

Local elections

The Liberal Democrats' performance in the 2023 local elections looked impressive, but how strong was it really? **John Curtice** analyses what happened.

The Liberal Democrat Performance in the 2023 Local Elections: Breakthrough or Consolidation?

THIS MAY'S ENGLISH local elections were a key test for all the political parties.

Most of the country outside London was being balloted. This included the vast majority of those district councils that only hold elections every four years, among which are many of the so-called 'Blue Wall' constituencies where it is the Liberal Democrats rather than Labour who are the principal challengers to the Conservatives. These seats are expected to provide most of the party's best chances of increasing its parliamentary representation at the next general election. So being seen to do well in these local elections was therefore of particular importance for the Liberal Democrats.

And there was plenty for the party to cheer about in the results. It made a net gain of just over 400 seats, which represented a 33 per cent increase in its representation. The party gained overall control of 12 councils, which constituted no less than a 70 per cent increase in the number of councils in the party's hands. All these gains of control were in councils where elections are only held every four years and where, as a result, all the seats were up for grabs, thereby making a change of control more likely. All are located south of Birmingham and they include many a place that was once

represented by a Liberal Democrat MP, including Guildford, Newbury and Newton Abbott. In short, the headlines undoubtedly gave the impression of a party that had made further progress on the long road back to electoral viability following the severe rebuke it received from the electorate in the wake of its involvement in the coalition government of 2010–15.

However, Liberal Democrats do not need reminding that the outcome of a first-past-the-post election in terms of seats is not necessarily an accurate reflection of votes secured in the ballot box. This is particularly true of a round of local elections in which many wards were electing more than one councillor (thereby making the result potentially even more disproportional) and where the size of wards in terms of registered voters is typically much smaller in the more rural district councils than it is in the larger cities. In this article, therefore, we focus on how well the party performed in terms of votes rather than its haul in terms of seats.

Not this is entirely straightforward either. In 44 councils new ward boundaries were implemented this year, making ward by ward analysis of the ups and downs in party support since previous local elections difficult if not impossible. Not all wards are fought by all the main parties – Labour, for example, are often



absent from the ballot in many of the smaller more rural district councils in which the Liberal Democrats had a particular interest – and thus not all wards provide an indication of how well the parties are doing when faced with the kind of competition they will face in a general election. Meanwhile, although in most places it was possible to compare the results with the outcome of the local elections four years previously in May 2019, which is when 90 per cent of the seats at stake were last contested, those elections took place in unusual political circumstances. Mrs May was trying – and ultimately failing – to persuade MPs to approve the Brexit deal she had negotiated. Voters had defected from the Conservatives in droves, while Labour, also divided on Brexit, were at a relatively low standing in vote intention polls too. How well the parties performed as compared with then does not therefore give us a clear picture of the advances and setbacks in party support during this parliament.

The data we analyse here come from detailed ward by ward results collected by the BBC in just under 800 wards in 45 local authorities. The sample was designed to take account of these various constraints. The local authorities were all ones where elections take

place every year (other than the one year in four when county council elections are scheduled) and where, consequently, it was possible to compare the results with more years than just 2019. Indeed, in many instances, it was not only possible to compare the votes cast this year with the outcome in last year's local elections (before the downfall of both Boris Johnson and Liz Truss) and with those in 2021 (well before 'partygate' began to trouble Boris Johnson), but also with local elections stretching back as far as 2015 (when they took place on the same day as the general election). Meanwhile, the local authorities covered were ones where typically the wards are contested by all three main parties, and indeed our analysis here is confined to those wards that satisfied that condition both this year and in whatever previous year with which comparison is being made. All in all, just over 670 of the BBC's wards were contested by all three main parties in 2019 and 2023, while just over 640 satisfied that condition in 2022 and 2023. Between them these features of the sample mean it consists disproportionately of relatively large urban authorities, though it still contains a number of councils in which the Liberal Democrats have significant strength.

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Key questions

Our analysis focuses in particular on two related issues. The Liberal Democrats' principal ambition at the next election appears to be to try and grow their parliamentary bridgehead by focusing their efforts on Conservative-held seats where the party came second in 2019. Indeed, this objective seems to matter more to the party than any attempt to increase its support more broadly. It is a strategy that, of course, anticipates that the Conservatives will continue to be deeply unpopular through to the next election and it is certainly one that has borne fruit in parliamentary by-elections since 2019. However, the outcome of one-off

The impression of the Liberal Democrat performance is one of consolidation rather than substantial progress.

parliamentary by-elections in which the Liberal Democrats can concentrate their limited campaign resources are not necessarily so easy to replicate in a nationwide contest. These local elections enable us to assess the potential prospects for such a strategy when the party is fighting on a broader canvass. Meanwhile, in line with this strategy and despite backing from the party conference for rejoining the EU, the party leadership at least has downplayed the issue of Brexit in the hope that this will ensure the issue does not prove an impediment to the party's ability to secure the support of disillusioned Conservatives who voted Leave in 2016. The local elections enable us to assess whether the party has been particularly successful or not in gaining ground in Leave-voting areas?

Overall performance

Table 1 shows the mean change in party support in the BBC's sample since each of 2019 (that is, the local elections in May, not the parliamentary election in December), 2021, and 2022. Despite having performed poorly four years ago, the Conservatives' vote was on average down by just over a point since 2019.

Meanwhile, the sharp reversal in the party's fortunes in the second half of the current parliament are underlined by its heavy loss of support since 2021, some of which only occurred in the last twelve months. In short, any party that was attempting to challenge the Conservatives in these elections, as both Labour and the Liberal Democrats were hoping to do, was likely to make notable gains of seats even if they themselves were not necessarily making much progress.

Indeed, we might note that questions could be raised about just how well either of the opposition parties performed. While Labour clearly performed more strongly than in 2019 and 2021. when it was in a relatively weak position in the polls, the party on average only recorded a

marginal advance on its performance in May 2022, even though since then the party's position in the national polls had strengthened considerably. This performance did little to assuage the doubts that Labour's poll lead was more a reflection of disenchantment with the Conservatives than enthusiasm for Labour itself. At the same time, the progress made by the Liberal Democrats looks rather less impressive than those figures of seats and councils gained we quoted earlier. Overall, the party was doing little more than treading water as compared with May 2019, while it also made only a marginal advance on last year. These figures give the impression of a party that was consolidating its position rather than one of a party that was making significant progress.

This impression is underlined by the estimates that, using the detailed voting data it collected, the BBC made of the 'projected national vote share'. This is an estimate of how well the parties would have done if local elections had taken place throughout Great Britain and if all three of the main Britain-wide parties had contested every ward. It is not an attempt at estimating what would have happened if a general election had taken place on local election day, but rather at providing a summary

Table 1 Change in party support since local elections of 2019, 2021 and 2022

	Mean change in % share of the vote			
	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat	Greens
2019	-1.1	+6.0	+0.0	-0.2
2021	-10.3	+4.9	+3.9	+1.3
2022	-3.6	+0.4	+0.9	+1.3

Analysis based on wards contested by Conservative, Labour, and Liberal Democrats in both years. Figures for Greens based on the subset of those wards that they contested both times. Source: BBC sample of local election results.

measure of the parties’ performances that is comparable across local elections even though the places in which such elections are held vary from year to year.

Indeed, that voters do not necessarily vote in local elections in the same way they would in a general election is clear from Table 2, which shows the projected national share for each set of English local elections since the 2010 general election. In particular, voters are more inclined to vote for the Liberal Democrats in local elections than they are in a general election – even in 2015 when the local elections took place on the same day as a general election, the party’s projected national share was three points above what it obtained in the parliamentary ballot. We thus should use the measure to assess how well the parties did in 2023 in comparison with other local elections, and not with past parliamentary contests.

Again, the impression of the Liberal Democrat performance is one of consolidation rather than substantial progress. True, at 20 per cent, the party’s projected national share was the highest it has been at any round of local elections since the party went into coalition with the Conservatives after the 2010 general election. But this represented no more than incremental progress on what the party had already achieved in both 2019 and 2021. Moreover, that 20 per cent figure is still well below what the party routinely scored in all local elections held between the 1992 and 2010 general elections; during that period the party’s tally was never less than 24 per cent and was sometimes up to five points above that. While the 2023 elections confirmed that the

Liberal Democrats have partly repaired the severe damage done to their local election base by their involvement in the Conservative-led coalition, the party is still suffering some of the fallout from those years.

Why did the Conservatives lose so many seats?

How then were the Liberal Democrats able to gain over 400 seats? Indeed, why also did the Conservatives suffer a net loss of over a thousand seats, given their vote was only

Table 2 Projected national vote share for Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats, English local elections, 2011–23

	Con	Lab	LD
	%	%	%
2011	35	36	16
2012	31	38	16
2013	25	29	14
2014	29	31	13
2015	35	29	11
2016	30	31	15
2017	37	28	18
2018	35	35	16
2019	28	28	19
2021	36	29	17
2022	30	35	19
2023	26	35	20

The elections that were due to be held in 2020 were postponed until 2021 on account of the COVID-19 pandemic. Source: BBC.

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Table 3 Mean change in party support since 2019 and 2022 broken down by defending party				
	Mean change in % share of the vote since 2019			
	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat	Greens
<i>Ward won in 2019 by:</i>				
Conservatives	-6.0	+8.0	-0.2	+0.4
Labour	+0.4	+6.0	-0.2	+0.1
Liberal Democrats	+0.2	+3.7	+0.5	-0.8
	Mean change in % share of the vote since 2022			
	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat	Greens
<i>Ward won in 2019 by:</i>				
Conservatives	-4.5	+1.7	+0.2	+1.3
Labour	-3.3	+0.2	+0.9	+1.6
Liberal Democrats	-2.9	-0.4	+1.8	+0.7

Analysis based on wards contested by Conservative, Labour, and Liberal Democrats in both years. Figures for Greens based on the subset of those wards that they contested both times. Source: BBC sample of local election results.

marginally down on 2019? Prior to the elections the Conservatives had pointed to an academic projection that the party might suffer losses on that scale. They did so in the apparent hope and expectation that, in the event, the outcome would not prove quite so bad and thus could be portrayed as evidence of the party having turned a corner.

The answer lies in two key features of the variation in party performance. First, as compared with 2019 the Conservatives lost ground heavily in wards they were trying to defend, while they largely maintained their existing share of the vote elsewhere. As the first half of Table 3 shows, the party's share of the vote fell on average by six points in wards the party won in 2019; elsewhere it actually edged up slightly. This pattern of heavy Conservative losses in the party's heartlands was in fact also evident in last year's local elections – but as the bottom half of Table 3 shows, it had been exacerbated over the last twelve months. In any event, although the Liberal Democrats were only treading water, the Conservative decline in seats they were defending meant that was still sufficient for the party to make gains at the Conservatives' expense.

Second, there was notable anti-Conservative tactical voting, though some of the evidence is not immediately apparent. In the top half of Table 4 we look further at the change in support for each of the parties since 2019 in wards being defended by the Conservatives. The table shows separately what happened in wards where Labour had been second four years ago, and thus might be regarded as best placed locally to challenge the Conservatives, and those where the Liberal Democrats had been second in 2019. The decline in Conservative support was much the same irrespective of who was previously second. However, at 9.3 points, Labour's progress in seats where it began in second place was three and a half points greater than in wards where the party had been behind the Liberal Democrats. That of course is precisely what we would anticipate if voters were more inclined to back Labour where they seemed to have the best chance of defeating the Conservatives locally. However, there is no sign here of the Liberal Democrats performing better in wards where they were previously second. Rather the party seems to have performed somewhat worse in those circumstances, not least it seems because of some strong performances by the Greens.

However, the second half of Table 4 paints a rather different picture. Here we analyse the change in party support since 2022 in wards that were won by the Conservatives on that occasion, again distinguishing between those wards where Labour had been second (again in 2022) and those where the Liberal Democrats were in that position. Once more the fall in Conservative support was much the same in both cases. Meanwhile, we can now see that not only did Labour advance on its support last year in wards where it had been second last year, while failing to do so elsewhere, but also that the Liberal Democrats advanced on average by more than five points where they had been second while at the same time falling back slightly elsewhere. In those local authorities where local elections had taken place more recently than 2019 at least, voters' decisions about casting an anti-Conservative tactical vote seem to have taken account of the evidence of more recent local elections.

Indeed, we can see this directly if we divide those wards where the Liberal Democrats had been second to the Conservatives in 2019 into two groups – those where the party was also second (or first) in 2022 and those where more

recently Labour had been the better placed of the main opposition parties. In the former group, support for the Liberal Democrats was up on average on 2019 by 5.9 points, whereas in the latter support for the party was down on average by as much as 12 points. In contrast, Labour's share of the vote increased by as much as 15.4 points in wards where it had become the main challenger to the Conservatives, but by only 1.1 points where the party still trailed the Liberal Democrats.

Against this backdrop it comes as little surprise that the scale of the Conservatives' losses proved to be so heavily. A party that loses ground most heavily in seats it is defending is bound to suffer much heavier losses than would otherwise be the case – indeed this is arithmetically almost bound to be what happens when a party's overall performance is as weak as that of the Conservatives. Meanwhile, a significant body of voters appear to have been motivated to vote for whichever candidate was best placed locally to defeat the Conservatives. It is a pattern that is redolent of the Conservatives' performance in local elections in the run up to the 1997 general election – and subsequently at that election

Table 4 Mean change in party support since 2019 and 2022, in wards held by Conservatives, by second-placed party

<i>Wards held by Conservatives in 2019</i>				
	<i>Mean change in % share of the vote since 2019</i>			
	<i>Conservative</i>	<i>Labour</i>	<i>Liberal Democrat</i>	<i>Greens</i>
<i>Second-placed party in 2019:</i>				
Labour	-6.1	+9.3	-0.7	-1.0
Liberal Democrats	-6.3	+5.8	-2.3	+4.2
<i>Wards held by Conservatives in 2022</i>				
	<i>Mean change in % share of the vote since 2022</i>			
	<i>Conservative</i>	<i>Labour</i>	<i>Liberal Democrat</i>	<i>Greens</i>
<i>Second-placed party in 2022:</i>				
Labour	-6.2	+3.6	-0.6	+0.6
Liberal Democrats	-6.3	-0.9	+5.4	-0.1

Analysis based on wards contested by Conservative, Labour, and Liberal Democrats in both years. Figures for Greens based on the subset of those wards that they contested both times. Source: BBC sample of local election results.

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Table 5 Change in party support since 2015, 2019 and 2021 by EU referendum vote 2016

	<i>Mean change in % share of the vote</i>		
	<i>Conservative</i>	<i>Labour</i>	<i>Liberal Democrat</i>
<i>Since 2019</i>			
2016 Leave <53%	-0.0	+4.3	+0.2
2016 Leave 53%+	-2.6	+7.4	-0.1
<i>Since 2021</i>			
2016 Leave <53%	-7.9	+2.8	+4.1
2016 Leave 53%+	-11.9	+6.3	+3.7
<i>Since 2015</i>			
2016 Leave <53%	-13.3	+7.4	+10.2
2016 Leave 53%+	-4.4	+7.0	+6.5

Analysis based on wards contested by Conservative, Labour, and Liberal Democrats in both years. % Leave is an estimate of the outcome of the 2016 referendum in a ward compiled by Jon Mellon on the basis of data originally created by Chris Hanretty. Source: BBC sample of local election results.

too, when the party won just 165 seats and found itself in a far worse position than Labour after its defeat under Jeremy Corbyn in 2019.

All this would appear to augur well for the Liberal Democrats' hopes of profiting from Conservative misfortune at the next election. At the same time, however, there is an implied warning to the party that its ability to secure anti-Conservative tactical votes from those who might otherwise back Labour may be limited to fewer constituencies than it might hope. If at the next election the polls are painting much the same impression as they are at present, with Labour therefore in a much stronger position than in 2019 – and the Liberal Democrats not – then in Conservative/Liberal Democrat battleground seats where Labour were not far behind in third place in 2019 voters might conclude that perhaps Labour, not the Liberal Democrats, now appear the better anti-Conservative bet.

Party performance and Brexit

But what of the other strand of the party's current electoral strategy, its decision not to place much emphasis on the issue of Brexit. Is

there any evidence that this is making it easier for the party to gain votes in places that voted more heavily for Leave in 2016? Table 5 compares the mean change in party support in wards where less than 53 per cent are estimated to have voted Leave with that in wards where 53 per cent or more voted that way. The comparison is undertaken for three previous baselines, 2019, 2021 and 2015.

The Conservatives have evidently had particular difficulty in retaining the particularly strong support they secured in Leave voting areas under Boris Johnson. This is particularly the case as compared with 2021 – when Boris Johnson was still Prime Minister and much of the electoral coalition that voted for the party in the 2019 general election was still backing the Conservatives in the polls. At 11.9 points the average fall in Conservative support since 2021 is four points higher in wards that voted relatively strongly for Leave than in those that backed Brexit less enthusiastically if at all. Yet while Labour, who have also opted to be relatively quiet about Brexit, have advanced more strongly in wards with more pro-Leave voters, there is no sign of the Liberal Democrats having done so. Whether the comparison is made with May 2019 or with May 2021, the party's

performance looks much the same in the two kinds of ward. Moreover, this picture is not changed if we confine our attention to Conservative-held wards. Indeed, as compared with 2021, the increase in Liberal Democrat support in Conservative-held wards that voted more strongly for Leave (+1.5 points) is somewhat less than the progress the party achieved in wards where support for Leave was lower (+4.0), a difference that is not accounted for by whether the party was previously second locally or not.

Indeed, the table also shows that, if we compare what happened in 2023 with the pattern of party support at the 2015 local elections, the Liberal Democrats' long-term progress since its electoral position reached its nadir has been somewhat greater in wards that were less keen on Brexit (+10.2 points) than it has been in those where support for Leave was lower (+6.5). In short, there is little sign that the party has had much success in reversing the impact

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of the Brexit debate on the electoral geography of its support in local government elections. Again, this stands in sharp contrast to Labour, whose relative success in wards that were more strongly inclined towards Leave means that it has largely reversed the relative loss of support it suffered in such places during the Brexit debate. This is evidenced by the fact that as compared with 2015, Labour's vote was on average up almost as much in more pro-Leave wards (+7.0 points) as it was in those that voted less strongly for Brexit (+7.4).

Conclusion

There was plenty of good news for the Liberal Democrats in the results of the 2023 local elections. The Conservatives' electoral difficulties, especially in areas of past strength, coupled

with an apparent willingness by some voters to vote tactically against the Conservatives between them suggest that the party's hopes of making gains in Conservative-held seats where it is the principal challenger locally are not unrealistic. That said, there was little evidence of the party itself registering any significant increase in overall support, and coupled with the increased popularity that Labour is currently enjoying in the polls, this could reduce at the next general election the number of seats where voters decide that the Liberal Democrats are the main challenger to the Conservatives. There are potentially limits to the success of a geographically focused campaign that is not accompanied by a broader increase in the popularity of the party.

Meanwhile, although Labour do appear to have had some success in recovering the ground it lost in areas that voted more heavily for Leave in 2016, there is little sign in these results that the tactic of saying little about

Brexit is enabling the Liberal Democrats to achieve a similar relative success in more Leave-inclined areas. Rather, the geography of the party's sup-

port is much the same now as it was four years ago when, for the time being at least, it was the only party seeking to revisit the Brexit decision. That said, the party is still able to profit from Conservative misfortune wherever it has local strength, irrespective of whether an area is pro- or anti-Brexit. And maybe for the time being at least, that might be thought good enough?

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