

On the 2017 and 2018 Local Election Results: It's All About UKIP

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There has been much talk in the media recently about the significance of Brexit as a key factor driving the local election results in England on the 3rd May. The Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson, went so far as to claim that promising to leave the Single Market and Customs Union was a “key part of Tory electoral success”. How valid are such claims? To try and answer this, we took a good hard look at local election results in the West Midlands, widely considered to be a bell-weather region for all things Brexit.

In answering this, the key point to note is that these results are considerably more complex than they at first appear. Since the EU referendum, two local elections (and one general election) have been held. The 2017 local elections were for county councils (and a unitary authority – Shropshire). In almost every case these were predominantly rural (or ex-urban). Shropshire saw few changes with the Conservative party gaining a solitary seat from Labour. In contrast, in Staffordshire and Worcestershire, the Conservatives dramatically increased their majority, whilst Warwickshire swung from No Overall Control (NOC) to the Conservatives.

Similar trends were visible in the peri-urban areas (both unitary and district) that voted in 2018. The Conservatives gained Redditch from the Labour party and registered significant gains in Cannock Chase (+4), Dudley (+7), Nuneaton (+9 and the council swung from Labour control to NOC) and Walsall (+5). Overall, the Conservative party made net gains of 32 seats across all areas in the West Midlands in 2018.

So, whilst Brexit pervades the political landscape, its true effects are more complex than is at first apparent. The real story of the 2017 and 2018 votes has been the collapse of UKIP. Of the 126 seats across England that they held going into the 2018 council elections, they retain only 3. As such, UKIP lost 23 seats across the West Midlands 2018, making up around 75% of the net gains made by the Conservatives. Of the remainder, 8 seats lost by Labour can all be accounted for by Nuneaton and Bedworth alone.

Even here, however, the real story is the UKIP collapse. The last time these wards were contested (2014), UKIP fielded candidates in 13 of the 17 wards contested in Nuneaton and Bedworth and gained 5882 votes – some 18.7% - in spite of not winning a single council seat. In 2018, in contrast, UKIP candidates stood in just 2 of the contested wards and received a total of 253 votes. Similarly, in Dudley all 7 of the Conservatives’ gains came at UKIP’s expense as was true in Cannock. In Walsall, the Conservatives gained 2 seats from Labour (in addition to those gained from UKIP/independents), but once again the UKIP factor was critical - Labour’s vote share actually *increased* in the two wards (Bloxwich East and Rushall Shelfield) they lost to the Conservatives.

Returning to the 2017 county council elections, in Staffordshire Labour's vote share fell by just 2% (from 30% to 28%), but UKIP's fell from 24% to 6% and the Conservatives appear to have gained by the same amount. Similar results are visible in Worcestershire and Warwickshire with the latter (perhaps unsurprisingly) primarily accounted for by changes in Nuneaton and Bedworth and neighbouring North Warwickshire. Indeed, Labour's 12-seat loss in the 2017 elections in Warwickshire almost exactly mirrors the 12-seat *gain* it made in the previous 2013 election with the UKIP factor a deciding element.

So, in trying to answer the question about whether Brexit has influenced the local election results, we are of the view that in so far that it has, this is solely due to the virtual eradication of UKIP as a political force, now that its key aim of leaving the EU appears to have been achieved. Beyond this, there is little evidence to suggest that the national Brexit policies of Labour or the Conservatives had any impact on the local turnouts.

Note on tables

Information on voter turnout in 2018 is not yet available. Results from 2017 suggest it is little different from usual (between 30-40% in most places, except in General Election years when it's higher at around 60%). The major exception to all of this remains London, where the UKIP presence was always subdued and the Conservatives have lost ground to Labour and the Liberal Democrats (albeit not by as much as had been touted), continuing a longer trend. Naturally, as one of only 3 remain-voting regions in the UK, London is quite distinct from much of the rest of England politically.

	Councillors in 2018					Change from Previous Election (2014 except Birmingham)			
	Con	Lab	UKIP	LD	Other	ΔLab	ΔCon	ΔUKIP	ΔOther
Birmingham	25	67	0	8	1	1	1	0	-2
Cannock Chase	15	21	0	1	4	0	4	-4	0
Coventry	13	40	0	0	1	1	-1	0	0
Dudley	35	35	1	0	1	0	7	-7	0
Newcastle-under-Lyme	18	20	0	3	3	-3	3	-3	3
Nuneaton and Bedworth	16	17	0	0	1	-8	9	0	-1
Redditch	17	12	0	0	0	-3	4	-1	0
Rugby	24	9	0	9	0	0	1	0	-1
Sandwell	0	70	0	0	2	1		-1	0
Solihull	32	2	1	4	12	1	1	-1	-1
Tamworth	22	5	1	0	1	-1	2	-1	0
Walsall	30	26	0	2	2	-2	5	-3	0
Wolverhampton	9	51	0	0	0	2	-1	-1	0
Wyre Forest	21	4	0	3	5	2	-3	0	1
Column Total						-8	32	-23	-1