

Local elections

The Liberal Democrat performance in large cities in May 2022, by **Michael Meadowcroft**.

Lib Dems in the cities

PROFESSOR JOHN CURTICE provides an impeccable analysis of the 2022 local elections and indicates where the Liberal Democrats did well ('The Liberal Democrat performance in the 2022 local elections', *Journal of Liberal History* 116, autumn 2022). He sets out the performance in the various regions and in the social make-up of councils, but the one vital statistic that he omits is the party's lamentable performance in the big cities. The significant generic difference between

these councils and the smaller boroughs and districts is the size of the individual electoral wards. Essentially, the larger the electorate the more difficult it is to win by sheer intensive local campaigning and the more significant is the party's core vote. In wards with 10,000 or more electors, Liberal Democrats need an opinion poll level of far more than the 10 per cent that was the average between the advent of Liz Truss as prime minister and her resignation. (The implosion of the Conservative Party

Councils with over 300,000 population					
Council	Population (2021 census)	2022 gains & losses	Total number of councillors	Lib Dem councillors	Av. electorate per ward
Birmingham	1,144,900	+4	101	12	8,250†
Leeds	812,000	-1	99	7	16,500
Sheffield	556,500	0	84	29	11,000
Manchester	552,858	0	96	2	12,000
Bradford	546,400	-1	90	6	12,000
Liverpool	486,100	n/a	90	12	11,500
Bristol*	472,400	n/a	70	8	14,500
Coventry	345,300	0	54	0	12,500
Leicester*	368,300	0	54	1	12,000
Wakefield	353,300	+1	63	3	11,500
Sandwell	341,900	0	72	0	8,000
Wigan	329,300	0	66	0	10,000
Nottingham*	323,700	n/a	55	0	11,000
Wirral	320,300	0	66	6	11,000
Doncaster	308,100	n/a	55	0	12,000
Newcastle	300,200	+1	78	21	7,000
Total		+4	1,193	107	

* Unitary authority (the others are metropolitan boroughs)

† Birmingham has 32 single-member wards and 37 double-member wards; the figure is electors per councillor. Liverpool is going down the same route of largely single-member and thus smaller wards.

n/a: no elections in 2022

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under Truss did not benefit the Liberal Democrats at all.) The table shows the pitiful state of Liberal Democrat representation on large councils and its poor performance at the 2022 elections.

We see that a quarter of the sixteen councils have no Liberal Democrat representation at all; three others have three or fewer councillors; and only four have a group in double figures. Looking at these latter four councils in more detail demonstrates that the position is even worse than these overall figures indicate. One would expect that, being relatively more successful, they would have a powerful city-wide presence; but, in practice, what prospects for expansion do they have? What one finds is depressing. In Birmingham, of the fifty-nine wards without party representation, one double-member ward is split between Labour and Liberal, but only one other can be regarded as marginal. In fact, apart from one further double-member ward, the rest have derisory votes.

Of the seventeen unrepresented Sheffield wards, only two can be regarded as marginal. In Liverpool, from the most recent (2021) figures, only one is marginal, leaving twenty wards with derisory votes, plus one with a respectable by-election result. In Newcastle, two are marginal, with fifteen derisory. What this indicates is the abject lack of a core vote in the country's major cities. As I know from my twenty-year experience in Leeds, without a much higher basic Liberal Democrat vote, the task of establishing a party presence, or of expanding an existing one, requires a huge level of sacrificial, financial and organisational commitment over a number of years. Essentially, unless one can hold seats relatively easily, it is impossible to expand without a much higher core vote. And without a powerful and noticeable municipal presence in these front-line cities, the prospect of developing a sufficient vote in four or more adjoining wards to win a parliamentary seat is remote.

The difference in task between the city with the largest wards and a rural county seat is shown in the experience of my former Leeds

colleague, David Selby. In his final victory in Leeds, in 1987, he polled 3,092 votes to win the Armley ward; in 2017 he gained the Newtown ward for the Powys county council with just 369 votes. He is now a key member of a Liberal-Democrat-led Powys administration.

If we examine the situation in London, we find precisely the same situation. In the thirty-two London boroughs, apart from the three stand-out boroughs – Kingston, Richmond and Sutton – where the Liberal Democrats have eliminated the Labour Party and have maximised the Liberal Democrat vote to gain and retain control, only two have representation in double figures: the adjacent Merton, and Southwark, the latter represented in parliament for twenty-seven years by Simon Hughes. In the whole of London, Liberal Democrats have just 152 councillors out of a total of 1,817 – and no less than 118 of these are in the three councils they control. Taking the same cut-off figure of 300,000 population as in the cities outside London, half of those fourteen London boroughs have zero Liberal Democrat representation and only Southwark has a group in double figures. The semi-proportional electoral system used for the Greater London Authority has enabled a party presence of two to survive, and Caroline Pidgeon has done a remarkable job of maintaining a Liberal Democrat presence, but a party cannot claim to be national, nor to be a serious political presence, with such minimal representation in its capital city, nor similarly in almost all of the country's major cities. Above all, it is the derisory votes in the vast majority of these electoral wards, along with its scores of lost deposits at parliamentary elections, that are an embarrassment.

It is significant that, in the recent party HQ mailing naming the top seven membership recruiters, none were in the big cities highlighted in this article and only one is Labour held. Unless the Liberal Democrats understand and accept its absence in these urban areas and apply themselves to establishing a clearly identifiable philosophical

position that attracts many 'movers and shakers', it has no chance of being able to challenge for any semblance of national political influence. In particular, it cannot pose

a significant challenge to the Labour Party in its strongholds. It is rigorous thinking, plus the 'vision thing' and its application, that is needed, not Dr Pangloss.

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Introduction to Liberal history

In the first of a new series of short introductory articles, **Duncan Brack** reviews the New Liberalism, an important development in Liberal politics and philosophy.

The New Liberalism

THE NEW LIBERALS of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century made the case against laissez-faire classical liberalism and in favour of state intervention directed against impediments to freedom such as poverty, ignorance or disease. They saw individual liberty as something to be achievable only under favourable social and economic circumstances. The New Liberal programme came to underpin most of the legislative achievements of the 1906–14 Liberal governments and marked the party's transformation to social liberalism.

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The New Liberalism emerged at the end of the nineteenth century (the term was first used by the Liberal MP L.

A. Atherley-Jones in 1889), largely as a reaction to the Liberal Party's failure, under W. E. Gladstone, to formulate an adequate response to the new social problems of industrialisation. Although radical pressure for 'constructionist' legislation – for example the free elementary education, graduated taxation and land reform of Joseph Chamberlain's 'Unauthorised Programme' of 1885 – had been growing for some time, Gladstone used great moral questions, such as home rule for Ireland, to steer the party away from the state-sponsored social reforms to which he remained firmly opposed.

The departure of most of the remaining Whigs, with Chamberlain, in 1886, after the split over home rule, Gladstone's retirement in 1894, and the disastrous elections of 1895

and 1900 opened the way to new thinking. Although living standards in general had risen throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, society was increasingly marred by the spread of slums, poverty, ignorance and disease, and the ending of the long mid-Victorian economic boom had removed the belief that economic growth would automatically solve such social problems. Just as the emergence of classical liberalism in the early and mid-nineteenth century was closely linked to the emergence of industrial capitalism, so the development of the New Liberalism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries derived from this further evolution of economy and society.

The Oxford academic T. H. Green was the first of the Liberal thinkers fully to take this growing social inequality into