

# In tomorrow's 2014 local elections UKIP are likely to poll a lot of votes but win few seats

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*The local elections take place this tomorrow, and the seats up for grabs are largely those that were last contested in 2010, at the same time as the general election. The intriguing question this time, as with the European elections, is how far the UKIP tide will reach. **Lewis Baston** thinks that the most likely result is that UKIP will poll a decent vote share but win very few seats.*



The local elections this year will largely be about the politics of London and urban England. All the seats in the 32 London boroughs, a third of the seats in the metropolitan boroughs and a scattering of unitary and district councils are up for election, as are all the seats in the new local authorities in Northern Ireland. The seats being contested in the local elections this week were last fought in 2010, on the same day as the General Election. They are therefore the last tranche of LibDems elected prior to the formation of the coalition with the Conservatives, and anything less than complete slaughter in many of the liberal urban areas (e.g. Islington, Haringey, Manchester) would be something of a relief for Clegg's party (if only short-lived, as the real horror for them will probably start on Sunday night with the counting of the European Parliament election).

Labour's performance in the 2010 local elections was, curiously, not too bad (the same sort of thing happened in 1979). Labour regained 10 London boroughs and made a net gain of nearly 400 councillors since its poor results in 2006. Controlling 17 of the 32 London boroughs is a similar result to previous reasonably good years like 1986, 1994 and 1998. Labour has limited room for expansion in 2014 in terms of gaining control of new councils – there are only a few boroughs on the target list, including regaining Harrow and winning control in Redbridge, Merton, Croydon, Hammersmith & Fulham and possibly Barnet and the Tower Hamlets mayoralty. Each of these, except possibly Redbridge, has its own local stumbling blocks for Labour – demographic change in Hammersmith & Fulham and a narrow set of target wards in Merton and Croydon that allows little room for error. In the metropolitan boroughs, Labour runs 29 out of 36 – close to its all-time peak of 32, which may be equalled this year if the party is fortunate.

One of the points of interest in the London borough elections will be how this year's results contrast with past voting patterns, highlighting the demographic shifts in the capital over the long term. If Labour gain Redbridge, as seems likely, it would be the first time ever that the party has controlled the borough. But councils that have been Labour in past high tides are likely to resist this time – Wandsworth in inner London where Conservative councils have transformed the borough's demographics since 1978, and the outer boroughs of Hillingdon and Bexley seem likely to maintain comfortable Tory majorities. In Havering, the Conservatives are probably more vulnerable to UKIP and Resident political groups than to Labour. The Conservatives and Lib Dems are the main parties contesting a handful of borough councils: Kingston and Sutton are held by the Lib Dems but Kingston in particular is very vulnerable to the Conservatives. All the wards in Richmond, which has alternated between Lib Dem (1998, 2006) and Conservative (2002, 2010) in the last four elections, are marginal and it has a high turnout and a politically engaged electorate. While a Conservative hold should be expected, nothing is guaranteed.

The 2010 elections were bad news for Greens, Independents and smaller parties, who had achieved a significant presence after the 2006 election, particularly in Lewisham, Tower Hamlets and Hounslow. With a lower turnout and wider public disaffection with politics as usual, there are certainly opportunities in 2014 for a revival of Greens and 'others' on London borough councils and in the metropolitan authorities (where Greens have made steady gains in 2011 and 2012, particularly in Solihull).



The intriguing question this time is how far the UKIP tide will reach. In the 2013 county elections the author, and many others, expected Nigel Farage's party to poll a substantial share of the vote but to win relatively few seats. In the event, their vote share was higher and their number of seats (139 net gains) a lot higher than expected. For a party that is appearing from nearly nowhere in local elections, there are four important variables to consider in how it translates votes to seats:

1. The number of candidates standing. It's impossible to gain votes, let alone seats, if candidates are not in place.
2. The overall vote share of the party.
3. The distribution of the party's vote
4. The distribution of other parties' votes.

UKIP is fighting 2,118 seats out of 4,242 up for election, a whisker below 50 per cent coverage. In the equivalent elections in 2010 it fielded only 609 (14.4 per cent), so the party is much better placed to translate support into votes than four years ago. Its support, to judge by every opinion poll, is also riding much higher, so the first two variables look favourable for UKIP.

However, even in their better areas, UKIP have struggled with the distribution of votes and seats. It is no accident that the Green Party has an MP despite polling many fewer votes in 2010 than UKIP did; the Greens have learned the art of targeted campaigning. UKIP has often gone for a broad scattergun approach. In Dudley, one of UKIP's more established areas, the party polled nearly 15 per cent of the vote in the borough but won no seats; winning more or less 15 per cent everywhere will not help gain any seats in a First Past the Post election (although it helps a lot in a PR election like the European Parliament). The Greens, in Dudley as nationally, won a seat with a much lower vote share (below 7 per cent) thanks to better targeting. Winning 40 per cent in a few wards and 10 per cent in all the rest is much more likely to result in election victories than an evenly-spread 15 per cent. UKIP targeting was still pretty poor in 2013, but their good national share enabled it to get just past the tipping point at which the normal variations in support for the various parties resulted in UKIP winning seats.

Distribution of the other parties' votes is also important. In an essentially two-party contest, a 35 per cent vote share can leave a candidate well behind the winner, but if there are four or five parties competing the same vote share can be enough for a comfortable victory. In Christchurch, Dorset, UKIP polled an impressive 34.6 per cent in the 2013 elections, but won no seats because the Conservatives are so strong in the area and there is little other political competition. In Basildon, however, they won three seats out of nine on a slightly lower vote share (32.1 per cent) because no other party was dominating (the Conservatives won 31.1 per cent and Labour 22.8 per cent).

The 2014 elections are a different sort of challenge for UKIP from the 2013 elections, which took place predominantly in Conservative rural and suburban England. UKIP can certainly poll reasonably well in some Labour areas. Their share of the vote in by-elections in Labour seats in the metropolitan boroughs since May 2013 has been consistently around 20-30 per cent, except in the core cities (Birmingham, Liverpool, Manchester) where they do worse. However, it remains questionable whether this will be enough to win many seats even in the better prospects like Wigan or Barnsley, because Labour is so dominant in local politics. In one of the few hard core Labour areas to vote in 2013, Bolsover, UKIP polled very respectably (25.2 per cent) but were still miles behind Labour and the closest squeak for Labour was a 27-point victory with UKIP second. Unless UKIP has got a lot better at targeting, or its vote is a lot higher than in 2013, the party probably will not do more than chip off the occasional exceptional ward (as with the by-election it won in Rawmarsh, Rotherham in 2013) from the Labour monoliths. Nor are the areas with strong party competition in 2014 looking that good for UKIP to come through the middle; London seems one of its weakest areas and the suburban metropolitan authorities have mostly also been weak territory. There will be some cases, however, like Great Yarmouth, Ipswich and Harlow where interesting things might happen. UKIP are unlikely to be much of a force in the inner London boroughs, but they have potential strength on the edges of London in areas like Bexley, Havering, Bromley and Hillingdon and could, if they do well enough, repeat the 2013 phenomenon of costing the Tories control over an otherwise 'safe' council (Lincolnshire in that case, most likely Havering or Hillingdon this time).

However, across the broad sweep of London and urban, Labour England, the most likely result is that UKIP will poll a decent vote share but win very few seats. But then again, I said the same about the Tory shires last year. We shall know by the end of the week if I am right this time.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting. Image credit: [pjohnkeane](#)*

## **About the Author**

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