

# [***What is at stake in UK local voting ahead of a looming general election***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BXT-YKV1-JC5B-G32M-00000-00&context=1516831)

The Associated Press

May 2, 2024 Thursday 5:57 PM GMT

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**Section:** INTERNATIONAL NEWS

**Length:** 1003 words

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**Dateline:** LONDON

**Body**

LONDON — Millions of voters in England and Wales cast ballots Thursday in an array of local elections amounting to the last big test before a U.K. general election that all indicators suggest will see the Conservative Party ousted from power after 14 years.

[*Prime Minister Rishi Sunak*](https://apnews.com/hub/rishi-sunak) will hope he can point to successes, notably in a couple of key mayoral races, to douse talk that the Conservative Party will change leader again before the United Kingdom's main election, which could take place as soon as next month.

On the other hand, Labour Party leader [*Keir Starmer*](https://apnews.com/article/uk-labour-party-conference-keir-starmer-dd80a2c751c89b6f97858b8250e07ef3) hopes Thursday's local elections confirm what opinion polls have shown for two years — that Labour is on course for power for the first time since 2010.

“The national context going into these local elections is very good for Labour and very bad for the Conservatives,” said Rob Ford, professor of ***politics*** at the University of Manchester.

As is often the case in British local elections, the run-up is about expectation management, so any outperformance can be painted as a success.

That's certainly the case with the Conservatives, who are widely predicted to lose around half of the 1,000 seats they are contesting. They have pointed out, for example, that the equivalent elections were held in 2021 when the government of then Prime Minister [*Boris Johnson*](https://apnews.com/article/boris-johnson-what-to-know-faad810ff08e041130e1759cf5a540e7) was riding high following the rollout of the coronavirus vaccines.

Thursday's elections are important in themselves — voters decide who will run many aspects of their daily lives, such as garbage collection, the state of the roads and local crime prevention measures in the coming years.

But with a general election looming, they will be viewed through a national prism.

Here are five things to know:

**WHAT'S HAPPENING?**

Voters in England and Wales went to the polls for local, mayoral and police and crime commissioner elections.

The voting was the final test of public opinion before the general election, which has to take place by January 2025, but which Sunak, who has the power to decide on the date, has indicated will be in the second half of 2024.

As well as a number of mayoral votes, including in London, where [*Sadiq Khan*](https://apnews.com/general-news-feabda2fb3894596a0acc9fe20a19c02) is expected to win a third term, there were more than 100 elections to local councils and nearly 40 for local police and crime commissioners.

There was also a special parliamentary election in Blackpool South, a long-time Labour seat that went Conservative in the last election in 2019, [*when Johnson won a big victory*](https://apnews.com/article/ap-top-news-elections-london-boris-johnson-international-news-0980b30ccff3be31ca82d99072bfeb73). The results will be announced in the coming days. London's mayoral result isn't due until Saturday.

No elections took place in Scotland or Northern Ireland, the other parts of the U.K.

**WHAT'S AT STAKE FOR SUNAK?**

Potentially his job. Sunak replaced [*Liz Truss*](https://apnews.com/article/liz-truss-europe-economy-business-e18e6e6007c28f6e11cc1a201c545b71), who quit after 45 days following a budget of unfunded tax cuts that roiled financial markets and sent borrowing costs for homeowners surging.

Sunak, who warned about the economic implications of Truss' plan, was supposed to be a steady hand after taking the top job in October 2022. If opinion polls are right, he's not improved the Conservatives' ratings, which had even prior to Truss, been battered by the circus surrounding Johnson, who was ousted over a series of ethics scandals.

With the Conservatives seemingly headed for one of their biggest-ever electoral defeats, there's mounting speculation Sunak may face a leadership battle if Thursday's election results are really bad.

Key to his survival could be the mayoral elections in the West Midlands and Tees Valley in the northeast of England. Should Conservative mayors Andy Street and Ben Houchen hold on, he may win some respite from restive lawmakers in his party. Should both lose, he may face trouble.

**IS LABOUR HEADED FOR POWER?**

In historical terms, Labour has a mountain to climb, if it's going to form the next government.

It's performance in 2019 was its worst since 1935. Starmer has tried to bring the party back to the center of U.K. ***politics*** after the five-year leadership of veteran left-winger [*Jeremy Corbyn*](https://apnews.com/hub/jeremy-corbyn).

Starmer's cautious approach has clearly worked if opinion polls are anything to go by. But it's fair to say that enthusiasm levels are far lower than those that heralded the arrival of Tony Blair before the 1997 general election.

That may be partly because of the more [*challenging economic backdrop*](https://apnews.com/article/britain-economy-recession-interest-rate-720092b0e5ad65f48b10e656e22c6687), but Starmer, formerly a human rights lawyer, lacks the razzmatazz of his predecessor. Even so, Starmer will hope Labour notches up big wins in areas it lost under Corbyn, in the north of England and in the Midlands.

One point of concern is how many traditionally Labour supporters in Muslim communities fail to vote in protest at the party's stance over the conflict in Gaza.

**ARE VOTERS BEING TACTICAL?**

One of the contributing factors to Blair's landslide victory in 1997 came from so-called tactical voting, whereby some voters put aside their preferred political party and back whoever they think is most likely to defeat the Conservative candidate.

Tactical voting has reemerged in recent years and could become key in the general election. It usually involves voters sympathetic to Labour in parts of the country, such as southwest England, backing the much smaller Liberal Democrats and Liberal Democrat supporters loaning votes to Labour in the Midlands and the north of England.

Conservative lawmakers across the U.K., even in supposedly safe seats, will be hugely concerned if voters think more tactically.

**PINCER FROM THE RIGHT?**

The Conservatives don't just face a challenge from the left. Reform UK is trying to outflank it from the right.

Though it is standing in a few seats, Conservatives will worry that support for the party will see Labour and others come through the middle.

Reform UK, which claims to be tougher on issues such as immigration and on [*Brexit*](https://apnews.com/hub/brexit), has said it won't stand aside to give incumbent Conservative lawmakers an easier chance at the general election, as its former incarnation, The Brexit Party, did in 2019. The Blackpool South special election will be particularly interesting on that front.

**Load-Date:** May 2, 2024

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