

How well is UKIP performing?

Opinion polls vs. local government election results

The rise of the UK Independence Party has made British politics extremely interesting at the moment, ahead of the European elections in 2014 and the next general election in 2015. But just how well is UKIP doing? According to the majority of opinion polls, it is ahead of the Liberal Democrats, but not by much, and is on average polling somewhat more than 10%. However, a separate flow of information comes from local government election results, and these are giving a very different message. This note looks at local government election results since 22nd August and brings the figures together. They show that, in terms of actual votes cast, UKIP is achieving roughly 20%, which is about double that of the LibDems.

Indeed, it would take a swing of only 3% - 5% to make UKIP a so-called 'major party'. In other words, UKIP has to persuade only about one person in 20 of the 80% who do not currently support it to be in contention with Labour and the Conservatives. (If it could persuade one in eight of that 80%, it might win the 2015 general election! I am not kidding. I don't expect this outcome, but – in terms of arithmetic – I am correct. The point shows how far UKIP has come in the last few years.)

Let me first of all summarize the results of the 59 opinion polls, held since 22nd August, which have been reported on the UK Polling Report website (www.ukpollingreport.co.uk). A table below has the information. I have not done anything sophisticated, but merely averaged the 59 polls. (For details, please go to the UK Polling Report website. Seven polling organizations are reported, YouGov, Populus, Opinium/Observer, ComRes/Independent, TNS/BMRB, ICM/Guardian and Survation.)

Results of 59 opinion polls since 22nd August	
	<i>% of total</i>
Conservatives	32.6
Labour Party	38.2
Liberal Democrats	10.1
UK Independence Party	11.6
All others	7.5
	100
Labour lead	5.6%

I am not going to comment further on these numbers, except to say that the method of questioning (when, for example, people are asked which is of the three ‘main parties’ they support) is sometimes likely to understate the UKIP share.

Now let us have a look in more detail at the results of the 47 local government by-elections held since 22nd August. They are reported to the UKIP party faithful by e-mail, on the ConservativeHome website (www.conservativehome.com), etc. Let it be conceded straightaway that the 47 by-elections have not been selected by me or anyone else to deliver a particular result, but they may or may not be representative of British public opinion in the last two months. A complete list of all the results is given in an appendix. If someone wants to say that the 47 by-election results are a poor sample and are misleading about UK public opinion, I am not going to get into a big argument. However, there is a feature of the numbers which argues – in my view – that the local election results are giving a faithful guide to the reality of British public opinion today. This is that the difference between the two leading parties (i.e., Labour and the Conservatives) is much the same (5.9%, compared with 5.6%) in the 47 local government elections as in the 59 opinion polls. There are good reasons for thinking that the opinion polls have difficulty identifying support for both UKIP and any of the smaller parties, because of their past focus on the so-called ‘main parties’.

Results of 47 local government by-elections since 22nd August		
	No. of votes	% of votes cast
Conservatives	15499	26.7
Labour Party	18933	32.6
Liberal Democrats	5564	9.6
UK Independence Party	11036	19.0
Greens	1762	3.0
Others (BNP etc.)	2658	4.6
Independents	2635	4.5
	58087	100.0
Labour lead		5.9%

So we have UKIP on 19.0% of the almost 60,000 votes actually cast in local government elections in the last two months. It should also be mentioned that – because UKIP did not contest some seats – the 19.0% figure somewhat understated the ‘true’ position. (The LibDems had this problem even more seriously, let it be conceded.) Where UKIP stood, its average vote share was 20.8%. One result from Scotland is included, with UKIP having a very low result there (in Govan, in fact), and UKIP is well-known to do better in England than in Scotland. If ‘other’ parties (i.e., the BNP etc.), Greens and independents are excluded, the vote shares of the *four* ‘main parties’ in this period were as in the box below. UKIP’s share is over 20%, and let me again emphasize that this is not some hypothetical fantasy by a prominent member of UKIP, *but a number that reflects actual votes cast*.

Vote shares of the four main parties in recent local by-elections

	No. of votes	% of votes cast
Conservatives	15499	30.4
Labour Party	18933	37.1
Liberal Democrats	5564	10.9
UK Independence Party	11036	21.6

The future: can UKIP win seats in 2015?

The tally of ‘seats’ won in these 47 local government elections was different from the vote shares. In this particular sample of local government elections, the seats that Labour did win it won with very large majorities. So its proportion of seats won (just over 38%) was lower than might have been expected from its share of the votes and the same as the Conservatives’. The LibDem position was also interesting. It took less than 10% of the votes, but had six elected local government representatives from of the 47 contests (i.e., a ‘seat won’ share of almost 13%). This is remarkable given the ‘first past the post’ nature of the elections. The wider lesson is that, where the LibDems already have representation *with effective party machinery*, they fight hard and tend to keep that representation. (UKIP may have had more or less double the LibDems’ vote share, but it had fewer elected representatives [four] from the 47 contests.) The LibDems’ apparent ability to protect their strongholds was evident in the Eastleigh parliamentary by-election earlier this year. Despite the remarkable swing towards UKIP, the LibDems kept the seat.

'Seats won' share, compared with vote shares, in the 47 local by-elections

	% of votes cast	No. of 'seats' won	% of total seats actually won
Conservatives	26.7	18	38.3
Labour Party	32.6	18	38.3
Liberal Democrats	9.6	6	12.8
UK Independence Party	19.0	4	8.5
Greens	3.0	1	2.1
Others (BNP etc.)	4.6	0	0.0
Independents	4.5	0	0.0

Let me conclude with two comments. First, because of the ‘first past the post’ nature of British general elections and the LibDems’ tendency to retain strongholds, it is possible that in the 2015 general election UKIP will have an appreciably higher vote share than the LibDems, but – because UKIP will have many more seconds and thirds than the LibDems – it still will not win a single seat. If so, the LibDems would not be able to complain about the unfairness of the ‘first past the post’ system as they had in the past.

The second comment is more provocative. I am not 100% sure of the UKIP vote in the 2010 *local elections in the course of the year*. In the local government elections on 6th May (i.e., those that occurred at the same time as the general election), the Conservatives took 35% of the vote, Labour 27% and the LibDems 26%, *and UKIP in fact had a net loss in terms of councillors*. So one has to presume that the UKIP vote share was 4% or so, perhaps even less. On this basis UKIP's local government score has roughly quintupled in less than four years, with its vote share up by over 15% (i.e., by about 4% a year).

It is simply a matter of arithmetic that – if this rate of progress were continued – UKIP would be one of the ‘major parties’ in 2015. Obviously, if UKIP were to rise from the 19% or so indicated by the local government election results by a further 8% between now and May 2015, its vote share would be 27%. If that came equally from the two current top parties (Labour and the Conservatives), the 2015 vote share would be

- Labour 28.6%
- UKIP 27.0%
- Conservatives 22.7%
- LibDems 9.6%
- Greens 3.0%
- Others (BNP, the nationalist parties) 4.6%
- Independents 4.5%

Of course this is not a forecast. Local government elections may be misleading, because turnout is low and party activists tend to vote whereas the apathetic majority don't. However, on the basis argued here UKIP has to persuade only one in ten of the people who have not voted for it in recent local government elections (i.e., one in ten of the 80% of people who vote for Labour, Conservatives, LibDems, etc.) in order to cause a very major upset in the 2015 general election.

And, if one in eight (of the 80%) ‘defected’ from ‘the main parties’, UKIP would win the 2015 general election. (In terms of seats, the result would be a fascinating ‘hung parliament’.)

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tim Congdon'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name 'Tim' and the last name 'Congdon' clearly distinguishable.

Tim Congdon
Economics spokesman for the UK Independence Party