

England's local elections 2018: Theresa May holds on, but the Conservatives remain on the precipice

*The results for England's local elections on 3 May indicate that the Conservatives and Labour parties remain neck and neck for national vote share. **Ben Margulies** argues that, though Theresa May has been more successful in local elections than elsewhere in her premiership, the Conservatives remain in a precarious position, with no easy path to regaining a majority.*



Theresa May leaving 10 Downing Street. Picture: [Number 10](#), via a [\(CC BY-NC-ND 2.0\)](#) licence

Of the many adjectives one wouldn't apply to Theresa May, 'lucky' probably comes near the top of the list. Even her greatest success – taking the Conservatives to their best vote share in 25 years – was a failure, as she lost the party's absolute majority in the House of Commons to the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn.

However, focusing on the June 2017 general election obscures one area where May has actually had quite a lot of success. Under her leadership, the Conservatives have done quite well in local elections, which usually go poorly for the party in power. In 2017, the Conservatives [won an equivalent](#) of 38 percent of the national vote and [61 percent of seats](#) up for election. The latter figure was the party's best since 2009, at the height of Gordon Brown's unpopularity. The Tories also won the mayoralty of the West Midlands, though they hold only one of Birmingham's 10 seats at Westminster.

The 2018 local elections were expected to be different. This was in large part because 2018 saw elections for the London boroughs. London has trended increasingly towards the Labour Party in recent years; the party made gains here in 2015 and 2017, and retook the mayor's office in the year in-between. London voted against Brexit, and its huge pool of EU citizens [have voting rights](#) in local elections. The Grenfell disaster found the Conservative-run council in Kensington and Chelsea wanting. Labour had high hopes on winning Conservative strongholds in the capital, including Barnet, Wandsworth and Westminster.

In the end, the party won none of them. [Early projections](#) from the BBC suggest that, in London, there has been a swing to Labour, but of only 1.5 percent. Outside the capital, the swing was 1 percent in the other direction, and the Conservatives have won control in Basildon and Peterborough. In terms of national vote share equivalent, [the two parties tied on 35 percent](#), meaning that the Conservatives received, at worst, the mildest of reproaches from the electorate (they earned about 42 percent at the last general election; Labour won 40).

What does this mean for British politics? Do these results portend a Tory revival? Probably not. Perhaps the most important statistic in the local election results to date is the complete collapse of the vote for the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). The Eurosceptic outfit was in its heyday in 2013–15, which means that it made significant gains in votes and (to a lesser extent) in seats during the 2014 local elections, which were the last polls for this batch of seats (and which coincided with the last EU Parliament elections).

The story of the Conservatives under May has been the story of the Conservative adaptation to Brexit – or lack thereof. At a policy level, the Tories remain divided on precisely what shape Brexit will take, or what degree of separation that the party will effect. But in terms of the Conservative electoral coalition, Brexit has produced a less ambiguous effect: the party has absorbed a large portion of the former UKIP vote, as voters on the authoritarian side of the political spectrum have migrated, or returned, to a Conservative Party that now promises concrete, credible action to regain control of the borders. This has reflat the Conservatives' vote share, and perhaps added new voters to their coalition – radical-right parties like UKIP sometimes draw in non-voters or former social democratic voters, who might have migrated via UKIP to May's Tories.

Of course, we saw the same UKIP-Conservative movement in the 2017 general election, and the Conservatives made scattered gains outside London even as they lost about a dozen seats overall. The local elections confirm that picture, as John Curtice explains [here](#). The reason the general election proved so dire for May is that Labour's vote share grew faster than the Conservatives'. It may be that as Stephen Bush [suggests](#) in *The New Statesman*, in a low-turnout election, older UKIP defectors came out while younger, pro-Labour voters, and migrants, did not. This would echo similar turnout patterns in the United States, where the Democrats – also the party of the young, urban and often non-white – struggle with turnout in all but presidential elections.

In other words, the local elections don't reveal any new strength for the Conservatives. May's coalition remains intact, and it may be more likely to turn out in second-order elections than Corbyn's, elections where May's own record and personality are less at issue. But in a general election, the sharp disputes over Brexit and socioeconomic issues may drive Labour turnout higher, frustrating any Conservative effort to regain an absolute majority in Parliament.

Nor will replacing May necessarily help. Were the hard-Brexit faction of the party to choose one of its own to replace May, they would risk defections in London, Scotland and elsewhere. If they choose a Remainer moderate, their UKIP wing will likely stay home, UKIP no longer being available to take them back. According to some [research](#) (specifically, by Bornschieer and Kreisi), radical-right populist voters (such as UKIP's core vote) often abstain in the absence of a radical-right party.

That said, one of the major impacts of the local elections is that it removes a major pretext from toppling May. Poor local election results can frighten incumbent parties; these were a factor in the 1990 coup against Margaret Thatcher, and in attempts in June 2009 to remove Gordon Brown. The Tories' relative success deprives May's enemies of a key piece of ammunition against her. She may not be lucky, but she has dodged at least one bullet.

So, May is safe for a few more months, perhaps, but the Conservatives and Labour remain at stalemate. BBC projections suggest that the Conservatives would suffer modest significant losses to Labour and the Lib Dems were the next general election to reflect 2018's English local election results. And since no party but the Democratic Unionists will deal with the Conservatives, the Tories cannot afford any significant losses. The Conservatives, like the nation they lead, remain perched on a precipice.

This article represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit.

About the author



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