

# [***The UK's Conservatives suffer historic losses in local elections as Labour edges closer to power***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BY1-WHR1-DYMD-61RP-00000-00&context=1516831)

The Associated Press

May 3, 2024 Friday 7:57 PM GMT

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**Section:** INTERNATIONAL NEWS

**Length:** 908 words

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**Dateline:** LONDON

**Body**

LONDON — Britain's governing Conservative Party suffered heavy losses in local election results Friday, further cementing expectations that the Labour Party will return to power after 14 years in a U.K. general election that will take place in the coming months.

Labour won control of councils in England that the party hasn’t held for decades, and was successful in a special election for a seat in Parliament.

If those results are repeated in the general election, it would lead to one of the Conservatives' biggest-ever defeats.

Though the results overall, admittedly on a low turnout, make for grim reading for [*Prime Minister Rishi Sunak*](https://apnews.com/hub/rishi-sunak), he was able to breathe a sigh of relief when the Conservative mayor of Tees Valley in the northeast of England was reelected, albeit with a depressed share of the vote. The victory of Ben Houchen, who ran a very personal campaign, may be enough to cushion Sunak from any revolt by Conservative lawmakers.

For Labour leader [*Keir Starmer*](https://apnews.com/article/uk-labour-party-conference-keir-starmer-dd80a2c751c89b6f97858b8250e07ef3), it's generally been a stellar set of results, though in some areas with large Muslim populations, such as Blackburn and Oldham in northwest England, the party's candidates appear to have suffered as a result of the leadership's strongly pro-Israel stance in the war in Gaza.

Perhaps most important in the context of the general election, which has to take place by January but could come next month, Labour won back the parliamentary seat of Blackpool South in the northwest of England. The seat had gone Conservative in the last general election in 2019, when then Prime Minister [*Boris Johnson*](https://apnews.com/article/uk-election-boris-johnson-photo-id-038bf7bf72c7490137ec921a5242a2ef) made big inroads in Brexit-supporting parts of the country.

In the contest, triggered by the resignation of a Conservative lawmaker following a lobbying scandal, Labour’s Chris Webb secured 10,825 votes, against the second-placed Conservative opponent's 3,218. The swing from Conservative to Labour, at 26%, was one of the biggest since World War II — more than enough to see the party return to power for the first time since it was ejected in 2010.

Starmer went to Blackpool, a coastal resort town, to congratulate Webb and urged Sunak to call a general election. Sunak has the power to decide on the date, and has indicated that it will be in the second half of 2024.

“This was directly to Rishi Sunak to say we are fed up with your decline, your chaos and your division and we want change," Starmer said.

[*Thursday’s elections*](https://apnews.com/article/uk-local-elections-mayor-london-sunak-starmer-6c08c449c84199520338fd104de6e837) in large parts of England were important in themselves, with voters deciding on who runs many aspects of their daily lives, such as garbage collection, road maintenance and local crime prevention, in the coming years. But with a national election looming, they are being viewed through a national prism.

John Curtice, professor of ***politics*** at the University of Strathclyde, said that the Conservatives are losing around half of the seats they are defending.

“We are probably looking at certainly one of the worst, if not the worst, Conservative performances in local government elections for the last 40 years,” he told BBC radio.

By late evening Friday, with more than half of the 2,661 seats up for grabs counted, the Conservatives were down by more than 410 while Labour was up by nearly 170. Other parties, such as the centrist Liberal Democrats and the Green Party also made gains. Reform U.K., which is trying to usurp the Conservatives from the right, also had some successes, notably in Blackpool South, where it was less than 200 votes from grabbing second place.

Labour won in areas that voted for Britain's departure from the European Union in 2016 and where it had been crushed by Brexit-backer Johnson, such as Hartlepool in the northeast of England, and Thurrock in southeast England. It also seized control of Rushmoor, a leafy and military-heavy council in the south of England where it had never won.

One bright spot for Sunak was the result in Tees Valley, which prior to Brexit had been a traditional Labour stronghold.

Sunak struck a defiant note in Teesside as he congratulated Houchen, whose share was down nearly 20 percentage points from 2021 to 54%, while admitting “disappointing” results elsewhere.

“I’ve got a message for the Labour Party too, because they know that they have to win here in order to win a general election, they know that," he said. "They assumed that Tees Valley would stroll back to them, but it didn’t.”

Sunak will be hoping Andy Street will remain mayor of the West Midlands when that result is announced on Saturday. Labour's Sadiq Khan is expected to remain London's mayor, though there are some concerns being voiced that a low turnout may see him lose to Conservative opponent Susan Hall.

Sunak became prime minister in October 2022 after the short-lived tenure of his predecessor, [*Liz Truss*](https://apnews.com/article/liz-truss-europe-economy-business-e18e6e6007c28f6e11cc1a201c545b71), who left office after 49 days following a budget of unfunded tax cuts that roiled financial markets and sent borrowing costs for homeowners surging.

Her chaotic — and traumatic — leadership compounded the Conservatives' difficulties following the circus surrounding her predecessor Johnson, who was forced to quit after being adjudged to have lied to Parliament over coronavirus lockdown breaches at his offices in Downing Street.

Nothing Sunak has tried to do has shifted the political dial, with Labour consistently 20 percentage points ahead in opinion polls. Whether anyone else can do better than Sunak is a question that may occupy the minds of nervous Conservative lawmakers in Parliament heading into the weekend.

**Load-Date:** May 3, 2024

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