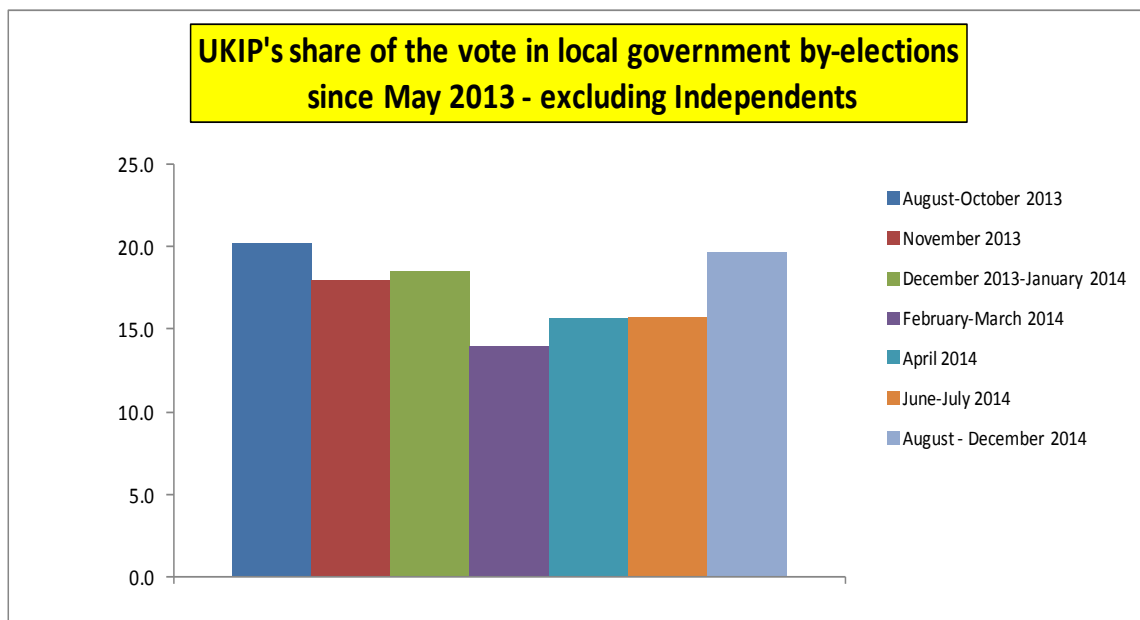


Do local elections confirm UKIP's poll share?

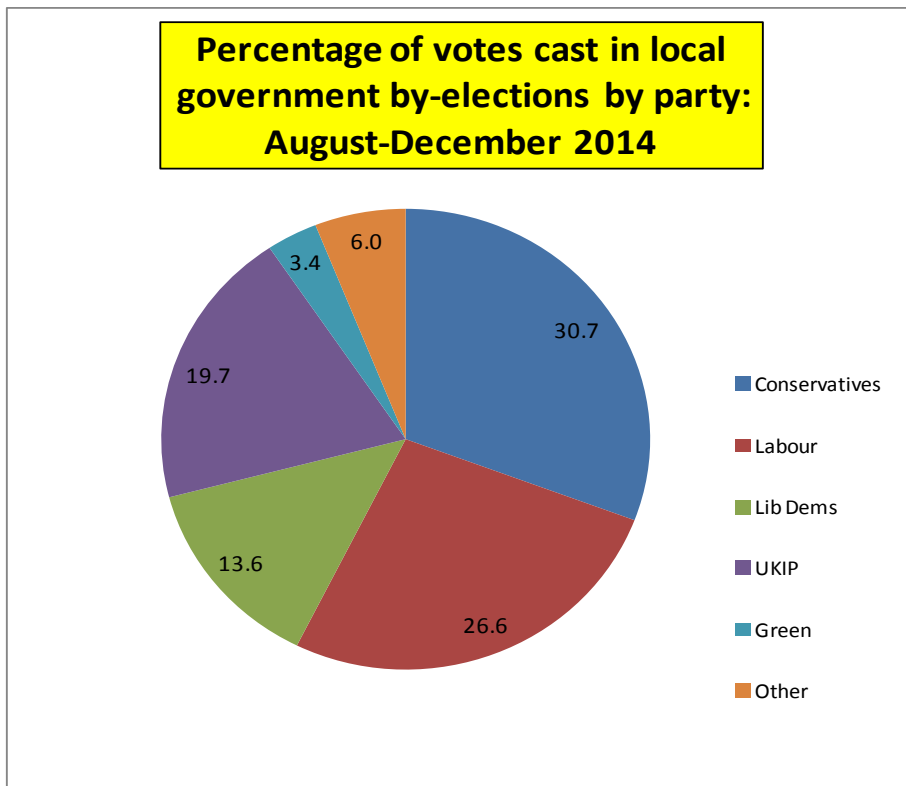
UKIP vote holding up just below 20%

Autumn 2014 saw two Conservative MPs – Douglas Carswell and Mark Reckless – defect to the UK Independence Party and win the resulting by-elections, giving the party two elected parliamentarians for the first time in its history. This provided the party with considerable publicity during a lull period only a few months ahead of a general election. The analysis here suggests that the wins by Carswell and Reckless had a spin-off in local government by-elections.



A previous analysis of local election results last September noted a possible change of pattern in the party's performance. A recurrent feature in UKIP's early years was that support would surge in the run-up to European elections and in their immediate aftermath, and then tail off. As the graph above shows, the tendency for UKIP's vote share to droop a few months after a European election is not being repeated on this occasion. According to local election results, the remarkable message of the second half of 2014 was that UKIP's vote share was growing, not falling, as the months went by. In the June and July local elections, the party won 14.2% of the vote, or 15.7% when independents are excluded. In August and September, this rose to 17.5% (or 18% excluding independents). The party's performance has continued to improve since then, with the data from August through to December indicating a support level of 18.5% (or 19.7% excluding independents). On this basis, support for the party is approaching the peak levels recorded in August- October 2013, in the wake of the astonishing 2013 local government elections.

A total of 99 district or county council by-elections took place during this period. UKIP contested 78 of these. The party has won seven further seats in addition to its victories in Worthing and Folkestone, which were covered in September’s note. Two were in North Kent, an historic stronghold of UKIP support and another was in Thurrock (Essex), a target seat for the party in the general election. Likewise, victory in Stamford North gave the party its twelfth councillor on Lincolnshire County Council. In another ward, West Heath (Farnborough, Hampshire) on Rushmoor Council, UKIP held on to a seat it had won earlier. The other two seats, Bridlington Central and Old Town (East Riding County Council) and Westoe (South Tyneside District Council) were the first UKIP victories in these areas. Of the remaining seats contested, the UKIP candidate was the runner-up on 31 occasions. The party managed to gain more than 20% of the vote in 50 out of the 78 by-elections it contested. In fact, if the seats where no UKIP candidate are excluded, the party’s share of the vote between August and December averages at 23.5% or 24.6% excluding independents.



UKIP appears to be gaining, not losing, momentum. Admittedly, the party’s performance across the country is uneven. The by-election results confirm the general perception that many of the party’s “hot spots” run in a line up the East Coast from Kent to Lincolnshire. In the more affluent rural seats and commuter towns in the South East, the party often manages a respectable second place, but has so far struggled to dislodge the Conservatives. UKIP is also strong in the South-West, where the 2015 general election will see many three-cornered contests with the Conservatives, the Lib Dems and UKIP all in contention. The party is doing well in Labour strongholds in the North, where it is

increasingly seen as *the* alternative to Labour, although with no hope of winning. It won over 30% of the vote in a by-election in Wigan in November and over a third of the vote at Sandfields in Port Talbot, South Wales, neither of which would have been seen as fertile UKIP territory a few years ago. Scotland continues to be a challenge, with the party struggling to attract even 5% of the vote. University towns, many parts of London and anywhere with a strong showing by the Greens are also difficult terrain, although the party did managed second place, albeit with under 15% of the vote, in a predominantly Labour ward in Oxford. .

When the votes are aggregated, UKIP comes in third well ahead of the Lib Dems. The Lib Dem vote is particularly interesting, since it appears to be well above its recent showing in national opinion polls. The party still performs well if it has existing or even well-established representation, such as in university towns and, for some reason, the more affluent historic cities like York and St Alban's. Elsewhere the Lib Dem vote has collapsed. The Greens tend to perform well in the same sort of places, but make little impact elsewhere. There is no prevalent trend across England, but in Scotland opinion is swinging strongly to the SNP.

As we head for the most unpredictable general election for many years, the evidence from these local government results is that UKIP has the momentum to win at least some of its target seats. However, actual wins in parliamentary elections will be well below the outcome that would be seen with proportional representation. As with local government elections, the party is likely to come a respectable second in many traditional Labour and Conservative areas. This may be disappointing for the candidates concerned, but would still represent a huge advance for the party in the period since the 2010 election. Still, with three months in which anything could happen, there may well be a few surprises when the results are announced.

NB: There have only been six local government by-elections since the New Year and with such a small sample size, it is impossible to draw any meaningful conclusions on the party's performance so far this year.