	What about the Lib Dems?	7
	The data	8
<b>7</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>9</b>
	Appendix	10

## **About the author**

Lewis Baston is senior research fellow at Democratic Audit and a commentator on elections for The Guardian, Channel 4 News, Progress, the House Magazine and in several books.

# 1 INTRODUCTION

This short paper, based on data, examines how the marginal constituencies which will decide the next General Election voted in the 2013 local elections.

The 2013 elections took place for the most part in the least Labour-inclined parts of England. They were disproportionately southern and rural, and as well as being areas of traditional Labour weakness they are also – on the evidence of the local elections in 2011 and 2012 – where Labour’s recovery since 2010 has been weakest. The sample of marginal seats available is therefore going to produce a more pessimistic picture for Labour than a set of local elections like 2012 which were mostly in urban areas and represented the northern metropolises, even if no votes had shifted. Even in southern England, the areas where Labour is most powerful and best-organised – Reading, Southampton and Plymouth for instance – usually had a break from local elections this year.

While Labour scored a respectable number of gains of councillors (291) since the 2009 drubbing, and took power in Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire, its share of the vote was a lot lower than in 2012 and some of the county-level and electoral division level results were disappointing. Adding up the votes in the key parliamentary constituencies (see Appendix for the necessary health warnings about this exercise) shows a similarly mixed pattern.

I shall break the Labour performances down into four loose groups: the best, the adequate, the disappointing and the Kippered.

# 2 ANALYSIS

## The best...

There are several very marginal constituencies where Labour opened up a large lead over the Conservatives, indicating that the political and organisational ground work has been put in and is paying dividends. Among these were the number one target from the Conservatives, North Warwickshire, where Labour did well in getting the core vote out in Bedworth as well as polling respectable voting numbers even in some quite Conservative commuter areas of the seat. Carlisle, Ipswich and Cannock Chase also posted double-digit swings since 2010, suggesting strong potential for 2015 Labour gains. Slightly smaller swings were enough to put Labour decisively ahead in other seats – Amber Valley, Lincoln, Hastings & Rye and Erewash. There were also a few seats further down the target list where large swings put Labour ahead in the votes cast in the county elections, such as North West Leicestershire and Gravesham, a tough target that was lost in 2005. Crawley, Redditch and Loughborough also came back to Labour (narrowly, with a high UKIP vote, in Redditch).

Perhaps the best performance of all was in the rather unlikely seat of Basingstoke, where a Conservative margin of 30 percentage points over (third placed) Labour in 2010 was slimmed down to only 4 points. As well as Basingstoke there were useful gains in some other non-target southern towns such as Banbury, St Albans and Salisbury.

## The adequate...

A 5-point swing was about average, and what was indicated by the national equivalent vote share. This would equate to Labour being about three points ahead, on the cusp of being able to win a parliamentary majority if it applied uniformly.

Labour 'won' a number of seats where victory might be expected given such a swing, although sometimes with margins that were uncomfortably tight or a vote share eroded by UKIP or the Greens. Among these seats were Sherwood, Nuneaton and Lancaster & Fleetwood, but swings of this magnitude are not going to be enough to overcome larger Conservative majorities of the sort to be found in Stafford, South Derbyshire or Tamworth, all seats that Labour lost in 2010 and which were still Tory in 2013.

## The disappointing...

There were a number of highly marginal seats which, on the 2013 local elections, would have stayed in the blue column. In many cases it is possible to find reasons and excuses. Several of them (Waveney, Morecambe & Lunesdale and Stroud) were difficult seats where popular Labour incumbents were narrowly defeated in 2010 and Labour's local government candidates have not done as well (in Stroud David Drew polled 5,000 more votes than his local running mates even in 2001). In some, such as Gloucester (and Watford, where the Lib Dems were ahead) Labour habitually does worse in local elections than it does in national elections. Some others, such as Rugby and Bristol North West, saw Labour do poorly in 2013 without obvious explanation.

Looking at some of the seats Labour won in 1997 and 2001, there were some very disappointing outcomes in places such as Hemel Hempstead, Braintree and Witham where Labour did not regain any council seats after being wiped out in 2009, and weak recoveries in places like Kettering and Wellingborough.

## ... And the Kipperd

In 2012 the UKIP vote probably helped Labour score some victories by dividing the right wing vote. But the UKIP vote in 2013 was larger and drew less exclusively from dissident Tories – it absorbed quite a lot of voters this time who were opposition-minded yet chose the populist right rather than the centre-left. In Great Yarmouth UKIP went from helping Labour win the borough council in 2012 to winning the most votes in the seat as a whole, particularly from white working class and lower middle class people who would also have been wooed by Labour. Great Yarmouth was one of about 8 or 9 constituencies where UKIP took the lead in votes in May 2013. Four of them (Aylesbury, Worthing East & Shoreham, North Thanet and Bognor Regis & Littlehampton) but the other four have been contested between Conservative and Labour. Labour came close in Boston & Skegness in 1997, and has recently won South Thanet, Forest of Dean, Camborne & Redruth and of course Great Yarmouth.

The UKIP vote seems to have put a dent in Labour's potential strength, particularly in the east of England and in coastal towns and New Towns, places which are key to building an election winning coalition of support.

## What about the Lib Dems?

For the Liberal Democrats, the county council results were disappointing and they probably lost ground in Somerset and Devon because they have previously been seen as standing up for their interests against remote, centralised power in London.

Labour's score-card against the Lib Dems is respectable: Labour would gain Burnley and Norwich South easily, and Cambridge respectably, but fall slightly short in Bristol West. Among Labour seats with small majorities over Lib Dem, there was a huge swing to Labour in Chesterfield but a comparatively small one in Ashfield.

The Conservatives and Lib Dems, on the basis of the county results, would

have traded a number of constituencies between them without any huge trend. The Tories would have won three of the four Lib Dem seats in Somerset, but – other than Wells – not by margins that should give them much confidence in a gain. The Lib Dems would probably – although the arithmetic is dubious – have lost out in west Cornwall and Lewes as well. UKIP ran them close in Eastleigh, building on their strong by-election vote. But it was roundabouts as well as swings – the Lib Dems were ahead in some seats that were Tory in 2010, such as South East Cornwall, Oxford West & Abingdon, Winchester, St Albans, Watford and Harborough. They were also holding most of their ‘free standing town’ type of seats such as Cheltenham, Colchester and Eastbourne.

## The data

Constituency	County	2010 Maj.	2013	Con	Lab	LD	UKIP	Green	Swing since 2010
Warwickshire North	Warwickshire	0.11%	LAB GAIN	27%	49%	0%	17%	3%	-11%
Sherwood	Nottinghamshire	0.44%	LAB GAIN	31%	39%	3%	24%	0%	-4%
Broxtowe	Nottinghamshire	0.74%	LAB GAIN	27%	28%	20%	17%	4%	-1%
Lancaster & Fleetwood	Lancashire	0.78%	LAB GAIN	29%	39%	2%	11%	18%	-5%
Amber Valley	Derbyshire	1.17%	LAB GAIN	28%	44%	3%	20%	1%	-8%
Waveney	Suffolk	1.50%	CON HOLD	30%	28%	4%	25%	12%	0%
Morecambe & Lunesdale	Lancashire	1.99%	CON HOLD	35%	32%	3%	17%	5%	0%
Carlisle	Cumbria	2.02%	LAB GAIN	26%	44%	4%	18%	3%	-10%
Stroud	Gloucestershire	2.24%	CON HOLD	33%	31%	7%	10%	19%	0%
Lincoln	Lincolnshire	2.31%	LAB GAIN	28%	39%	7%	23%	0%	-7%
Corby	Northamptonshire	3.49%	LAB HOLD	32%	40%	7%	13%	1%	-6%
Hastings & Rye	East Sussex	4.00%	LAB GAIN	29%	39%	5%	23%	4%	-7%
Ipswich	Suffolk	4.43%	LAB GAIN	26%	41%	8%	18%	6%	-10%
Nuneaton	Warwickshire	4.63%	LAB GAIN	36%	37%	0%	7%	16%	-3%
Gloucester	Gloucestershire	4.77%	CON HOLD	33%	28%	17%	18%	3%	0%
Northampton North	Northamptonshire	4.81%	LAB GAIN	26%	27%	19%	23%	4%	-3%
Erewash	Derbyshire	5.25%	LAB GAIN	31%	40%	5%	22%	0%	-7%
Worcester	Hereford & Worcester	6.09%	CON HOLD	33%	33%	5%	14%	12%	-3%
Cannock Chase	Staffordshire	7.01%	LAB GAIN	25%	40%	8%	25%	0%	-11%
Loughborough	Leicestershire	7.09%	LAB GAIN	38%	44%	7%	6%	0%	-7%
Warwick & Leamington	Warwickshire	7.16%	LAB GAIN	29%	29%	17%	6%	12%	-4%
Pendle	Lancashire	7.96%	LAB GAIN	31%	35%	25%	3%	0%	-6%
Stevenage	Hertfordshire	8.01%	LAB GAIN	30%	36%	11%	16%	4%	-7%
Watford	Hertfordshire	8.23%	LD GAIN	20%	23%	36%	12%	6%	-6%
Norwich North	Norfolk	9.16%	LAB GAIN	29%	32%	7%	23%	8%	-6%
High Peak	Derbyshire	9.29%	LAB GAIN	31%	36%	13%	11%	6%	-7%
Great Yarmouth	Norfolk	9.93%	UKIP GAIN	28%	34%	1%	36%	1%	-8%
Dover	Kent	10.47%	CON HOLD	35%	33%	6%	16%	0%	-4%
South Ribble	Lancashire	10.79%	CON HOLD	41%	33%	7%	20%	0%	-1%
Stafford	Staffordshire	10.87%	CON HOLD	40%	37%	0%	19%	3%	-4%
Harlow	Essex	11.22%	LAB GAIN	30%	33%	4%	29%	3%	-7%
Bristol North West	Bristol UA	12.03%	CON HOLD	37%	27%	18%	3%	7%	-1%
Crawley	West Sussex	12.48%	LAB GAIN	35%	38%	3%	21%	2%	-8%
Rugby	Warwickshire	12.64%	CON HOLD	36%	31%	14%	9%	7%	-4%
Burton	Staffordshire	12.65%	LAB GAIN	37%	37%	2%	21%	0%	-6%
Tamworth	Staffordshire	13.13%	CON HOLD	38%	35%	4%	17%	2%	-5%
Redditch	Worcestershire	13.22%	LAB GAIN	28%	31%	4%	30%	5%	-8%
Derbyshire South	Derbyshire	14.14%	CON HOLD	36%	35%	3%	24%	0%	-6%
Leicestershire North West	Leicestershire	14.46%	LAB GAIN	31%	35%	9%	24%	0%	-9%
Dorset South	Dorset	14.79%	CON HOLD	32%	26%	17%	9%	9%	-5%
Staffordshire Moorlands	Staffordshire	15.27%	CON HOLD	33%	26%	7%	25%	0%	-4%
Northampton South	Northamptonshire	15.40%	CON HOLD	33%	29%	18%	10%	5%	-6%
Scarborough & Whitby	North Yorkshire	16.50%	CON HOLD	31%	23%	3%	22%	5%	-4%
Thanet South	Kent	16.58%	UKIP GAIN	26%	27%	4%	35%	5%	-9%
Kettering	Northamptonshire	19.21%	CON HOLD	35%	26%	3%	26%	0%	-5%
Gravesham	Kent	19.69%	LAB GAIN	34%	35%	2%	19%	0%	-11%
Darford	Kent	21.22%	CON HOLD	42%	26%	0%	25%	1%	-3%
Bromsgrove	Worcestershire	21.90%	CON HOLD	34%	28%	3%	11%	5%	-8%
Forest of Dean	Gloucestershire	22.69%	UKIP GAIN	24%	24%	5%	28%	4%	-11%
Wellingborough	Northamptonshire	22.82%	CON HOLD	40%	27%	2%	26%	1%	-5%
Selby & Ainsty	North Yorkshire	23.71%	CON HOLD	43%	30%	0%	9%	2%	-5%



# 3 CONCLUSION

Overall, the success of UKIP in some previously Conservative/ Labour two party towns, particularly on the east side of England in a band from Scarborough down to Dover, complicates the message of the 2013 elections considerably. Some Conservatives see UKIP voters as a pool of right wing, Eurosceptic votes, but only a part of the vote they achieved in the county elections and in opinion polls is of this nature. Many of them, as Labour thinkers such as John Denham have noted, are profoundly dissatisfied with the way the coalition is leading Britain but have not been persuaded by Labour's alternative yet.

Even leaving aside the UKIP factor, the results in 2013 were not as good as they might have been for Labour. In places where a direct comparison with the 2012 local elections is possible the Labour vote often fell slightly more than the Conservative vote, producing a technical swing to the Tories since last year. This was apparent in places such as Harlow and Redditch where there were strong UKIP votes, and also in Hastings and Nuneaton & Bedworth where there were not. The turnout in these county elections, languishing in the low-30s in many of these traditionally high turnout areas, as well as the results, show that these elections were not a vote of confidence in any party.

## Appendix: Method

The basis of the calculation is simply to add up the votes cast for each party in the county electoral divisions that make up a parliamentary constituency. This may sound uncomplicated, but in practice it is not.

One basic complication is that in a number of cases a county electoral division has parts which are in more than one parliamentary constituency (both county divisions and constituencies tend to be made up of district council wards). This means that one has to divide the votes cast between two parliamentary constituencies. One can be a bit more sophisticated than just splitting them 50 per cent each side – it is usually possible to work out from the component district ward electorates in what proportion the county division is split. But this will be imprecise, as turnout varies within electoral divisions, and so do political preferences.

Another complication is that parties do not run complete slates of candidates in county elections, while the major ones will do in general elections. If a party leaves some areas uncontested, its vote across the constituency will be artificially low in the projection – for instance, Great Yarmouth is a weak area for Lib Dems but they are realistically on more than 1 per cent of the vote. The same applies for uneven appearances by the smaller parties.

Sometimes the apparent complexion of a constituency will be distorted by personal votes for council candidates – county electoral divisions can have as many as 22,000 electors so personal and local factors in one area can have a large overall effect. Take Lewes, for example. Lewes town was won overwhelmingly by an Independent in 2013, but in district and general elections Lewes town is one of the better Lib Dem areas of the constituency. Without the Independent, the Lib Dems may well have led rather than come third when the votes for the constituency are added up.

Above all, one should not lose sight of the fact that turnout in local elections is around half of what one can expect in general elections.

## About the Fabian Society Labour's Next Majority programme

Policy, message, organisation. These are the three key components of any election winning campaign.

Since its defeat in the 2010 general election, the Labour movement has tried to come to terms with its failure in these three areas. A number of commentators have looked at each of these in turn and made recommendations on how to win focused on one or the other.

The Fabian Society's 'Labour's Next Majority' project is an attempt to unify all these three areas. Bringing together policy experts, pollsters, campaign professionals and Labour activists the Fabian Society will examine how policy, message and organisation can work together and inform each other to deliver a majority for the Labour party at the next general election.

For more information about the Fabian Society's Next State programme, visit our website: [www.fabians.org.uk/programmes/next-majority](http://www.fabians.org.uk/programmes/next-majority)

