

ELECTORAL LANDSCAPE PAPER FOR MAY 2015 ELECTIONS

Introduction

1. The purpose of this draft paper is to set out the broad electoral context for elections in May 2015.
2. This is an updated draft of this paper following the BBC Trust consultations and before the Editorial Standards Committee approves the Election Guidelines. The revised paper will also assist the Executive in determining the allocation of Party Election Broadcasts (PEBs) based on the PEB allocation criteria and assist the Editorial Standards Committee of the Trust in determining any appeals, regarding either allocation of PEBs or relevant editorial coverage.
3. This paper sets out details of past relevant electoral support and provides a framework for assessing current electoral support and other relevant factors. The intention of the paper is to set out the material evidence necessary for making these judgements – not to make recommendations about the judgements themselves.
4. The BBC will remain open to any new relevant evidence of current electoral support (in relation to the allocation of PEBs, until the day after the close of nominations).

Political Landscape: Background

5. The BBC takes the position that to ensure due impartiality, the electorate and licence-fee payers are best served by giving those parties which demonstrate clear evidence of substantial electoral support more coverage in an election period than those parties which do not.
6. For editorial coverage, this is set out in the Editorial Guidelines, which say:

News judgements at election time are made within a framework of democratic debate which ensures that due weight is given to hearing the views and examining and challenging the policies of all parties. Significant smaller parties should also receive some network coverage during the campaign.
7. In making these judgements, electoral support in the previous equivalent election is the starting point – eg. for the 2015 general election, the level of electoral support demonstrated at the same election in 2010. In order to have regard to changes in levels of support since that time, some weight is also given to evidence of electoral support at different, subsequent elections, including local and European elections, elections to devolved institutions and Westminster by-elections. Another relevant consideration is evidence of robust and consistent trends in opinion polls.
8. Other relevant factors are the broad political context, which could include the formation of new parties, splits in parties, and new alliances between parties.

9. Weight will also be applied appropriately taking account of the number of candidates a party is fielding and the electoral system being used.

2015 Elections

10. The General Election will take place across the UK on Thursday 7th May 2015. On the same day, local government elections take place in England in:

36 Metropolitan Boroughs

49 unitary authorities

194 district councils

6 mayoral contests

11. Each election has its own political backdrop, but the broader UK political landscape which will potentially impact on voters to a greater or lesser extent includes:

- The economic situation, including the progress of recovery, public spending, taxation;
- The debate over the UK's future relationship with the European Union;
- The issues arising from immigration;
- The impact of the constitutional issues arising from the result of the referendum in Scotland.
- The dynamics of coalition government in Westminster as parties move towards setting out their own stalls.

Past Electoral Support

General Election 2010

12. For the first time since 1974, the result of a general election did not produce a clear winner, with no party achieving the 326 seats necessary to secure an overall majority. Five days elapsed before it was possible for the Queen to invite David Cameron to lead Britain's first peacetime coalition government since the 1930s.
13. After thirteen years in power, Labour's share of the vote slipped below 30%, more than six percentage points down on 2005, with a net loss in seats of more than 90. The Conservatives, whilst increasing their share of the vote by nearly 4 percentage points, with a net gain of nearly a hundred seats, fell some way short of a majority, with a total of 307 seats.

14. The Liberal Democrats ended up with five seats fewer – 57 – though their share of the vote was up by 1% to 23%. That is the best ever performance for a third party, with the exception of the SDP-Liberal Alliance in 1983 (which secured more than 25% of the vote – though that translated into only 23 seats).
15. Altogether, the three largest UK parties won 88% of the votes across the UK in 2010 – the lowest figure in modern times for a general election (from a high of more than 99% in 1951). Among the next three largest parties in England, the only one to win a seat was also the only one to lose share of the vote. The Greens achieved their first ever Westminster constituency, despite overall being marginally down – to 1% - compared to 2005. They were behind not only UKIP, which won three times as many votes, but also the BNP, which increased its share to nearly 2%. With 5% of the vote between them, however, both UKIP and the BNP failed to win a seat.
16. In Scotland, in terms of seats, there were no gains or losses for any party in 2010. But in contrast to its performance in England, Labour increased its share of the vote, by more than 3% points, topping 40% and again returning 41 out of a total of 59 MPs. The SNP, still with six seats, also improved share (by under 2.5%), but compared to the Scottish Parliamentary elections in 2007 and 2011, their performance in Westminster polls continued to be more modest. The Lib Dems slipped behind the SNP in share, but held on to their eleven seats, despite being just 2% ahead of the Conservatives who retained a solitary MP. No other party in Scotland achieved as much as 1% of the vote – with UKIP up marginally at 0.7%, narrowly ahead of the Scottish Greens.
17. By contrast, in Wales, Labour lost ground (with a slightly higher swing to the Conservatives than elsewhere) down more than 6 percentage points and a net loss of three seats. Nevertheless, they held 26 out of the 40 constituencies, with the Conservatives gaining five seats and up nearly five percentage points. Despite the Lib Dems being slightly up in share and Plaid Cymru slightly down, the former lost a seat, and they each returned three MPs. UKIP and the BNP both gained in share, but with less support than in England.
18. In Northern Ireland, Sinn Fein topped the poll – in terms of share of the vote – for the first time, with more than 25%, up 1% on 2005 and just ahead of the DUP, which lost nearly nine percentage points. The latter, however, held 8 seats – down one – remaining the fourth largest party in the House of Commons. Sinn Fein retained its five MPs – though it does not take up seats in Westminster. The SDLP held its three seats, with a small drop in share. The largest increase in support – up two and a half percentage points to more than 6% – was the Alliance Party, which won a seat at the expense of the First Minister, Peter Robinson. The Ulster Unionist Party fought the general election jointly with the Conservatives under the title “UCUNF” – but, despite winning more than 15% of the vote, failed to win a seat. The former UUP MP, Sylvia Hermon, won her seat as an independent Unionist. Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV), having won more than 12% of the vote in the European election the previous year, beating the Alliance Party, in 2010 attracted less than 4%. The Northern Ireland Green Party secured just half a per cent of the vote.

Westminster By-elections

19. A striking feature of Westminster by-elections in the second half of the present Parliament – even before Clacton and Rochester and Strood - has been the performance of UKIP. From the beginning of 2013, the party came second in five by-elections. Altogether, they had been second on eight occasions during the Parliament. More recently, UKIP has, for the first time, MPs elected to the Commons - two Conservative defectors, who won their seats back under new colours. Neither Clacton nor Rochester and Strood were contested by UKIP in 2010 – in the by-elections of October and November, 2014, they secured nearly 60% and over 42%, respectively. Since the start of 2013, UKIP's average share of the vote in Westminster by-elections has been 33%.
20. The most exceptional by-election of the Parliament, however, in March 2012, was Respect's victory over Labour in Bradford West. The party came from fifth in the general election to winning with more than half the vote, the first time since 2000 that the main opposition party lost a seat in a by-election.
21. Apart from the three victories of UKIP and Respect – and Labour's gain of Corby from the Conservatives, in 2012 – the remaining fifteen by-elections of the parliament were held by the incumbent party (thirteen of those being Labour).
22. The Liberal Democrats, the party previously most associated with by-election success, have had very little whilst in government. Their sole victory - holding Eastleigh in February 2013 - was with less than a third of the vote, the lowest winning share of the parliament. They came second on three occasions, but altogether lost their deposit (ie won less than 5% of the vote) in eleven contests – more than half of the by-elections during the Parliament.
23. The Greens made little impact on Westminster by-elections, their best performance being in Rochester and Strood, in November 2014, where they received just over 4% of the vote. They failed to retain a deposit in any of the twelve by-elections they fought during the Parliament, with an average vote share of less than 3%. They have, however, beaten the Lib Dems in three of the last five by-elections, albeit without any substantial rise in their own vote.

European Elections 2014

24. UKIP's victory in the European elections was the first time a party other than Labour or Conservative had topped the poll in a UK-wide election since the Liberals more than a century before. From second in 2009, they increased their share of the vote by nearly eleven percentage points, to more than 27%, winning 24 of the 73 seats, an increase of eleven. Labour, from a low base in 2009, also added nearly 10 percentage points, to win 20 seats, an increase of seven, with just over a quarter of the vote. The Conservatives, losing six seats, down to 19, were narrowly behind Labour. The Liberal Democrats' share of the vote was exactly halved, down to less than 7%, losing all but one of their eleven seats. For the first time in a UK-wide election, they slipped to fifth, 1% behind the Greens, who gained a seat for a total of three, despite their own share of the vote marginally decreasing. The BNP, who had won national representation for the first time

in the 2009 European election, with more than 6% of the vote, lost both their seats and dropped to just over 1% of the vote.

25. In Scotland, the SNP topped the poll with 29%, keeping its two MEPs; Labour's improvement, by 5 percentage points, to 26%, also meant retention of its two seats. The only change in seats in Scotland was UKIP returning its first MEP, with more than 10% of the vote, at the expense of the Lib Dems, who, with 7% slipped to sixth just behind the Scottish Greens.
26. None of the four seats in Wales changed hands, where Labour, despite increasing its share of the vote by nearly 8 percentage points, only just topped the poll ahead of UKIP, whose share increased by nearly twice as much. Again, it was the Lib Dems who suffered most, securing less than 4% of the vote, in sixth place, narrowly behind the Greens. The Conservatives and Plaid, though both found their vote-share was down 3-4%, each held on to their single Welsh MEP.
27. Northern Ireland uses a different voting system in European elections to the rest of the UK, electing three members via Single Transferable Vote. Sinn Fein topped the poll, with more than 25% of first preference votes; the DUP were next with 21%. The Ulster Unionist Party, with 13%, took the third seat, but only very narrowly ahead of the SDLP and then the TUV, who gained 12% of the vote. The Alliance Party took 7% and UKIP just under 4%.

English Local Elections:

28. It is important to bear in mind that local elections in England only ever present a partial picture of the view of the total electorate in England. That needs to be taken into account when analysing figures for the share of the vote the last time most of these elections were contested, in 2011.
29. It was the first opportunity since the 2010 general election for voters in England to reflect at the ballot box on the consequences of a coalition government in Westminster. The estimated national equivalent share of the vote was: Conservative 38%, Labour 37% and the Liberal Democrats 16% - their lowest ever up to then. It was the first indication that it was the junior partner in the coalition who was likely to feel the anti-government tendency which often occurs in local government elections. The Lib Dems had a net loss of nine councils, holding onto ten, with a net loss of seats of nearly 750. The Conservatives won or retained more than 150 authorities, with a net gain of three councils and more than 85 seats. Labour won or retained more than 50 councils, with a net gain of 27 and more than 800 seats. The Greens won or retained 79 seats, winning most of the seats on a council - Brighton and Hove - for the first time. The British National Party retained just two seats, losing eleven. UKIP retained the seven seats it held, but showed no indication, in 2011, of any substantial progress in local government.
30. The main change, therefore, in subsequent local elections in England - albeit not in the same set of seats - has been the advance of UKIP in the past two years. Whilst both the two government parties made losses in 2013 and Labour, in opposition, made gains, this was the first time that UKIP made a real impact in council voting. With a net gain of

nearly 140 councillors, they moved past the Greens to become the fourth party in English local government.

31. That pattern continued in 2014, with UKIP gaining more than 160 seats, though the party's comparatively weaker showing in London was demonstrated in the borough elections. There was the normal cycle of Labour, in opposition, being net gainers and the government parties net losers; however, the Liberal Democrats' losses were heavy – down from more than 700 seats to over 400. The estimate of national equivalent share of the vote in 2014 was 31% for Labour, 30% for the Conservatives, 18% for UKIP and the Liberal Democrats down to 11%.
32. The Greens improved their position to hold or retain nearly 40 seats, but now have less than half the representation UKIP has in local government (UKIP approximately 370 seats, Greens around 170). The BNP won a single seat in May 2014.

Devolved Elections

Scotland

33. The 2011 Scottish Parliamentary election saw the SNP winning a majority for the first time, with 69 seats (up from 47) out of 129 and a mid-40% share of the vote in both the constituency and list sections of the poll. Labour slipped from 46 to 37 seats, with just over 30% in the constituency section and over 26% in the top-up lists. The biggest losers were the Liberal Democrats, reduced from 16 to 5 seats and a vote share down to 7.9% and 5.2% respectively. The latter figure, in the list section, was less than 1% ahead of the Scottish Green party, who again won two seats, though its 4.4% represented only a slight increase on 2007, despite having regularly registered more in opinion polls during the run-up to the election.

Wales

34. The Welsh Assembly election in 2011 saw Labour improve its position from 2007, increasing from 26 seats to 30, with a share of over 40% in constituencies, allowing the party to form an administration in the 60 seat Assembly without their former coalition partners, Plaid, who slipped from 15 to 11 seats and to below 20% in terms of share. The Conservatives improved marginally, winning 14 seats, an increase of two; the Lib Dems dropped from 6 seats to 5 and lost more than 4% share in the constituencies, 3% in the list section – down to 8%. No other party won a seat – UKIP and the Greens, with four and a half and three and a half per cent share respectively, were the next best parties in the regional vote.

Northern Ireland

35. The Assembly elections in 2011 followed a similar pattern to the 2010 General Election in Northern Ireland – further establishing the DUP and Sinn Fein as the two dominant parties, but there was little change in the share of first preference votes between the larger parties compared to the previous Assembly election in 2007. The DUP topped

the poll with 30%, gaining two more seats for a total of 38 out of 108. Sinn Fein, with almost 27%, took 29 seats, up one. The Ulster Unionist Party, with 13% of the vote, took 16 seats, down two; the SDLP, with 14%, won 14 seats, also down two. The Alliance Party increased their share of the vote by two and a half percentage points, to more than seven and a half per cent, winning eight seats, an increase of one. The TUV and the Greens won a seat each, with two and a half and one per cent share respectively.

Other Elections

Police and Crime Commissioner Elections in England (outside London) and Wales, 2012

36. The PCC elections were marked by particularly low turn-outs and were not necessarily fought on the same party political basis as other elections – ie some parties did not contest them or did not launch a national campaign. There was a particularly strong showing by independent candidates, who, between them, secured 26% of the vote and twelve out of 41 commissioner posts.

Current Electoral Support

Opinion Polls

37. Polling continues to underline that the two largest parties across Great Britain are Labour and the Conservatives. But the trend emerging from polling across a variety of methods and companies over a sustained period suggests that UKIP remains well ahead of the Liberal Democrats in GB-wide polling. In nearly all such polling commissioned since May 2014, UKIP have been ahead, averaging almost double the share of the Lib Dems. An average rating of around 15% is firmly established, although there have been variations from 9% to 23% in individual polls since the new year. Lib Dem support has been averaging, consistently, around 8%, with less variation in individual polls.

38. Since autumn 2014 Green support has continued to nudge up, to the extent that their average is now within one or two percentage points of the Liberal Democrats. Their average rating towards the end of 2014 was just below 5% - since the new year, it has been above 6%.

39. In Scotland, although there is less polling specific to the parties there, since the independence referendum a consistent and robust trend has been established that the SNP is gaining electoral support. All polling since October has put the SNP on 40% or more – as high as 52% - and Labour mostly below 30%. Polling for the Lib Dems, UKIP and the Scottish Greens is variable, but all below 7%. Conservative support is relatively steady, averaging around 17%, similar to the party's showing in 2010. There is very little polling assessing the situation only in Wales, but such as there is suggests UKIP are now competing with Plaid Cymru for third place, both averaging around 12% in the polls, with the Lib Dems behind and performing slightly worse than in England.

Party Membership

40. The number of people choosing to be a member of a political party is not necessarily a consistent indicator of electoral support. It may fluctuate according to other factors and the cost and benefits of membership may vary. Nevertheless, some political parties do make the case that a rise in membership should be taken as evidence of increased support.
41. A House of Commons Library paper in September 2014 pointed out that, “due to the efforts of several parties to bring flexibility to their terms of membership, what is meant by ‘membership’ is under constant flux. Some parties restrict the voting rights of certain members, for example, while others offer gradations in membership costs to suit a member’s desired level of engagement with the party. Historic estimates have also...been subject to exaggeration. As a consequence it is often difficult to compare like for like between party membership levels.”
42. The SNP claimed that in the two weeks following the Scottish referendum, its membership rose three-fold, an increase of more than 50,000. This puts the SNP ahead of the Lib Dems as the third largest party, by membership, in the UK. The number of SNP members is now put at 93,000. The Green Party of England and Wales said in January it had passed 50,000 members – and the Scottish Greens say they now have more than 8,000 members – both have experienced substantial increases since last autumn. UKIP also claims a substantial rise in membership – to around 40,000 – matching their substantial electoral improvement.
43. By way of context, membership of the big three UK parties has been in steep decline for some time. Liberal Democrat membership has more than halved since the early 1990s and is now estimated at around 44,000, with the party claiming it is rising again after falling below that figure in 2012. Estimates for Conservative and Labour in 2013 put both parties at under 200,000 members. Overall, it is worth bearing in mind that not much more than 1% of the UK population is a member of any political party. This indicates the difficulty in using this as a reliable indicator of current electoral support.

Conclusion

44. The outcome of the 2015 general election is regarded by psephologists, academics and party analysts alike as being harder to call than any in living memory. This paper is not intended as a crystal ball, but a gathering of the most relevant evidence such as exists before the voters have their say in May. In 2010, 12% of voters did not support Labour, the Conservatives or the Liberal Democrats. Current polling puts that figure at about 27%. Even if a first-past-the-post system does not result in many more seats for the smaller, but growing parties in Westminster, it is likely to have an unpredictable impact on what happens between the larger parties in many individual constituencies.
45. The evidence of growth in support for UKIP and the SNP and, to a lesser extent, the Greens; the evidence of decline in support for the Lib Dems and – at the least – increased antipathy towards “establishment” parties and politicians generally; the adjustments to the realities of coalition government, the reactions to the constitutional debate in Scotland and elsewhere, as well as to the ongoing pressures of economic uncertainty, all mean that the 2015 general election will be fought in new electoral

territory. This poses new challenges for what the audience will expect in terms of the relative levels of coverage the BBC gives to the different political parties throughout the UK. This paper sets out the context in which those judgements will be taken.