

SUMMARY

Local Election Analysis

Tuesday 6 May 2025, House of Lords

The APPG on Social Science and Policy convened on 6 May 2025 to discuss living standards in the UK. The event was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council.

Chaired by **Lord Norton of Louth**, co-chair of the APPG, the group heard from **Prof Sir John Curtice**, Professor of Politics at the University of Strathclyde and a Senior Research Fellow at the National Centre for Social Research.

Sir John has written extensively about voting behaviour in elections and referendums in the UK, as well as on British political and social attitudes more generally. He is a Fellow of the British Academy, the Royal Society of Edinburgh and the Academy of Social Sciences. He is an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Statistical Society and the Market Research Society.

Initial election results

Reform were clearly ahead with 31% of all votes cast, followed by Conservatives (23%), Liberal Democrats (17%), Labour (14%), and Greens (9%).

These elections took place in predominantly Conservative areas, so Labour's figure isn't nationally representative, but Reform's lead is undisputed.

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Calculating change since previous elections: methodological challenges

Calculating the change in support for the parties since previous elections is far from straightforward for these contests. County elections are in general harder to analyse than district elections. They only happen once every four years. The boundaries of county electoral divisions are rarely the same as those of district wards where elections may have taken place in years when there was not a county council election. Meanwhile, this year in particular there were boundary changes in nearly half the county electoral divisions/wards making it impossible to calculate change in vote share in those wards.

Shown in the slides are two measures of change since 2021 (when these seats were last contested) that can be calculated for each party:

1. An average of the changes across all counties. This, however, reflects changes in the number of wards fought as well as changes in popularity.
2. An average of the change in each party's share of the vote in wards fought by Conservative, Labour, and the Liberal Democrats, both in 2021 and in 2025, together with for the Greens the average change in those of these seats that they fought in 2021 and 2025. In addition, we show the change in Reform's share of the vote since 2021, irrespective of whether or not they fought the ward in 2021.

The methodological good news is that the changes observed in wards without boundary changes are similar to the changes across all counties and thus appear to be representative of the overall elections. All our ward level analysis of change in party support is based on this subset of wards – though, because it makes little difference to the results, we drop the requirement that a ward was fought by all of Conservative, Labour and the Liberal Democrats in 2021 and 2025.

The figures show that Conservative and Labour support were both well down on 2021, that support for the Liberal Democrats and the Greens was little different, while, of course, Reform who fought only a handful of

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wards in 2021 were well up.

But, of course, politically May 2021 was a long time ago. We would like to know how different this year's local election results were from what happened last year when there was a general election.

The slides provide two measures, both imperfect:

1. For those places where district council elections were held last year, the mean change in each party's support since May 2024 after the results this year and last year are aggregated up to the district council level. This measure will reflect differences in proportion of seats fought in the two elections as well as changes in the popularity of the parties.
2. A comparison of the outcome this year with what happened last year across 15 areas, comprising both individual constituencies and aggregations thereof where the electoral division/ward boundaries used this year can be matched with those of current parliamentary constituencies. The calculation, which excludes areas where the boundaries were aligned but there was a significant deficit in the proportion of wards/divisions fought by one or more parties, covers 51 constituencies.

The figures confirm the message of the polls that Reform's support was well up on last year, that Labour's support has fallen heavily, that the Conservatives' support was rather lower than its record low last year, and that both the Liberal Democrats and the Greens doing a little better than in last year's general election.

As in previous years, the BBC estimated what would have happened if there had a nationwide ballot on May 1, if the pattern of voting where there were not elections reflected what happened in those that did, and that all seats were contested by each of the five main parties.

For the first time this put a party other than Conservative and Labour in the lead – Reform were credited with 30%. At 15% the estimated Conservative tally was the party's lowest ever in a local election, while Labour's 20% matched the previous record in 2009.

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We need to talk about Brexit

For some of the parties, including Reform, how well they did was related with the estimated level of support for Leave in the 2016 referendum (based on census data for each ward and the known relationship between party support and the demographic character of an area).

The slides show:

1. Reform's vote was heavily concentrated in pro-Brexit Britain, representing a distinctive section of society rather than general protest.
2. Liberal Democrats are clearly the "party of Remain England," performing strongest in Remain-voting wards, alongside the Greens.
3. Consequently, Reform and the Liberal Democrats/the Greens are at opposite ends of the Brexit division.
4. Conservative support no longer correlates with the level of support for Leave – the party's previous advantage in Leave areas has disappeared. The pro-Brexit coalition that delivered Conservative victory in 2019 has now been "rubbed out".
5. Labour, like the Conservatives, now occupy the middle ground on the Brexit divide. They also perform equally well in pro-Remain and heavily pro-Leave wards.
6. Consequently, the average level of support for Reform was the same (31%) in wards the Conservatives and Labour were trying to defend, but was much lower in wards being defended by the Liberal Democrats (22%) and the Greens (23%).
7. This last point helps explain why both the Conservatives (45% of the seats they were defending) and Labour (50%) lost seats heavily to Reform, whereas the Liberal Democrats and the Greens lost hardly any.

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Brexit as a broader social indicator

Brexit is not merely a policy position but an indicator of broader social attitudes.

Those who favoured Brexit tend to share other socially conservative views: concerns about immigration, scepticism of equality policies, and a belief that Britain should be proud of its imperial past.

These attitudes are linked to educational attainment. Consequently, Reform's share of the vote was significantly higher in areas with fewer university graduates, while the Liberal Democrats, and to a lesser extent, the Greens excelled in areas with higher graduate populations.

The link with educational attainment is also evident in the pattern of the changes in party support since 2021. The Conservatives lost ground most heavily in wards with fewer graduates, while Reform gained above all in these same areas.

On the question of which party Reform's rise has threatened most, there is a crucial distinction to be drawn between threat to votes and threat to seats.

The data show that in wards where Reform's vote was up most on 2021 (by over 40 points), it was the Conservatives who suffered greatest losses. In contrast how well Reform did was unrelated to the rise and falls in support for the other parties.

The loss of the heartlands

Another key reason why both the Conservatives and Labour lost two-thirds or more of the seats they were defending is that both parties lost support most heavily in wards where they were previously strongest. As a result, Conservative support fell on average by 25 points in wards it was defending, compared with 16 points

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where it was not. Meanwhile, Labour's support dropped by 19 points in wards it won in 2021, well above the seven point it differed elsewhere.

For the Conservatives this pattern was a repetition what happened at the 2024 general election and which cost it dearly. In part the pattern was an arithmetic inevitability – in some wards it did not have 20% of the vote to lose.

Curtice advises Labour to focus less on worrying about whether to try and win back votes from Reform or the Greens and instead on why it has seemingly lost the faith of voters who supported them last year in their heartlands. Recent MRP polls also suggest Labour's support has fallen more heavily since the general election in constituencies they previously held.

However, unlike the general election, there was no evidence of tactical voting - against either Conservatives or Labour - in these local elections.

The impact of the electoral system

The electoral system (which in English local elections is not simply single-member plurality but in some instances multi-member plurality, which has a tendency to be even more disproportional) significantly benefited Reform and the Liberal Democrats while, in a reversal of the typical pattern, worked against both the Conservatives and Labour.

As the largest party, Reform, with 31% of votes, received 41% of seats helping it to win overall control of 10 councils, a substantial boost from the electoral system. Some MPs praised first-past-the-post after the 2024 general election for keeping Reform out. However, "this year it let them through the front door".

The Liberal Democrats also benefited despite being third in overall votes. They secured 23% of the seats on 17% of the vote. Their support was more geographically concentrated than that of other parties, doing well in areas

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such as Oxfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Wiltshire with stronger Remain votes and an already relatively high Liberal Democrat vote four years ago. As a result, of the eight councils where Reform did not come first in votes, it was the Liberal Democrats who were ahead in seven - and they benefitted from the electoral system in all seven. The Conservatives only topped the poll in one council, Buckinghamshire (though the boost they received from the system was not quite enough for the party to retain overall control).

The fragmentation of British politics is evident in the high proportion of seats that were won with low shares of the vote. A quarter of all wards were won with less than 35% of the vote, and only 15% with more than 50%.

Key conclusions

Summarising the key findings:

1. Reform's success was founded on capturing the pro-Brexit "Johnsonian coalition" that delivered the Conservatives victory in 2019, and was accelerated by disappointment with both main parties.
2. Reform particularly benefited from the first-past-the-post system because Conservative and Labour lost ground most heavily in their former strongholds.
3. Reform posed no significant threat to Liberal Democrats or Greens, who were insulated by their stronger performance in Remain areas.
4. The Liberal Democrats also benefited from the electoral system due to their geographically concentrated support.

"A lot of what you thought you knew about British politics five years ago is no longer with us."

The presentation benefitted from data compilation and analysis undertaken by Patrick English, Steve Fisher, Rob Ford, and Lotte Hargrave. The results were collected by the BBC.

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Q&A Session on Election Analysis

Is there an “iron ceiling” on Reform/Farage’s vote?

There likely is a ceiling, but for deeper reasons than Farage’s polarising personality. Reform operates in a niche market of socially-conservative, pro-Brexit voters (about 40% of the electorate maximum). Reform’s polling has plateaued around 25% since February, though local elections suggest they performed slightly better. Reform’s ceiling is estimated at around 30%, but Curtice observed that 30% could still make them the largest party if the remaining vote remains fragmented.

Clarification on voting “blocks” and Labour-Reform relationship

On the “blocks” concept, Reform primarily takes votes from Conservatives, while Green success primarily hurts Labour and Liberal Democrats. However, recent polling shows Labour are now losing support in multiple directions: 9% to Reform, 9% to Liberal Democrats, 8% to Greens, and even 5% to Conservatives. This highlights the difference between vote loss and seat loss – Reform’s success against Conservatives can help them win Labour-held seats even without taking many Labour votes directly.

Would proportional representation benefit Reform?

If Reform maintains its significant lead in first-preference votes, other parties would struggle to overcome this through second preferences.

Age demographics of voters

Age is the biggest demographic division in British politics. Older voters predominantly support Conservative and Reform, while younger voters support Labour and especially Greens. Despite Farage’s TikTok popularity,

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Reform voters remain overwhelmingly older, non-university graduates, and male.

Would compulsory voting make a difference?

Compulsory voting would be extremely difficult to enforce in today's political climate. Such measures work best if they are introduced at a time when voting is already a social norm (as in the 1950s).

Will multi-party politics continue?

Multi-party politics is likely to continue because British politics now operates on two dimensions: the traditional left-right economic dimension and the social liberal/conservative dimension (represented by Brexit). These dimensions don't align perfectly – there are socially conservative left-wing voters and socially liberal right-wing ones. This creates the potential for multi-party politics. Reform and Greens primarily articulate the social liberal/conservative dimension. Conservative and Labour must appeal across both, a more difficult task. Additionally, the traditional class-vote relationship has disappeared, with Labour's core vote now being “young, middle-class professionals living in London.”

Conservative vs. Labour strategic concerns

Conservatives need to worry most about Reform. However, competing with Farage on his territory may not be the best approach – instead, they should focus on addressing the concerns voters have about the party's ethics and competence following the 2019-24 parliament. Labour faces problems on both left and right. The advice for Labour is to “go forward” rather than tacking to the left or the right, and develop a clearer sense of direction and narrative.

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Difference between local and general election voting

Liberal Democrats and Greens typically perform better in local elections than general elections. The limited polling on voting intentions for the local elections suggested Reform might actually perform less well in the local elections than in a general election, undermining any “comfort blanket” for the main parties. Polling showing Reform as the most popular party is now clearly credible.

Value of local constituency campaigns

The academic consensus has shifted with a strong local campaign now worth about 1,500 votes (up from 500 in previous estimates), particularly for newly elected MPs. This can be crucial in marginal seats, though it was not enough to save many Conservatives from the “tsunami” that hit the party in 2024.

Labour’s independent challenges

Labour lost to independent candidates in Muslim areas, with Gaza remaining a significant issue.

Labour’s vote was significantly down in areas with substantial Muslim communities, with many formerly Labour voters supporting independents. However, this varied by ward depending on local campaigning and how the Gaza issue was approached.

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