

RISHI SUNAK'S TORIES SUFFER IN LOCAL UK ELECTIONS, BUT COMPOSITION OF THE NEXT GOVERNMENT REMAINS UNCERTAIN

Early Friday morning, as the country prepared for the Coronation of King Charles III the following day, the results of the May 4 local elections began rolling in. While most observers expected the Tories to do poorly, not only did the vote tallies confirm that, but the results appeared to shock Conservative Campaign Headquarters (CCHQ), which reportedly had projected losses of only around 600 seats. All told, the Tories lost 1,061 councillors, out of around 8,000 seats up for election across 230 local authorities, and lost control of 48 councils. Labour had a gain of 536 seats and took control of 22 councils, giving them the best result in local elections since 1997 and making them arguably the largest party in local government, for the first time since 2002. The Liberal Democrats (gaining 407 seats and control of 12 councils) and the Greens also had a good election day. (See [BBC Scoreboard](#).)

Labour's transformation in just three years should not be understated; in 2019, with Jeremy Corbyn at the helm, the party suffered its worst defeat in a general election since 1935, in large part due to the collapse of the "red wall" – traditional working-class strongholds that had voted Labour for decades and voted for the Tories under Boris Johnson in 2019. That Labour defeat was a combination of defections of pro-Leave Labour voters in the north and the Midlands and defections of Remainers in the south who detested Corbyn. Interestingly, this past week, the Tories appear to have lost most heavily to Labour in Leave (red wall) areas and to the Lib Dems in Remain (blue wall) areas.

The question on the minds of most in Westminster is what does this mean for the general election, which must be called, under the Dissolution and Calling of Parliaments Act 2022, by January 2025? While they may or may not presage a general election outcome, these local elections are the last key elections before the upcoming general election.

According to Sir John Curtice, Professor of Politics at Strathclyde University (*see* [BBC post](#)), had the entire country voted this past week (the so-called "national equivalent voteshare"), Labour would have had a 35% share of the vote, the Tories would have had 26% and the Lib Dems 20%. This lead, incidentally as noted above the largest Labour lead since 1997, suggests a projected victory for Labour but not enough for it to form a government on its own. (Labour today has 196 MPs and would need 326 MPs for a Commons majority.) Some experts believe the delta must be at least 10 points for Labour to form a Labour government.

There are plenty of caveats, not the least of which is that there is at least a year to go before the general election (if held in May) and at least 17 months (if held, for example, in October). One also still needs to factor in to whom Green and Lib Dem voters would shift their votes (probably Labour). Effective tactical voting could spell deeper trouble for the Tories, with 55% of the vote between Labour and the Lib Dems. There is also the question of whether or not Labour can siphon off votes in Scotland from the Scottish National Party. Mitigating this is that presumably a number of Tory voters simply stayed home on Thursday, but might well turn out again in the general election.

What this Means for Keir Starmer

There is a significant consensus that Keir Starmer has a messaging challenge. To win, he must do more than benefit from the anti-Tory sentiment that has built up over the past few years. Particularly in the red wall areas, there appears to have been a large anti-Tory vote

rather than an embrace of Labour, aided significantly by the fact that Starmer is not Corbyn and thus Labour avoided the taint of toxicity for all but the far left. That said, Starmer did set out to recover Leave-backing former Labour voters as a pillar of his election strategy.

Starmer has yet to convey what the Labour Party stands for and how he can improve the lives of so many feeling the impact of the myriad crises facing the country. What would a Labour victory mean, for example, for young people unable to buy a home, for the NHS and for care homes?

What this Means for Rishi Sunak

As for Sunak, while Tories saw no evidence of a “Rishi bounce” (and perhaps the results would have been far worse had he not assumed the premiership), there does not appear to be a groundswell from the conservative Tory right to ditch him in favor of Boris Johnson. Although there are recriminations aimed at Sunak and CCHQ, Britain has suffered through a period of political and economic chaos, with a dire cost of living crisis, surging inflation, lagging GDP growth, concerns over the NHS and widespread strikes affecting many across the country. Sunak’s two predecessors, Boris Johnson and Liz Truss, had shredded the party’s reputation for integrity and competence. Sunak did manage to reduce the Labour lead over Tories to about 15 points since taking over as PM in October.

Commentators believe the Tories need to move away from culture war issues (the small boats, aka immigration) and spend more time on housing, the NHS and public spending, although Sunak did include “stopping the boats” in his [litany](#) of action items needed after the “disappointing” election results. Tax cuts and planning reforms championed by the right are unlikely to help, though the pressure on Sunak to cleave right will likely increase in the coming weeks.

We may get a better sense of the Tory after-action responses from the Conservative Democratic Organization, whose Take Control conference headlined by Johnson allies will be held next weekend, and the more right-wing international National Conservatism Conference in mid-May.

That said, it is hard to see how Sunak, or any other Tory leader, could now repeat 2019 and fashion a winning message that resonates both in the red wall areas and the blue wall areas. Boris Johnson pulled it off in 2019, but that outcome may well have been the result of a confluence of factors that cannot be replicated.

Impact of Brexit

A word about Brexit in a political messaging environment in which neither the Tories nor Labour raise Brexit or what the country needs to do (including the prospect of rejoining the single market or customs union) to mitigate the myriad adverse impacts of Brexit.

Commentators have over the past few months poured over polling data on views of the electorate towards Brexit post the pandemic. We now have new datapoints in the aftermath of the council elections.

One pollster [already has concluded](#) that Labour made its biggest gains in Leave areas, while the Tories suffered their biggest losses in Remain areas. According to [BBC data](#), obtained by the Observer and cited in the Guardian, support for Labour was up by seven points relative to 2021 in heavy Leave wards. While the Tories were down 2.5 points in the most pro-Remain

wards, they were down by 5.5 points in the most pro-Leave wards. While Leave sentiment was a heavy predictor of support for the Tories following the referendum, that link is now far less pronounced.

Concluding Thoughts

Keir Starmer does not have a lock on Number 10. Projections have Labour as the likely largest vote-getter in the next general election, but it remains far from clear whether he enters as the head of a Labour government or of a coalition government. A coalition government could also mean a follow-on election well short of the mandated deadline for the next election after 2024. The uncertainty largely hinges on the lack of clarity over whether this past week's results represent deep and irreversible dissatisfaction (at least for the next 18 months or so) with the Tories or, alternatively, enthusiasm for Labour.

Admittedly turnout in council elections is low (and newly introduced voter ID requirements may have further dampened turnout this past week), but the mood clearly suggests a significant thirst for change. And this really should not come as a surprise considering the multiple crises facing the British public. Much does appear, the dazzling Coronation Concert this evening notwithstanding, that the country – from the NHS and other public services to the economy – is broken. The return of competence and normalcy of government that Rishi Sunak largely represents is unlikely to be the change British voters ultimately seek.

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Washington, D.C.

May 7, 2023