

# The 2025 UK local elections

## A political earthquake?

The local elections on 1 May marked a seismic shift in the nation's political landscape. For the first time in modern history, neither Labour nor the Conservatives emerged as the dominant force. Instead, Reform UK surged ahead, capturing the public's attention and a significant share of council seats. The results suggested the waning influence of traditional parties and underscored the electorate's appetite for change. Are we witnessing a new era in British politics?

### Box 1 Reform UK's meteoric rise

Reform UK, under the leadership of Nigel Farage, achieved a groundbreaking victory. The party secured 677 of the 1,641 council seats available (more than 41%) and took control of 10 councils, disrupting the longstanding two-party system. Reform UK's success extended to parliamentary gains too, as it won the Runcorn and Helsby by-election by a mere six votes. Farage's agenda, emphasising stricter immigration controls and economic reforms, resonated with voters disillusioned by traditional parties and positioned the party as a formidable force in future elections.



Nigel Farage celebrating Reform UK's results, 2 May 2025

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### Box 2 Tory decline

The Conservative Party faced an unprecedented setback, losing all 15 councils it previously controlled and a staggering 676 council seats. This marks its worst local election performance since 1889. Leader Kemi Badenoch publicly apologised, describing the results as a 'bloodbath'. Internal dissent grew, with some calling for a leadership change and even Boris Johnson's return. The party's failure to present a cohesive policy platform and address voter concerns was seen to contribute to its dramatic decline.

### Box 3 Mixed outcomes for Labour

Labour experienced both gains and losses. While it secured three mayoralities, including a surprise win in the West of England, it suffered a significant blow by losing the Runcorn and Helsby by-election. That defeat – by just six votes, and overturning a 15,000-vote majority achieved less than a year earlier – intensified internal criticism of Keir Starmer's leadership. Some Labour MPs urged a policy shift to reconnect with core voters. Despite retaining some key positions, the overall results indicated a need for Labour to reassess its strategy and address areas of voter discontent.

### Box 4 Strategic gains for the Lib Dems

The Liberal Democrats capitalised on the electorate's desire for change, gaining 104 councillors and taking control of councils in Tunbridge Wells and Dorset. Its success in traditionally Conservative areas like Cambridgeshire, Oxfordshire and Shropshire underscored its strategic targeting and effective campaigning. These gains not only bolstered its local influence but also positioned the party as a key player in the evolving political landscape.

### Box 5 Progress for the Greens

The Green Party made significant strides, increasing its council seats by over 70, including 10 in Bristol City Council. Its growing support in areas with high student populations and among Muslim communities reflects a broader appeal beyond traditional environmental concerns. While it fell short of an overall majority in Bristol, its performance indicates a rising influence and the potential to shape future policy discussions, particularly on climate and social justice issues.

### Box 6 Fragmentation and the future

The 2025 local elections have ushered in an era of political fragmentation. The dominance of Labour and the Conservatives has been challenged, with smaller parties like Reform UK, the Liberal Democrats and the Greens making significant inroads. This shift reflects a changing electorate seeking alternatives to traditional political narratives. As the UK approaches future general elections, parties will need to adapt to this new landscape, addressing diverse voter concerns and forging broader coalitions to maintain relevance and influence.

### ACTIVITIES

#### Class debate

1 'The election results in May 2025 redefined UK party politics.' Argue for/against this, using 2025 local election evidence.

#### Note-making

2 Analyse different media articles to identify alternative perspectives on the causes and consequences of each party's performance.

#### Essay

3 'The UK party system remains a two-party one.' Make a group or individual plan for this essay, using recent examples.

Nick Gallop is editor of POLITICS REVIEW.