

## SUMMARY

### Post-May Local Election Results Analysis with Prof Sir John Curtice

7 May 2024, House of Commons

The meeting of the Social Science and Policy APPG was held on 7 May 2024 and was addressed by Prof Sir John Curtice (Professor of Politics at the University of Strathclyde and a Senior Research Fellow at the National Centre for Social Research). The following is a summary of key points.

#### Assessing the performance of the parties in local elections

Around one in five people do not vote in local elections in the way they say they would in a general election. This helps explain why there are some systematic differences between the levels of support parties secure in local elections and their current standing in the polls – differences that are also in evidence when local and general elections are held on the same day.

The Liberal Democrats have long outperformed their national poll standing in local elections, while more recently this has been true of the Greens too, while Independent councillors now enjoy rather more success.

This means that Labour tends to ‘underperform’ in local elections.

However, the ups and downs in party support in the polls are typically reflected in local elections. So the key question to ask of the results is **whether the ups and downs in the parties’ performances in the local elections broadly match the changes in party support in the polls.**

Most of the seats and positions being contested in the variegated crop of local elections held this year were previously contested in May 2021, when the Conservatives enjoyed, on average, a six-point lead over Labour in the polls. Now they are 20 points behind. This represents a swing of 13% from Conservative to Labour.

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The Conservatives' current level of support is 19 points adrift of what it was three years ago, while support for Labour is seven points higher and that for the Liberal Democrats two points higher.

Since the local council elections in 2023, according to the polls, Conservative support has slipped by six points, and Labour support by one point. The Liberal Democrats have simply held their own.

Meanwhile, support for Reform is seven points higher than in the spring of last year.

### How the main parties performed in the 2024 local elections

The change in party support since 2021 in the three kinds of local election contest that took place outside London all showed similar swings from Conservative to Labour:

- a little over 7% in the local council elections (ward-level samples from the BBC)
- 9% on average in the metro mayoral contests
- 9% across all the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) elections in England

This confirms that there has been a substantial swing from Conservative to Labour since 2021, although the swing in the local results is somewhat lower. Meanwhile, the Liberal Democrats are up a couple of points in the local council and PCC elections, though on average they only held their own in the metro mayor contests.

However, the swing to Labour in London was lower, ranging between 1.5% in the Assembly constituency vote and 3% in the Mayoral contest. This may reflect the fact that Labour was already relatively strong in the capital. All the same, the Conservatives recorded their lowest share of the vote yet in the London Assembly.

Support for the Liberal Democrats edged up on all three votes by around 1%.

The results of the local council elections were analysed and modelled by the BBC to produce a projected national share. This is an estimate of what the outcome in votes would have been if all the country had had a local council election this May. It assumes that those who did **not** have a ballot would have behaved in an

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analogous manner to those who did. **This is not the same as saying that this is what would have happened if a general election had taken place on the same day.**

This estimate put Labour on 34%, up five points since 2021, but down a point on last year.

The Conservatives were credited with 25%, down 11 points on 2021, and one point down on last year. The Conservative tally equals the previous all-time lows for the party recorded by the BBC in 1995 and 2013. The figures mean that, at 9%, the estimated Conservative lead over Labour is the same as last year.

The Liberal Democrats were credited with 17%, up one on 2021, but down three on last year. So once again, the Liberal Democrat performance was well above their current standing in the polls of 9%.

A similar estimate of the 'National Equivalent Vote' produced for Sky and The Sunday Times produced largely similar figures.

### Turnout

Although turnout in the local council elections was on average 4% down on 2021, there is no evidence in the results to support the contention that the poor Conservative performance can be explained by their supporters staying at home.

In the local council elections, where turnout was down on 2021 local elections, support for the Conservatives fell on average by 11%.

### How Reform and the Greens performed in the 2024 local elections

It should be noted that, at 24%, the estimated share for other parties in the BBC's projected national share is up by five points since last year and is almost at the 25% registered in May 2019 when both the Conservatives and Labour were performing badly in the polls.

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This underlines a message from the current opinion polls which has been broadly ignored, which is that at present around one in three say they will vote neither Conservative nor Labour – a level not seen in the general election ballot boxes since 2015.

Around half of the 24% for Others is accounted for by the performance of the Greens, whose support also outstripped their standing of 6% in the polls.

On average, the party won 12% of the vote in those wards where it stood (nearly three-quarters of the total, only slightly fewer than the Liberal Democrats). This was not only an increase of one to two points on their performance in 2021 and 2023, but also a marginal increase in support on 2019 – the party's best performance in English local council elections.

The Green Party's support increased on average since 2021 in the metro mayoral elections by 1.5%, though it did no more than hold its own on the two London Assembly ballots.

Reform only ran candidates in one in six wards, while the party's presence on the ballot papers was also patchy in the metro mayor and PCC ballots. Where the party did stand in the local council elections, it won on average 12% of the vote. This represented an increase of 6.5% on its performance last year in those wards where it had stood last year. The party fielded a full slate of candidates in London, and registered an increase of 5% since 2021 on both Assembly ballots.

### **The Impact of Reform**

One of the key messages of the opinion polls is that most of the support for Reform is coming from voters who backed the Conservatives in 2019. Polls in April suggest that, at 22%, the proportion of 2019 Conservative voters who say they would now vote Reform is higher than the proportion who state they would now vote Labour (17%).

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It may be the case that where Reform were not on the ballot paper, some of those who would otherwise have backed the party stuck with the Conservatives instead.

In wards in the BBC's sample where Reform were **not** on the ballot paper in either 2021 or 2024, support for the Conservatives fell by 11% compared with 2021, while the swing from Conservative to Labour was 7%. In wards where Reform were on the ballot paper this year but had not been three years ago, support for the Conservatives was down by 19%, while the swing to Labour was 12.5%.

That 19% fall in Conservative support matches the 19% fall in Conservative support in the polls since spring 2021, while the swing to Labour almost matched exactly the 13% figure in the national polls.

In wards that Reform fought this year but not last year, support for the Conservatives fell on average by 5% compared with just 1% in wards where Reform did not contest the ward. The 5% fall is similar to the 6% drop registered since last year in the polls.

### Changes in Electoral Geography

Meanwhile, the elections point to potentially significant changes in the geography of electoral support which, if repeated at a general election, would be disadvantageous for the Conservatives. In a repeat of a pattern in evidence in last year's local elections, support for the Conservatives fell (and support for Labour rose) more heavily in wards where the Conservatives had previously been strongest.

In wards where the Conservatives won less than 20% of the vote in 2021, the party's vote fell on average by 5%, while Labour's vote was also down by 1%. In contrast, in wards where the Conservatives won over 50% in 2021, their support fell on average by 17%, while Labour's share of the vote increased by 7%.

This pattern may help explain why the swing to Labour was lower in London, although there is some evidence that the swing may also have been lower in those parts of the capital to which the ULEZ regime was extended last year.

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One of Labour's aims in this parliament has been to increase its support in places that voted most heavily for Leave in 2016 as these were places where the party lost ground most heavily in the 2017 and 2019 general elections.

As was the case last year, Labour did advance more strongly – and the Conservatives fell back most heavily – in wards that voted most heavily for Leave in 2016. This pattern is only partly accounted for by the higher level of support for Reform in such wards.

This does not mean that all of the impact of the Brexit debate on the geography of party support has disappeared.

Compared with the local elections in 2016, which took place shortly before the EU referendum, support for Labour was up by just 1% in wards where more than 60% voted Leave, compared with 4% in those where a majority backed Remain. The equivalent figures for the Conservatives were no change and a drop of 7% respectively.

### Labour weaknesses

There were some notable weaknesses in Labour's performance.

1. **Labour lost ground heavily in wards where the Greens performed best.** In wards where support for the Greens was 10% or more above their tally in 2021, Labour's share of the vote fell on average by 7%. In contrast, how well the Greens performed made little difference to how the Conservatives fared.
2. **Labour lost ground heavily in wards where a large proportion of the population identify as Muslim.** On average, in wards where more than 10% identify as Muslim, support for the party fell by 14% compared with 2021. In some instances, the Greens did well while in others it was Independent or other candidates standing on a platform that was critical of the Israeli incursion into Gaza.

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### Tactical Voting

The Liberal Democrats' hopes of winning seats in the forthcoming general election rest heavily on winning seats that the Conservatives will be defending against a second-placed Liberal Democrat challenger.

Such an outcome would be more likely if supporters of the third-placed Labour candidate were willing to vote tactically for the local Liberal Democrat in the hope that this would help secure the defeat of the local Conservative.

At the same time, it is possible that this behaviour might be replicated by supporters of third-placed Liberal Democrat candidates in seats where Labour are the principal challengers to the Conservatives.

There is clear evidence of anti-Conservative tactical voting taking place in these elections. Support for the Liberal Democrats rose compared with 2021 results, on average by 6% in wards where the party was second to the Conservatives three years ago, better than the party's performance in any other kind of ward.

At 2%, the increase in Labour support in such wards was well below the 8% increase that was registered in wards where Labour started in second place, a performance that was achieved while support for the Liberal Democrats did not increase at all.

Together with the large decline in Conservative support in wards where the party was previously strongest, this helps explain why the Liberal Democrats won more seats than the Conservatives in the local council elections for the first time since 1996. It also explains why the Conservatives almost lost (as had been predicted) nearly half of the seats that they were trying to defend.