



# Do local elections predict the outcome of the next general election? Forecasting British general elections from local election national vote share estimates



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## ABSTRACT

This article outlines a method for forecasting British general elections from national level vote shares at local elections. Although local elections are notionally 'local', the evidence suggests that they at least partly mirror national electoral fortunes. A simple general election vote share on local election vote share regression model that accounts for partisan differences and incumbency effects fits past data with reasonable accuracy. Based on the results of the 2013 and 2014 local elections, the model forecast a 56% probability of hung parliament, with a 78% probability of the Conservatives receiving the largest share of the vote.

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Local elections in the United Kingdom are regularly used by politicians and political commentators as barometers of public support for governments and parties between general elections. Although they are officially concerned with local issues and determine the composition of local government, success and failure across the pooled election results are frequently taken to be a 'triumph' or a 'disaster' for national level political parties and their leaders. Most evaluations of party performance at local elections treat the results as a 'nowcast' and offer their conclusions as to what would happen at a General Election if the local results were repeated. This paper seeks instead to assess the predictive capacity of local elections and develops a simple method for forecasting future general election outcomes by accounting for predictable variation between local and general elections.

The article proceeds as follows: First it explores the potential benefits and pitfalls of using local election results as a source of information about future elections and introduces the two measures of national level results used in the forecast. Second it develops a method for forecasting vote shares at future general elections from national vote estimates at local elections. Third it outlines the method used here for converting vote share forecasts into seat forecasts. Finally it presents the forecast for the 2015 general election based on the results of the 2013 and 2014 local elections.

## 1. National results from local elections

In their present form, local elections have been held annually in England and Wales since 1973, following the passage of the Local Government Act 1972, with a rotating combination of different councils facing election each year.<sup>1</sup> That this is the case presents a number of challenges for using local elections to forecast future general elections: they do not include local elections in Scotland (which are all held on a separate, five year, cycle) and the different combinations of councils in different years may yield wildly different national level aggregations of votes cast, and indeed no official national level results are reported.

Fortunately these problems are overcome thanks to two estimates of the GB national (e.g. including Scotland) vote performance of the main parties at local elections as if they were held in similar circumstances to general elections – that is, they were held nationally and the main parties fielded candidates in every ward/division. The first, the National Equivalent of the Vote (NEV) is produced by Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher and published by the Sunday Times, and is available for every election since 1980. The second, the Projected National Share (PNS), is produced by the BBC,

<sup>1</sup> Councillors serve four year terms but depending on the council they are either all elected every four years, half the councillors are elected every two years, or a third of the councillors are elected every year for three years out of four, with no election held in the fourth year.

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and is available from 1982 onwards.<sup>2</sup>

The forecasting model developed here in essence uses NEV and PNS national vote shares as if they were large scale opinion polls. Used in this way, local elections results have two potential advantages over conventional polling: first in terms of their sheer scale, and second the information they provide is based on actual voting behaviour rather than reported intentions.

Using local election results to forecast general elections has several obvious disadvantages, not least the limited amount of information that is available – there are only 27 local elections that have the necessary NEV results and 25 that have the PNS results, which limits the complexity and accuracy of any forecasting model.

It might be argued that since local elections are about local government, their results reflect local concerns rather than national trends. However local elections might reflect national political concerns to the extent that partisanship crosses different electoral arenas and local elections are ‘second order’ – that is, voters use the elections in secondary electoral arenas to express their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with national level governments (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). However several authors have shown that voting in local elections is less ‘second order’ than voting in the classic second order case – European Parliament elections (Heath et al., 1999; Rallings and Thrasher, 2005). Despite these caveats, national politics does seem to exert at least some effect on local election behaviour (Rallings and Thrasher, 1997) suggesting that local elections are a potential source of information about future national electoral fortune. Indeed local by-election results have been used with great success to forecast general elections (Rallings et al., 2011).

Perhaps the most obvious disadvantage of using local elections to forecast general elections is the long lag between local elections and subsequent general elections – in the present election cycle the most recent local elections held before the 2010 general election were held on May 22, 2014 – almost a full year before the general election. The present election illustrates the pitfalls of such a long range forecast – the rise of the Scottish National Party during and after the Scottish independence referendum occurred after the last local elections, and so cannot be incorporated into the forecast.<sup>3</sup>

These challenges illuminate the purpose and limitations of the local elections forecasting model. It is important to make clear that it is not intended to compete on equal terms with models which can incorporate more recent information into their forecasts. Rather it is intended as an attempt to evaluate the forecasting power of a particular source of information about party support and answer the question posed in the title - do local elections predict the outcome of future general elections? The model proposed here suggests that local elections do predict future general elections, at least to some extent. This is not because the vote shares at local and subsequent national elections do not change from one election to the other, but because they *do* change in systematic ways. The local election model should be seen in two ways, as a (very) long range forecast of future elections, and as a way of benchmarking party performance in local elections against past electoral trends.

## 2. Forecasting vote shares

Two forecasting models are developed here – with separate models for NEV and PNS. In order to maximise the information

available for each forecast from the limited data available, analysis is conducted on the pooled data of each of the three main parties (Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat) and the combined other vote share. The local election model can be considered a special case of a votes on polls forecast model, with polls replaced by local election vote shares. The dependent variable for each party  $p$  at local election  $l$ , is the share of the vote they receive at the general election following the local election (*general election vote<sub>pl</sub>*). The main independent variable of interest is the estimate of the party's share of the national vote at the local election (*local election vote<sub>pl</sub>*) and different specifications of the model contain dummy variables indicating the party of each case (*labour<sub>p</sub>*, *lib dem<sub>p</sub>*, and *other<sub>p</sub>*, with the Conservatives as the base outcome) and whether the party was the incumbent government party at the time of the local election (*incumbent<sub>p</sub>*). These dummy variables are included to control for party and government specific local election effects – on average incumbent government parties tend to perform worse at local elections than they do at subsequent general elections (i.e. midterm blues), the Liberal Democrats tend to do better in local elections than they do in general elections, and the Conservatives do worse.

One piece of information is notable by its absence – how far in advance of the general election the local election is held. It seems plausible – or indeed *likely* – that local elections held closer to general elections will provide better a better forecast of future general elections than those held further away. However, incorporating information into the model about the time until the next election (analysis not shown here) does not improve the fit of the forecasting model and subsequent tests of the model suggest that, on average, predictions from earlier local elections are no worse than predictions from later local elections.<sup>4</sup>

Four potential forecasting models are developed with different combinations of the predictor variables:<sup>5</sup>

- (1) General election vote on local election vote.

$$general\ election\ vote_{pl} = \alpha + \beta_1 local\ vote_{pl} + \varepsilon_{pl}$$

- (2) General election vote on local election vote with party dummies.

$$general\ election\ vote_{pl} = \alpha + \beta_1 local\ vote_{pl} + \beta_2 labour_p + \beta_3 lib\ dem_p + \beta_4 other_p + \varepsilon_{pl}$$

- (3) General election vote on local election vote with the government incumbency dummy.

$$general\ election\ vote_{pl} = \alpha + \beta_1 local\ vote_{pl} + \beta_5 incumbent_p + \varepsilon_{pl}$$

- (4) General election vote on local election vote with party and government incumbency dummies.

<sup>4</sup> It is possible (and perhaps likely) that this is due to the small amount of information available for the present method, rather than some hitherto undiscovered flatness in changes in voting behaviour over the electoral cycle.

<sup>5</sup> Other variations, including vote change models and models with interactions between *local election vote* and the party and incumbency dummies (i.e. to create party and government specific slopes) were also tested – the results (not shown) do not suggest any predictive gains from any of these additions.

<sup>2</sup> For a brief overview and comparison of NEV and PNS, see Fisher (2014).

<sup>3</sup> The additional problem of how the rise of the SNP will affect calculation of the NEV and PNS when elections are not held in Scotland remains is also a concern, and it remains to be seen how this will affect the calculation of NEV and PNS, and the applicability of the current forecasting model to future elections.

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