England's Greens made historic local gains. What next?

Article by James Dennison
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With their recent success in the local elections in England, the Greens have consolidated their position among the three major progressive forces. But to hold together its diverse electorate, the party needs to strike a difficult balance between competing demands.

Last month saw the Green Party in England gain a record result in local elections, doubling their number of councillors to 481 and securing a Green local council majority for the first time anywhere in the northern hemisphere. A majoritarian electoral system has for decades held the Greens in Britain back, but after long-term growth and newfound strategic and geographic focus, it now offers the chance for major breakthroughs in a way impossible elsewhere.

Such success has been relatively rare in the United Kingdom, as underscored by the Northern Irish Greens lacklustre performance two weeks later. As such, it has raised questions both seeking to explain the result and reconsider the party's strength relative to its often more successful continental peers. Moreover, the Greens' high-profile victories in historically Conservative-voting areas show a new electoral potential for a party that – like every corner of British politics – has experienced a turbulent decade.

The headlines for the party – winning 6 per cent of seats available all over the country and taking full control of Mid Suffolk District Council – are unambiguously positive. Even more so given, first, the majoritarian electoral system used in English local elections that disproportionately benefits larger parties as votes are converted to seats and, second, that the party only stood in 41 per cent of all seats, considerably lower than the Conservatives (93 per cent), Labour (77 per cent), and the Liberal Democrats (60 per cent). The Greens have been estimated as winning around 12 per cent of the vote on average in the seats in which they stood candidates – around the same as their impressive 2019 European election performance. The party has life after proportional elections.

Rural success

The broader electoral context sees Labour now having more councillors in Great Britain than the Conservatives for the first time since 2002 – though post-election analyses for them were less overwhelmingly positive – and the Liberal Democrats making significant progress in a similar, albeit more widely-expected, manner to the Greens. Notably, the two biggest Green successes were in rural, previously Conservative-dominated districts in the East of England: Mid Suffolk, where the party won its historic majority, and East Hertfordshire, where they have only been represented in the council chamber since 2019. They also became the biggest party in a handful of other southern rural seats. Elsewhere, in northern South Tyneside, the party is now the official opposition. Even where the Green representation is smaller, just having two councillors in numerous local authorities allows the party to table bills or has robbed one of the two big parties of sole control.

The Greens did especially well in rural areas, reflecting a conscious internal decision to target historically strongly Conservative-voting seats in the hope of gaining 100 councillors. In the end, they won 241. The

only significant stain on the night were 13 lost seats to Labour in Brighton and Hove, including those of their local leader and deputy leader, showing that even the Greens are susceptible to anti-incumbency voting. They had run the council as a minority administration since 2020 and Brighton is also included in the Westminster constituency of their only MP, Caroline Lucas.

The Greens' co-leader Adrian Ramsay – who had prior to the 2010s built an effective operation in neighbouring Norfolk and will stand to be an MP next year – said that the victory in Mid Suffolk would "pave the way for electing the first Green MP in the area". The party's success was by no means overnight, following 20 years of presence on the council and representing the only non-Conservative option in a third of local seats. Aside from benefitting from what the party's other co-leader Carla Denyer described as "a deep dislike of the Tories and Starmer's uninspiring Labour", the party campaigned strongly on local issues including opposition to a planned large-scale housing development, adopting a not-in-my-backyard approach that highlights potential contradictions.

Ten of the most Green local authorities are now located in the East of England. Perhaps most encouraging are signs that the party made its strongest gains in areas where it had already done best in 2019. This suggests an ability to concentrate votes geographically – all-important in majoritarian electoral systems, and something that eluded the Greens in previous high-water marks in 1989 and 2015. The party's clearer geographical focus mirrors the first local and later national growth of the Liberal Democrats in the South West prior to their disastrous participation in the 2010-15 coalition government.

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Such local success will act as a signal to voters in those areas that the best route to removing a Conservative MP is by voting Green. Left-of-centre voters seem to be rapidly re-learning what is their best tactical voting option among the three progressive parties after Britain's political geography had been in a state of flux following the coalition government, the rise and fall of UKIP, Corbyn's leadership and a much-hyped "Brexit realignment". This will be of concern to Labour, who, under Keir Starmer, had hoped to quietly win a Westminster majority by being the sole claimants to the anti-Tory vote after 13 years of largely poor governance. That the Greens are unambiguously considered one of the three progressive options reflects their established position, since the 2015 "Green Surge", within the second tier of the British party system, a far cry from their past status as one of several minor parties on the left. The Greens had spent the previous five years seeking to form various ill-fated "progressive alliances" with Labour and/or the Liberal Democrats, but that seems no longer necessary.

Steady local growth

Over the past two decades the Greens have seen a steady increase in their local election performances, marked by occasional but increasingly regular episodes of rapid growth and visibility. Prior to this and despite having a shared origin in Europe's oldest Green Party, founded 50 years ago, the British Greens fared poorer in the late 20th century than their sister parties in continental Europe and the English-speaking world. Initially a single party, the Greens divided into an English and Welsh, a Scottish, and a Northern Irish party in 1990. Compared to elsewhere in Europe, they faced structural challenges such as a less favourable electoral system and a lack of state funding, as well as weaker anti-nuclear and 1968 movements.

Following their shock 1989 European election success, in which the Greens won 14,5 per cent of the vote, all three parties began competing on environmentalist and left-liberal ground, particularly with the resurrected Liberal Democrats. By the turn of the millennium, the parties were able to find their feet not least thanks to newly proportional, devolved and European electoral systems. In England, steady local growth culminated in the 2010 election of party leader Caroline Lucas MP who had led internal reforms that increased the party's exposure by underlining its anti-establishment, social justice credentials. These changes proved effective in attracting a younger generation of "anti-capitalist" members and signalled that voting Green at Westminster need not be a wasted vote.

Soon after, the entry of the Liberal Democrats into an austerity-dominated coalition, the rise of UKIP, and the 2014 Scottish independence referendum all triggered demand for a certain kind of party that the Greens were already becoming. These factors manifested in a 2015 polling bounce and a revenue-generating membership boost of mainly young, urban university graduates united by outrage at the rightward drift of British politics. This "Green Surge" largely foretold the election of Jeremy Corbyn as Labour leader, which caused support for the Greens to decline and the party's social basis to become less distinct. However, Corbyn's initially successful ambivalent position on Brexit proved unable to hold. The Greens' "Yes to Europe, no to climate chaos" line was successful both at the 2019 European and general elections, as their social basis expanded.

The current Westminster Parliament – dominated by Brexit, Covid-19, leadership changes for the Conservative Party, and the troubles of the Scottish National Party (particularly relevant in Scotland, where the Scottish Greens have shared power with the SNP since their successful 2021 Scottish election) – has seen further opportunities for the Greens to broaden their electoral coalition. The transformed party system is settling into a new political geographic logic whereby the Liberal Democrats chip away at the Conservatives' wealthier seats and Labour fights to retake its former post-industrial strongholds.

This increased geographic focus by the other parties leaves plenty of spare room for the Greens across England, particularly in seats in which they have already built up a presence, dissuading competition from the other two progressive outfits. Moreover, serious issues of sewage and water pollution, a cost of living crisis, underfunded public services, an electorate plainly cognizant of climate change, and echoes of 2015 in terms of both immigration politics and Labour's ambiguous opposition – not to mention the long shadow of Brexit – all act as grist to the Green electoral mill, boosting their relevance to voters.

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Whereas older voters are still more likely to be tied to the big two parties, the pandemic, working for home, and the soaring cost of living in urban centres have all contributed to pushing young Green-sympathetic families into the very areas where the Greens had already planted their flag. Following these local elections, the Greens will be able to make use of their larger local machinery and visibility to attract such voters, while the national relevance and revenues of the party are underscored by established and increasing membership numbers.

Policies under scrutiny

But at the next general election, likely in late 2024, the party will face far greater scrutiny over its policies than it has at recent European or local elections. A fantastical list of policies, incrementally added to over decades via successive party conferences, partially undid them prior to the 2015 election as journalists took aim at plainly unfeasible spending pledges and utopian declarations. Although the party's offer is more streamlined now, its electorate is more multifaceted than ever. Green leaders will have to deftly balance competing demands, particularly when reconciling their more big-state economics with environmentalism and an emphasis on localism and internationalism – not always an internally consistent combination.

Above all, the success of the Greens will still hinge on how tight the race between the two main parties is. Should Labour maintain their large lead, the Greens might pick up seats as a socially and politically diverse set of voters feel free to express their Green sympathies and misgivings towards the direction of Labour. Should the race tighten, however, as it has slowly done since Rishi Sunak took over as Prime Minister, the inescapable logic of first-past-the-post will push more progressive voters towards Labour and away from the Greens yet again.

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