

# Reading the local runes:

What the 2011 council elections suggest for the next general election

By Paul Hunter



# Reading the local runes:

What the 2011 council elections suggest for the next general election

By Paul Hunter

## Introduction

Media coverage of local government elections is often couched as the electorate giving the government of the day a good kicking. This year was no different with the junior partners in the Coalition suffering their "worst losses for generation"<sup>1</sup> and "Nick Clegg in firing line as Lib Dem vote implodes"<sup>2</sup>. Despite the predictable headlines little research has been undertaken to examine the relationship between local and national elections.

This paper looks at some of the key trends of local elections since the 1972 Local Government Act (which changed the local government landscape to resolve problems arising from new patterns of urbanisation). In particular, it examines the correlations between local government results in Great Britain and the performance of parties nationally and what the 2011 local elections suggest for the next general election.

The media may focus on the government's performance, but what is really important in reading the runes of local elections is the opposition's. The election results show that the electorate often uses the local government elections to take out their anger with central government. However, this does not mean people flip their votes straight to the opposition. This is the important point when looking at likely changes in government. Whilst voters may dislike the government of the day the opposition has to ensure this unhappiness is turned into active support for them. Put simply, focus tends to centre on the government's unpopularity when it should be on the opposition's popularity.

What emerges from the data is that in every general election since the 1972 Local Government Act the opposition needs to have over 40% of councillors to win the following general election.

This year the spotlight of the elections was mainly on the junior partners in the coalition dropping to 15% of councillors and controlling just 4% of councils. Whilst this has political ramifications for the Liberal Democrats, focus for the Conservatives and the opposition should be on Labour's performance. Labour now stands on 27% of councillors (up 4 percentage points on 2010) and has some way to go to break the seemingly crucial 40% barrier.

The Liberal Democrats result in the local elections does have significance in terms of the defragmentation of the vote. Research in this report shows that whilst the number

---

1 *Guardian*, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2011/may/06/election-results-2011-lib-dems-worst-losses>

2 *Telegraph*, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/>

of councillors held by the two main parties has been declining since the early 1980s the last two round of local elections has seen this trend reversed. The two main parties now control more councils than at any point since the 1972 Local Government Act. If this trend continues we could see a return to definitive two-party politics at the next election.

This paper is broken into three sections and includes data from this year's local elections. The first section looks at the link between the number of councillors and national elections. The second section looks at correlations between central government elections and the number of councils parties hold. The last section examines the performance of the parties at the 2011 local elections, and in particular at what Labour should hope to achieve before the next general election.

## **1. Councillors**

Comparing results of councillors with national results may at first seem like an extraordinarily difficult task. After all council elections take place each year in different places; council wards and councils themselves are different sizes to parliamentary constituencies; turnout is lower in local elections; and the individual merits of candidates are different. Yet despite the difficulty in matching them completely, local results offer some key insights into how people vote at future national elections.

### *High and low watermarks*

The percentage of local councillors unsurprisingly follows the popularity of a party nationally. For the Conservatives the highest percentage of councillors was in 1978. For seats in parliament however they gained the largest number in 1983. For Labour they reached the most councillors in 1996. For parliamentary seats this came a year later in 1997. Meanwhile the Liberal Democrats had their highest number of councillors and parliamentary seats in 2005.

On the flip side, for the Conservative party their low in percentage of councillors came in 1996, and for Labour its low was 2009.

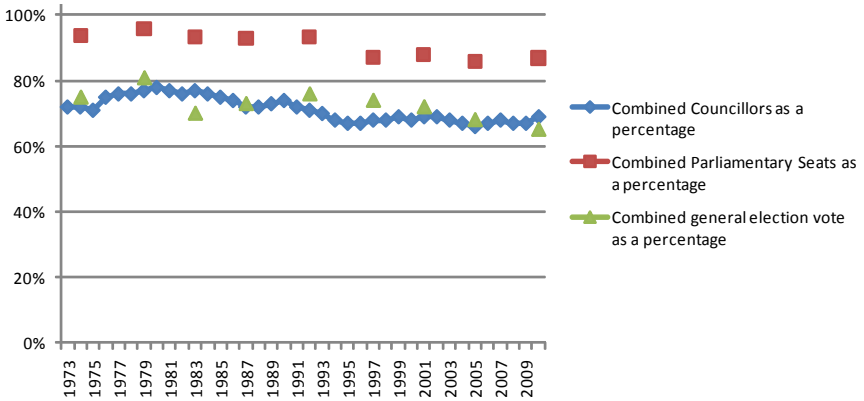
### *Pluralisation of voting trends*

Much has been made recently of more plural voting patterns in general elections, which have seen the two-party vote share fall from a peak 97% in 1951 to just two thirds in recent times (whilst seats held have fallen from 99% in the 1950s and early 1960s to below 90% today). For local elections, what we see from the data on the combined percentage of Conservative and Labour councillors is that they are far closer to the percentage of votes cast at general elections than the combined parliamentary seats won. As figure 1 shows there is around a 15-20% difference between votes and seats for the main two parties in

general elections. This is almost certainly a natural result of far smaller constituencies in local elections than parliamentary ones.

Figure 1 shows a clear downward trend in two party support from a high-point at the start of the 1980s when four out of five councillors were either Labour or Conservative, down to two out of three in 2005. This trend of decline in councillors follows a similar pattern to general elections. The 2010 local elections started to reverse the trend (albeit only slightly). As we will examine in more detail later, this trend has continued in 2011 with the collapse of the Liberal Democrat vote.

**Figure 1: Combined two party share of councillors and parliamentary seats and votes**



Sources: Calculated from *Local elections 2010 Research Paper 10/44* (House of Commons Library, 2010), and *The Local Elections Handbook 2011*, Rallings, M and Thrasher, C (Biteback Publishing, 2011), and *British Electoral Facts*, Rallings, M and Thrasher, C (Total Politics, 2009)

*Predicting future results?*

Any theory predicting the future must be treated with great care. However, looking at historical results there are some correlations between national and local elections.

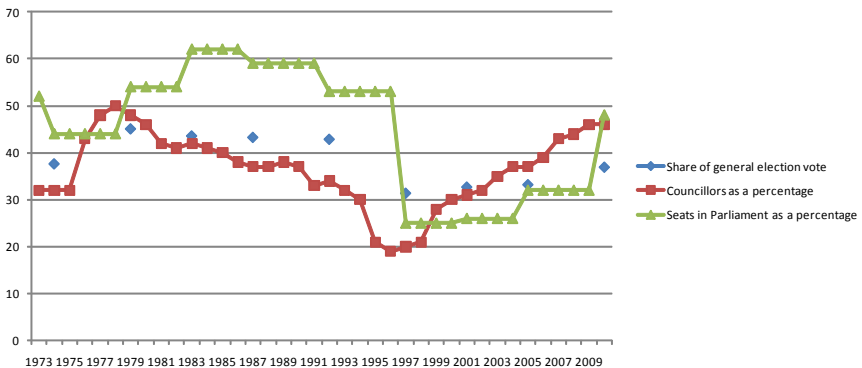
As previously noted, most media coverage of local elections focuses on the government's performance. Usually this is talking up the electorate bloodying the government's nose. However, this is slightly misleading and often misses the real point. In 1978 the Conservatives held 50% of all council seats and won 54% of the parliamentary seats at the following year's election. In 1991 they held just 33% of council seats and yet won 53%

of parliamentary seats. Clearly then council seats should not be treated as a simple guide to how the British public intends to vote at general elections or, indeed, the outcome in parliamentary seats.

However, there is evidence to show how tide up local elections are with the national electoral cycle. A party's performance in council seats is highest just prior to them moving from opposition into government, it falls steadily (with them usually performing better in local government elections in general election years) before they are kicked out of power. That said, it is worth noting that on several occasions (early 1990s and 2000s) we see the opposition winning more council seats than the government, and yet the government goes on to win at the next election.

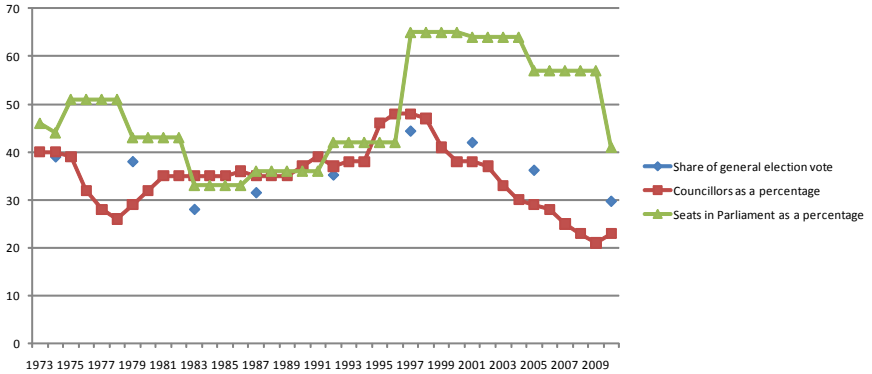
What appears to be important is the support the opposition gains. In the 1980s the number of Conservative councillors gradually diminished falling from 42% in 1981 to 37% in 1987. In that same period Labour stayed on 35% whilst all other parties gained all 5 percentage points that were lost from the Conservatives. The 1980s are often seen as a period where Labour failed to capitalise on local election successes nationally. However, despite prominent local government figures such as David Blunkett and Ken Livingstone the data shows that Labour's performance locally was a long way from dominant.

**Figure 2: Conservative party performance**



Sources: Calculated from *Local elections 2010 Research Paper 10/44* (House of Commons Library, 2010), and *The Local Elections Handbook 2011*, Rallings, M and Thrasher, C (Biteback Publishing, 2011), and *British Electoral Facts*, Rallings, M and Thrasher, C (Total Politics, 2009)

**Figure 3: Labour party performance**



Sources: Calculated from *Local elections 2010 Research Paper 10/44* (House of Commons Library, 2010), and *The Local Elections Handbook 2011*, Rallings, M and Thrasher, C (Biteback Publishing, 2011), and *British Electoral Facts*, Rallings, M and Thrasher, C (Total Politics, 2009)

Whilst governments are often unpopular and frequently suffer mid-term blues, if the *opposition* is seen as out of touch or incompetent it is likely to be visible in poor local election results (hence results for Labour in the 1980s). Oppositions have to offer a positive platform and a reason for voters to come out and vote for them. By looking at the opposition's performance over time a clear 'tipping point' it needs to reach appears. A year before general elections that saw a change in government (1973, 1978, 1996 and 2009) the opposition had over 40% of councillors. In the other years prior to elections which saw the government of the day remain in power (1982, 1986, 1991, 2000 and 2004) the opposition's percentage of councillors was below the 40% threshold.

Although this measure does not predict the level of support either in votes or seats at the following general election, it appears to indicate which way it is likely to go.

**2. Council control**

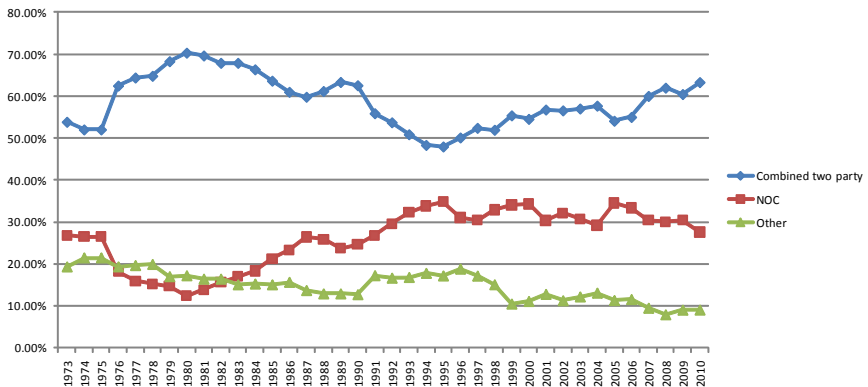
A similar pattern emerges for control of councils. The peaks for the Conservatives again came in 1978, and a low in 1995 with the Conservatives holding less than 3% of councils. For Labour its high was in 1997, and nadir in 2009. For the Liberal Democrats they scored their highest performance in 1997, and lowest performance in 2002.

### Plurality of council control

The plurality of council control shows a mixed picture. The least plural time was in 1980 and was followed by a steady decline to a position in 1995 where less than half of councils were controlled exclusively by either the Conservatives or Labour. Since then there has been a steady increase in the combined two-party control of councils. This increase is mostly due to the vastly improved performance of the Conservative party (and not a mirrored fall in Labour's support). The combined total stood at just over 63% in 2010, back up to the 1989 level. This upward trend continued in 2011 and could do so further if the Liberal Democrats keep on losing councils. Whilst the trend has been towards a strengthening of the Conservative and Labour joint position it is nowhere near the levels seen in the House of Commons where the two main parties hold 89% of the seats.

When looking at the strength of other parties (which parties apart from the main two have overall control) we see a pattern of diminishing strength from the 1970s. There was a slight blip in the 1960s before dropping to its lowest point in 2008 when just 8% of councils were controlled by parties other than the Conservatives and Labour. However, this is not proof of diminishing plurality as the number of councils with no overall control is high (consistently around the 30% mark since the 1990s - up from just 12% in 1980). This shows that a lot of councils are run by joint administrations, which given the hostility of the Conservatives and Labour towards each other, involves third parties.

**Figure 4: Combined two party control of councils**



Sources: Calculated from *Local elections 2010 Research Paper 10/44* (House of Commons Library, 2010), and *The Local Elections Handbook 2011*, Rallings, M and Thrasher, C (Biteback Publishing, 2011), and *British Electoral Facts*, Rallings, M and Thrasher, C (Total Politics, 2009)

### *Stability*

The stability of the number of councils a party controls is more volatile than the number of councillors. In 2001, Labour lost 13 percentage points of its councils (well over a third of its councils) and yet the next year had regained as many as it had previously lost. What is seen is the 'winner's bonus' found in parliamentary elections replicated in council elections. However, because of the high number of councils with no overall control, the lows are much lower. But because of the winners bonus the highs are similar to the percentage of councillors. Furthermore Conservative control of councils is far higher in the good times and worse in the bad than for Labour. For example, in 1996 Labour had 47% of councillors and 48% of councils, while the Conservatives in 2008 had 43% of councillors and held 50% of councils. Figure 6 shows that Labour has never received a higher percentage of councils as councillors. However the same is not true for the Conservatives. On the other side, when the Conservatives received a low of councillors, around 20%, they dropped to a staggeringly low point controlling just 3% of councils whereas when Labour was on 20% of councillors it still held 10% of councils.

### *National results and council control*

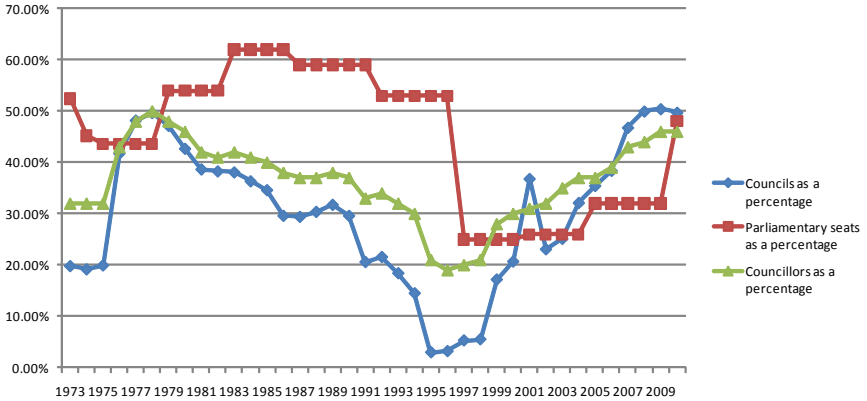
Again there are some correlations between national results and local elections. As with councillors we see an electoral cycle where a party's strength in control of councils increases as it is about to take power nationally (reaching its zenith just before or around the time of the general election that sees them come to power) declines whilst in power and falls rapidly when it is about to lose power in Westminster.

Again a picture emerges in the 1980s of Labour failing to make headway in increasing their number of councils. Labour's performance was fairly flat around the 30% mark in the 1980s, and jumped slightly in 1991. The Conservatives on the other hand steadily lost councils during this period from a height of 50% in 1978 to 20% in 1991. The greatest decline was in 1991 when it dropped 10 percentage points. However, most of this was due to councils being hung or going to other parties than Labour. What is important is the performance of the opposition. Whilst Labour was 15 percentage points ahead of the Conservatives in councils in 1991 its performance was not strong enough to suggest a victory at the next election. This breakthrough only occurred in 1995 when Labour jumped over 10 points to hold 45% of all councils. This is when Labour started to win in areas beyond its heartland, which it required for general election victory.

When looking at the Conservative's performance before they came to power we see they too held over 40% of councils (in 1978 and 2009 they were up at around 50% but as shown before they tend to be favoured in their upturns in council control). Apart

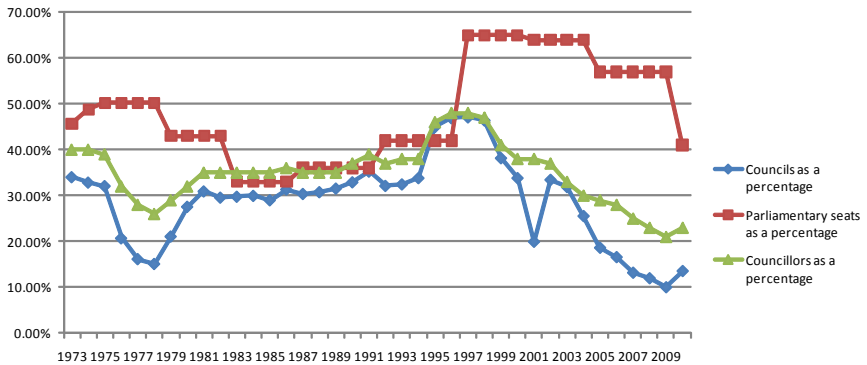
from 1973, in the run up to general elections if the opposition did not hold over 40% of councils then it would remain in opposition.

**Figure 5: Conservative party's control of councils**



Sources: Calculated from *Local elections 2010 Research Paper 10/44* (House of Commons Library, 2010), and *The Local Elections Handbook 2011*, Rallings, M and Thrasher, C (Biteback Publishing, 2011), and *British Electoral Facts*, Rallings, M and Thrasher, C (Total Politics, 2009)

**Figure 6: Labour party control of councils**



Sources: Calculated from *Local elections 2010 Research Paper 10/44* (House of Commons Library, 2010), and *The Local Elections Handbook 2011*, Rallings, M and Thrasher, C (Biteback Publishing, 2011), and *British Electoral Facts*, Rallings, M and Thrasher, C (Total Politics, 2009)

### 3. The 2011 local election Results

This year's local elections were held across most of England (with no elections in Wales, Scotland or London) and the councils which were all up were 30 Unitary Authorities and 124 Second-Tier districts. Going into the election the Conservatives had 46% of Councillors and 50% of councils, Labour had 23% of councillors and 14% of councils and the Liberal Democrats had 19% of councillors and 6% of councils.

Despite not all seats being up for election the results start to indicate where the main parties are heading nationally.

#### *Councillors*

Whilst the focus of this year's results has been on the Lib Dem collapse, the main beneficiaries have been Labour. However, the Conservatives performance would be seen as positive for them with their performance holding up well. The Liberal Democrats now have 15% of councillors, Labour 27% and the Conservatives 46%.

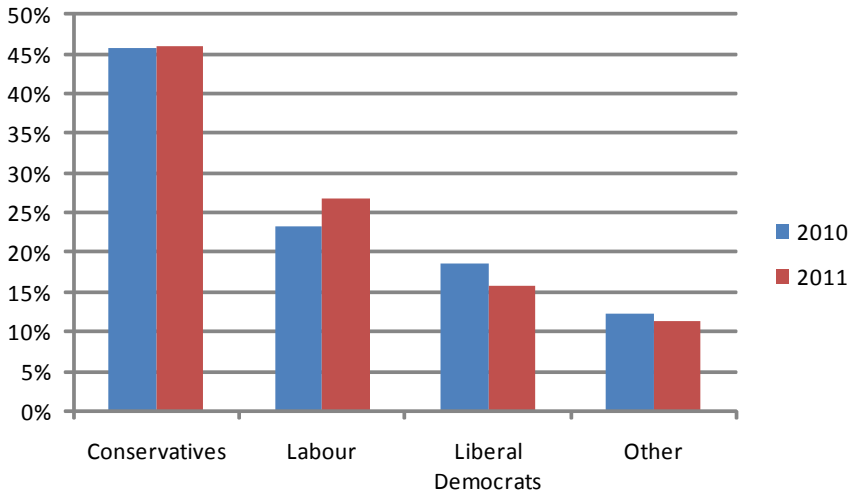
What this shows is that whilst Labour have increased their percentage of councillors by four percentage points given the low base from which they started they still have a long way to go. As there are only a certain amount of gains that Labour can make from the Liberal Democrats if Labour wants to break the 40% threshold it will need to start to make inroads into the Conservative's locally. As already shown, Labour increased their vote immediately after their 1979 election defeat but flat-lined from 1981 to 1989.

In percentage terms of councillors compared to the 2010, the Conservatives have remained the same; Labour has increased by 4 points; while the Liberal Democrats percentage of councillors has fallen by 4 points (to their lowest position since the early 1990s). Historically the governing party's support in local elections tends to fall-off after coming to power. This hasn't been the case for the Conservatives but certainly is the case for the Liberal Democrats. At present the claim that the Liberal Democrats are acting as a shield for the Conservatives seems to be borne out.

#### *Councils*

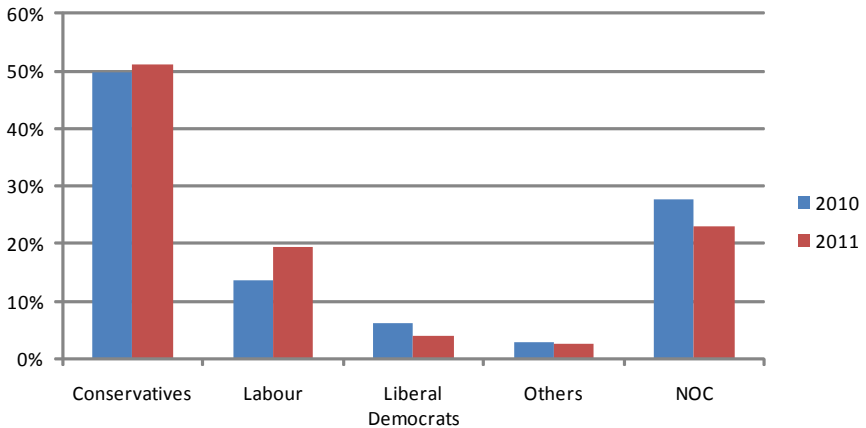
A similar pattern has emerged in control of councils. The Liberal Democrats have lost control of nine councils, Labour have gained 26 mainly winning these from hung councils, and the Conservatives have gained four. The split of councils is now: Conservatives 206, Labour 79, and the Liberal Democrats 16. Labour has won back councils in the north which they would have previously seen as their heartlands most notably in Sheffield and Leeds but also councils such as Gravesham in the south.

Figure 7: Party share of councillors following 2011 elections



Source: Calculated from BBC data and Local elections 2010 Research Paper 10/44 (House of Commons Library, 2010)

Figure 8: Party share of councils following 2011 elections



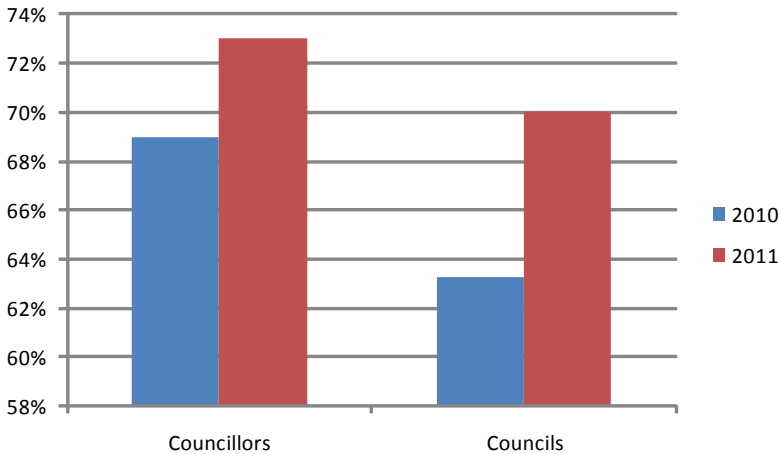
Source: Calculated from BBC data and Local elections 2010 Research Paper 10/44 (House of Commons Library, 2010)

Labour is still far short of the 40% threshold. However, it was starting from a historically low base and the councils which were all up were also largely in the Tory heartlands which may skew the results slightly in the Conservative's favour. For Labour to start to make real headway towards the 40% threshold will require big gains (especially from the Tories) at the next round of local elections.

*'Defragmentation' and the return of two party politics*

The recent Smith institute paper<sup>3</sup> looking at Labour's electoral decline since 1997 was sceptical about the inexorable shift away from two-party politics towards more plural voting patterns. It is certainly the case that in general elections there has been more plurality in voting patterns in recent times. However, this trend seems likely to be reversed (at least in the short term) given the failure to take the first steps towards proportional representation with the no vote in the AV referendum and the impact of the Liberal Democrat's decision to form a coalition with the Conservatives. This pattern seen in opinion polls is also evident in the local election results. This year's results indicate that the third party has taken the hit for being in government rather than the Conservatives. The two main parties combined percentage of councils and councillors now stands at 73% and 71% respectively. This is the highest it has been for councils since 1973 and councillors since 1992.

**Figure 9: Two-party share of councils and councillors**



Source: Calculated from BBC data and Local elections 2010 Research Paper 10/44 (House of Commons Library, 2010)

3 Hunter, P *Winning back the 5 million – understanding the fragmentation of Labour's vote* (Smith Institute, 2011)

## **Conclusion**

This paper has attempted to demonstrate the correlations between national and local election results. Whilst there are many caveats to consider, some trends can be seen. In particular, it seems that the opposition needs to break the 40% barrier in both control of councils and council seats to be on track for victory at a general election.

Analysis of this year's results suggests there was good news for both Labour and the Conservatives. Labour will be happy to be rebounding from previous poor local election results, while the Conservatives will be content to have secured a similar level of support. The big losers have unsurprisingly and undoubtedly been the Liberal Democrats. If the historic 40% mark holds true the challenge for Labour is to start to make further progress at the next round of local elections. Labour is highly unlikely to break the 40% threshold without winning previously Conservative held council wards. This will be a big challenge and one which both Labour and the Conservatives should be paying close attention to in the upcoming local elections.