



Tony Travers

May 13th, 2025

The two-party system may finally be breaking

*The end of the two-party system has been prophesized many times before, but Labour and the Conservatives had held firm. This time, argues **Tony Travers**, things might be different. The local election results, the voters' aversion towards the two major parties, as well as global trends all point towards British politics entering a multi-party era.*

Enjoyed this post? Sign up to our [newsletter](#) and receive a weekly roundup of all our articles.

The outcome of the 2025 local elections in England has already had a massive impact on British politics. Reform UK's surge, pushing aside both the Conservatives and Labour suggests that the country's "two-party" system may be moving towards being a three, four or even five party system – or six in Scotland and Wales. Labour and the Conservatives both lost two thirds of the seats they were defending, while not only Reform, but also the Liberal Democrats and Greens took many new seats.

Is this perhaps just a "blip" in normal British politics? After all, in the early 1980s, the SDP appeared to be on the way to supplanting Labour as the second major bloc within the two-party system. This did not happen: the first past the post voting system saved Labour at the 1983 general election and the party under Neil Kinnock changed so much that by 1997, with Tony Blair as leader, it was able to win a landslide majority over the Tories.

There are powerful reasons to believe this time things are different. First, the Conservative-plus-Labour vote share has been in long-term decline. In the 1950s, there were two general elections when these powerful parties together won over 97 per cent of the vote. In the intervening period, this percentage has gradually been reduced, though the response to Brexit briefly re-inflated the two-party vote in 2017 and 2019. But at last year's election, Labour and the Conservatives together won just 57 per cent of the vote. The "national equivalent vote" share for the two parties in this year's local elections was 37 per cent. Nothing like this has ever happened before.



There are powerful reasons to believe this time things are different.



Overseas evidence suggests the recent advance of Reform UK in Britain is not an isolated case. The National Rally party's increasing threat to the mainstream in France, AfD's recent successes in Germany's federal elections, Georgia Meloni's premiership of Italy, Javier Milei's economic revolution in Argentina and Donald Trump's presidency in the United States, together imply that a form of revolt against the prevailing Establishment is under way in many countries.

Britain has long seen itself as holding out against the eccentric political change elsewhere. Conservative and Labour leaders have supported the first past the post voting system because, since 1945, it has generally produced majority governments of one or other of their parties. Having said that, the Lib-Lab pact in the 1970s, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition from 2010 to 2015 and Theresa May's post-2017 reliance on the Democratic Unionists tell a rather different story. Indeed, Labour's landslide in 2024 was little more than a quirk of the voting system and can now be seen as a harbinger of the current situation in the country's politics.



The consequences of this year's local elections go far beyond providing further evidence about the fragmentation of support for the Conservatives and Labour.



Polling evidence suggests there is now significant antipathy (or worse) towards both the Labour and Conservative parties. Research will be needed to find out how these previously successful entities now generate such distaste among a significant portion of the electorate. No one imagines British voters ever loved their politicians. See Hogarth's 1755 *Humours of an Election* paintings for evidence that satirists have long captured negative attitudes to the political class. But the current

level of distaste appears to have hardened into something rather different. Support for liberal democracy has fallen in Britain and elsewhere.

The consequences of this year's local elections go far beyond providing further evidence about the fragmentation of support for the Conservatives and Labour. The loss of hundreds of councillors across England will reduce these Parties' capacity to fight elections: councillors tend to form the bedrock of local activism between general elections. In some places, Conservative and Labour MPs now have constituencies with few if any councillors of their own party. Equally, Reform UK will now have much more effective election fighting machines in places from Durham via Staffordshire to Kent.

Assuming Reform manage to govern reasonably effectively (which is a major question) and that they can keep their anti-Establishment credentials, they will be provided with a major opportunity by the major structural changes the government is currently committed to throughout England. Places which don't already have directly-elected mayors with combined authorities of the kind currently found in Liverpool City Region, Greater Manchester, West Yorkshire and the West Midlands will be required to create such combined authorities and, separately, to reform the existing system of councils so there is a single tier of unitary councils everywhere. Moreover, such councils are expected to have a population of no less than 500,000.

All these new councils will be holding elections. So, for example, in Essex and Surrey, where this year's elections were cancelled, there will be polls next year to choose "shadow" authorities to start work in 2027. In that year, there will be many more votes for new councils and mayors. Given the experience of Greater Lincolnshire and Hull & East Yorkshire at this year's elections – both elected Reform mayors – it is easy to imagine how several of the soon-to-be-created mayoralties will be won by the party next year and the year after.



It is hard to exaggerate the impact this year's local elections have had on the psyche of the Labour and Conservative parties. Both privately fear they may be heading, if not for extinction, then for a very different role in the future of British politics.



Unless, of course, Reform fall back from their current position. The next big test for the party (and for all the others) will be next May's round of local elections – which will be far bigger than this year's. There will be all-out elections in London, as there will be for Birmingham city council. Most other metropolitan districts will have elections for a third of their councillors and there will be many others. The Scottish parliament and Welsh Senedd have all-out elections on the same day. Overall, Labour have far more seats to lose next year than the Conservatives, though on this year's showing both parties could lose seats, not only to Reform UK. But the major parties could also lose seats to the Liberal Democrats, Greens and Independents.

It is hard to exaggerate the impact this year's local elections have had on the psyche of the Labour and Conservative parties. Both privately fear they may be heading, if not for extinction, then for a very different role in the future of British politics. Nothing quite like this has happened since the creation of the contemporary political parties in the mid-19th and early 20th centuries. The next 12 months will tell us much more about where the parties, and British government, are headed.

Enjoyed this post? Sign up to our [newsletter](#) and receive a weekly roundup of all our articles.

All articles posted on this blog give the views of the author(s), and not the position of LSE British Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Image credit: [lazylamma](#) on Shutterstock

About the author



Tony Travers

Tony Travers is a Visiting Professor in LSE Department of Government and Director of LSE London. His key research interests include local and regional government, elections and public service reform.

Posted In: Local government | LSE Comment | Party politics and elections



© LSE 2025