



Rochester and Strood

TOP PHOTO

Ian Richards asks what the Rochester and Strood result means for the main political parties — and for the 2015 general election

Six months out from the 2015 general election British politics is in a state of flux. We are seeing unpredictable swings in party fortunes and the traditional UK party system in meltdown. If the 2010 election put the final nail in the coffin of the two-party system with the creation of the Con-Lib coalition, the rapid ascent of UKIP since then has caused political havoc. If one considers the possible effect of the SNP

on Labour's fortunes in Scotland — gains by the SNP will inevitably mean losses for Labour — the 2015 election is almost impossible to predict.

In the wake of the Rochester and Strood by-election, this e-review provides some thoughts on the state of (some of) the parties.

UKIP

Winning its second Westminster seat was another breakthrough moment for UKIP. The defection of Mark Reckless from the Conservatives to UKIP was a major coup for Nigel Farage. The party has recently built a reputation as the anti-establishment option in UK politics, a radical insurgency force to which the main parties have no apparent answer. UKIP's 3,000-vote majority in Rochester and Strood suggests that its momentum remains strong going into 2015. Having won an unpromising seat (it was only the party's 271st target seat) UKIP is now hopeful of taking dozens of seats at the 2015 general election. Immigration and the European Union are their two trump cards in both Tory and Labour heartlands.

The Rochester and Strood result

Party	Vote (%)	Change (%)
UKIP	42	+42
Conservative	35	-14
Labour	17	-12
Green	4	+3
Lib Dem	1	-15
Others	1	-4

Conservatives

The Conservatives were confident that they could beat UKIP in Rochester, believing it was 'demographically hostile' to the smaller party. To this end, David Cameron visited the seat five times (unprecedented activity for a sitting prime minister in a by-election campaign) and the Tories 'threw the kitchen sink' at the seat. Party managers will nervously watch out for further defections to UKIP. Favourites to 'cross the floor' include Philip Hollobone and Peter Bone.

Labour

Again, Labour proved unable to hold its ground in southern England. In the *Telegraph* Mary Riddell asked how Ed Miliband could have managed to turn 'expected defeat into utter disaster'. Labour's number of votes was almost halved and the long-term decline in its core vote continues. To add insult to injury, its shadow attorney general, Emily Thornberry, resigned her post after tweeting what was seen by some as a highly contemptuous image of the average Rochester voter. Rather than focusing on the Conservative Party's inability to win back the seat, the media painted the outcome as worse news for Labour. This was a tactical own goal by the party's high command.

Liberal Democrats

The March 2013 e-review (www.tinyurl.com/pvu62dr) focused on the Eastleigh by-election. This event was noteworthy because the Liberal Democrats defied expectations to hold on to the seat at a time when their name was politically toxic. UKIP came fourth, but it was their best result in a parliamentary election up to that point. Nearly 2 years later the Rochester and Strood by-election was noteworthy for the near total collapse of the Lib Dem vote. It was the 11th time this parliament that the Lib Dems have lost their deposit. They gathered a pitifully low 0.9% of the vote. The only small sliver of hope for party strategists is that they can hold on to seats where they are the incumbent party. The Eastleigh result suggested this might be possible, but their current position still looks desperate.



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What does this mean for 2015?

At the end of 2014 no party is in a stable position and the upcoming election looks likely to be the most exciting in living memory.

Weblinks to follow up

Conservative Home's take on the result: www.tinyurl.com/pr77jop

Commentary on the result from James Kirkup in the *Telegraph*: www.tinyurl.com/n2m43x4

Questions for discussion

- 1 Why did the Rochester and Strood by-election attract so much media attention?
- 2 Which party will be most disappointed by the result and why?
- 3 How well do you think UKIP will do in the 2015 general election and why?

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