

# [***What we learned from local votes ahead of looming UK general election***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BYF-K371-DYMD-650B-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

LONDON — Millions of voters in England cast ballots Thursday in an array of local elections, the last big test before a looming U.K. general election that all indicators suggest will see the Labour Party return to power after 14 years in the wilderness.

[*Prime Minister Rishi Sunak*](https://apnews.com/hub/rishi-sunak) was barely able to point to any big success for his Conservative Party, confirming that the electoral coalition that gave the party a big win in the 2019 general election has frayed, if not completely dissolved, in the wake of a series of political dramas and the cost of living crisis.

For Labour leader [*Keir Starmer*](https://apnews.com/article/uk-labour-party-conference-keir-starmer-dd80a2c751c89b6f97858b8250e07ef3), the results provided confirmation of what opinion polls have shown for two years — that Labour has recovered from its 2019 low and is on course to win the election comfortably.

Here are five things we learned:

**WILL SUNAK FACE A REBELLION?**

It's possible.

Though the Conservatives lost around half the 1,000 council seats they held, and suffered a huge defeat in the special parliamentary election in Blackpool South, a coastal resort town in the northwest of England, it looks as though Sunak will not face a revolt just yet from anxious lawmakers in his party.

That's largely because the Conservative candidate in the mayoral contest in Tees Valley in the northeast of England hung on, albeit with a much depressed vote. That helped soothe some concerns despite losses elsewhere.

However, the defeat of the Conservative incumbent mayor in the West Midlands could prompt another bout of jitters among lawmakers increasingly concerned about their ability to hold onto their seats in a general election. Sunak is under pressure from different wings of the party to go further right or move to the center.

Overall, the results show that Sunak hasn't improved the Conservatives’ overall position following the damage caused by the actions of his predecessors, [*Boris Johnson*](https://apnews.com/article/uk-election-boris-johnson-photo-id-038bf7bf72c7490137ec921a5242a2ef), who was effectively ousted, and then replaced by [*Liz Truss*](https://apnews.com/article/liz-truss-europe-economy-business-e18e6e6007c28f6e11cc1a201c545b71), whose tenure lasted only 49 days after her economic policies rocked financial markets.

**WHEN WILL THE GENERAL ELECTION BE?**

Probably in the fall.

In the U.K., the date of the general election rests in the hands of the prime minister. It has to take place by January, and Sunak has repeatedly said that his “working assumption” was that it would take place in the second half of 2024.

Though that theoretically could take place as soon as July, most Conservative lawmakers have indicated that the best time would be in the fall, when [*recent tax cuts*](https://apnews.com/article/britain-tax-cuts-budget-hunt-sunak-election-ca912dc3f2d18263e04654d2814e9ab1) may register with voters, [*inflation*](https://apnews.com/article/britain-inflation-interest-rates-485e2f3956bbf139b89b25c60fd53156) has fallen further, and interest rates may have been cut — helping to fuel an economic feelgood factor.

Waiting till the fall may also give the government a chance to cut taxes again in another budget. Conservatives will also be hoping that the controversial plan to [*send some asylum-seekers to Rwanda*](https://apnews.com/article/uk-rwanda-migrants-deportation-law-parliament-0057c79b9cc00e6815c294aceb876788) will have got off the ground and that there is evidence that it is acting as a deterrent for those seeking to make the dangerous crossing in small boats across the English Channel from France to England.

**IS LABOUR HEADED FOR POWER?**

It looks like it.

In historical terms, Labour has a mountain to climb, if it’s going to form the next government. Its performance at the last general election in 2019 was its worst since 1935. Starmer has tried to bring the party back to the center of U.K. ***politics*** after the leadership of veteran left-winger [*Jeremy Corbyn*](https://apnews.com/hub/jeremy-corbyn).

Starmer’s approach has clearly worked if Thursday's results are anything to go by. Labour won control of councils in England that the party hasn’t held for decades, and was successful on a massive swing away from the Conservatives in Blackpool South, which if repeated at the general election would lead to a big majority.

Labour won in areas that voted for Britain’s departure from the European Union in 2016 and where it was 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, showing that it has a broad base of support.

It’s fair to say that enthusiasm levels are far lower than those that heralded the arrival of Labour's 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 Blair.

**WILL IT BE A LANDSLIDE?**

It'll be tough.

One of the contributing factors to Blair’s landslide victory in 1997 came from so-called tactical voting, whereby some voters put aside their political preference and vote for whoever has the best chance of defeating the party they oppose the most. In 1997, that was the Conservatives.

Tactical voting has reemerged and was evident somewhat in Thursday's elections where Conservative candidates lost out to other parties, not just Labour, but also to the centrist Liberal Democrats and also to the Green Party.

The Conservatives may also be outflanked from the right, with Reform U.K. poised to stand candidates across Britain. In Thursday's elections, it was a minimal presence but where the party did stand, it clearly took votes away from Conservative candidates. That was notable in Blackpool South, where the Reform candidate was just shy of usurping the Conservatives into second.

Should Reform, which claims to be tougher on issues such as immigration and on [*Brexit*](https://apnews.com/hub/brexit), do as well in a general election, then it could lead to other parties, notably Labour, defeating Conservatives.

**DOES LABOUR HAVE A GAZA PROBLEM?**

It certainly looks like it.

In some areas with large Muslim populations, such as Blackburn and Oldham in northwest England, Labour candidates appear to have suffered as a result of the leadership’s strongly pro-Israel stance over the conflict in Gaza.

Labour's vote share was clearly impacted, but the effect on its performance in a general election remains unclear, as those seats with a big Muslim population generally have big Labour majorities.

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