

Crunch time for Sunak?

What you need to know ahead of the Local Elections 2024



Image Credit: Sky News

Local Elections 2024

Voters go to the polls today across England and Wales in a variety of local elections. Highest-profile will be the 10 regional mayoral contests in England, including in London, Manchester, and the West Midlands. A third of the UK's local councillors – over 2,600 – are also up for election, along with all 37 Police and Crime Commissioners and the 25-strong London Assembly. There is also a parliamentary by-election taking place in Blackpool South.

These local stakeholders are amongst the most visible in the daily lives of the British electorate. They levy their own taxes and are responsible for administering highly visible elements of governance: voter-facing services like education, roads, waste management, and policing. Their impact is therefore more tangible in some areas than that of the Government in Westminster, which sets national policy through legislation.

While the politically interested tend to treat local elections as an annual stocktake of voter preference, usually in an effort to diagnose the national political mood, this year's elections are particularly relevant as we approach a General Election.

Significant Conservative losses could turn up the heat on the Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, potentially reigniting acrimony in his Parliamentary Party and turning the conversation back towards the question of confidence in his leadership. Conversely, a better-than-expected set of results – even if still bad on the Tories' own terms – could see the Sunak's position assured, for now at least.

With this in mind, there are some interesting contests which will be worth following over the coming days as results trickle through. The results in the West Midlands and Tees Valley, both seemingly tight, will likely define the security of the Prime Minister's position, and the wider narrative as the Conservatives endeavour to

keep their grip on local power. A Labour victory in both seats will be a major disappointment for the Tories, but expectation management is running high on both sides.

Across the country, the way the votes are shared out will be telling. The Conservatives will be especially nervous about Reform UK, as-yet untested on this scale. Though the Party is standing in limited number of seats – 323 across the country – a strong showing would do little to quell Tory fears that Nigel Farage's outfit could pose an existential threat as it looks to supplant them as the predominant party on the political right.

Meanwhile, the main parties will be keeping a close eye on traditional swing areas which often serve as a sign of things to come at general elections; such bellwethers include Walsall and Redditch Councils (Conservative vs. Labour), and Gloucester City Council (Conservative vs. Liberal Democrat).

The 2024 Local Elections will also serve as a dry run for the General Election. With the wind in their sails, Labour can rely on the party faithful to turn out for their campaign. In contrast, the Tories' ability – or lack thereof – to mobilise activists will be on full display at these elections. Supporter apathy is a difficult beast to overcome in politics.

As if all this weren't enough to consider, today also sees a parliamentary by-election in Blackpool South, following the resignation of Conservative MP Scott Benton. With polls pointing to another comprehensive Labour win, the result will likely set the tone for initial analysis of the days results nationwide. It will take an electoral miracle for Sunak and the Conservatives to shift that narrative in their favour.

Scenario 1: Significant losses for the Conservatives

If a week is a long time in politics, three years is an eternity. When the council seats up for election today were last contested, the Conservatives were benefitting from the so-called ‘vaccine bounce’ and were five points ahead of Labour in the national polls.

This saw them gain overall control of 13 councils and add 235 councillors to their tally, many in seats the Conservatives had never previously held. On the same night, Conservative Ben Houchen won over 70% of the vote in the Tees Valley mayoral election, and Tory Andy Street nearly 50% in the West Midlands.

That night, the Conservatives also won the Hartlepool by-election, taking the seat from Labour with over 50% of the vote, suggesting that the remaining bricks in the so-called ‘Red Wall’ were collapsing. It was in this context that, as reported by Tom Baldwin in his biography of the Labour leader, Sir Keir Starmer was seriously considering resigning.

Fast-forward to the present day and British politics has undergone a paradigm shift. Two Prime Ministers on, the Labour are consistently 20 points ahead in the polls, there is ongoing speculation about the Prime Minister’s position, and fatalism about the Conservatives’ prospects has set in amongst both MPs and the grassroots.

Even the most optimistic of Conservative supporters have therefore already factored in that the Party will suffer severe losses. A senior figure at Tory HQ went as far as to tell EGA that ‘of the 985 council seats we’re defending, losing 400 would be a success’.

It is important to say that even if Rishi Sunak were on course for a modest majority at the General Election, the Party’s performance in 2021 means they should expect to make losses tonight. But if the Tories lose half of the seats in contention, by any definition this would constitute a hammering and bring renewed pressure to bear upon the Prime Minister.

Conservative MPs will have factored this into their thoughts about what to do in the immediate aftermath of the elections. Many have already resigned themselves to losing their seats at the General Election, and expect the Party to spend a considerable amount of time in opposition.

The procedural bar – 52 letters of no-confidence – remains high for rebels to move against the Prime Minister. Even then, he would still expect to comfortably win a confidence vote. But if the Conservatives take heavy losses today, come third behind Labour and Reform UK in the Blackpool South by-election, or lose their flagship mayoralities in the West Midlands and Tees Valley, there will be renewed momentum behind those voices already calling time on Sunak’s leadership. Potential candidates to succeed him will be emboldened and may begin dusting off their campaign spreadsheets once again.

Whatever the outcome, MPs will be returning to Westminster on Tuesday. Sunak will be hoping for at least a sliver of good electoral news to cling onto in order to prevent any fresh challenge to his leadership from gaining traction. His fate, however, may be sealed in the ballot boxes at 10pm tonight.

Scenario 2: Modest gains for Labour

Observers have placed much importance on these local elections. The prospect of the Labour Party unseating Tories up and down the country, in council seats and mayoralities alike, is certainly possible – but should it be the expectation? It’s important that we keep a sense of perspective about what constitutes a good performance, and what underperformance looks like.

Given the state of the parties at Westminster, Labour will be disappointed not to make significant gains. The Tories are defending 985 council seats, which they won on a night where they made 235 gains and Labour took 327 losses: Labour will be hoping to take a couple hundred of those back. But failure to make comprehensive gains at this election should not cause us to completely re-evaluate our expectations for the General Election later this year.

The Tees Valley and West Midlands candidates are doing their best to distance themselves from the Conservative Party. Instead, they are leaning into their incumbency and emphasising their independent, personal brands. Conservative sources both in Birmingham and Stockton tell us that they have been informally instructed to avoid mentioning Rishi Sunak or the Conservative Party on the doorstep. This will reduce the tendency of swing voters to oppose the Tories by voting Labour.

It’s also important to bear in mind that those who vote in council, mayoral and PCC elections – all of which tend to have low turnout – are often more attuned to politics than the average voter. This means they will have a good understanding of what the candidates do and don’t deliver for them locally, and may well vote differently at the General Election.

An important consideration is that in recent weeks, the Prime Minister may be allowing himself to feel that some things are starting to go in his favour. The Rwanda Bill has passed through Parliament and deportation flights are scheduled. Conservative voters will be also impressed by the defence spending increase and welfare reform. EGA hears that if the Tories hold the Tees Valley and West Midlands, some in Downing Street are eyeing the prospect of an early General Election to capitalise on growing momentum.

A worse than expected performance from Labour will feed into this feeling.

With all this said, the Labour Party should be expecting to do well this evening. Today’s elections are an important test of their campaigning readiness and muster, and watchers of the results should expect to see seats turning blue-to-red all over the map.

Not winning some totemic targets will deal a blow to Labour Party morale as it prepares for the General Election. But to see tonight’s results as a preview of the General Election would be to miss the point: the national picture looks very different from what are ultimately hundreds of local contests.

Mayoral Contests

Tomorrow, 10 regions in England will elect Mayors, who wield devolved powers in areas such as skills, transport and infrastructure, controlling billions of pounds of public spending. This year there will be new Mayors elected in York and North Yorkshire, the East Midlands, and the North East. Mayoral offices up for re-election include South Yorkshire, West Yorkshire, Tees Valley, Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region, West Midlands and London. Across these regions, Labour will be hopeful to make significant gains, while the Conservatives will be fighting desperately to hold existing Mayoralities.

There are two mayoral races where polling puts Labour and the Tories in close contention. In the West Midlands, incumbent Andy Street is facing a strong challenge from Labour’s Richard Parker. Up in the Tees Valley, meanwhile, the Conservative incumbent Ben Houchen is facing off against Labour’s Chris McEwan. Considering both Mayors won huge shares of the vote at the last election in their respective regions, the races have become remarkably tight. Both areas are nonetheless crucial for Labour, where they hope to win swathes of seats at the next General Election.

A senior Labour source in the West Midlands told EGA that it’s “neck and neck between the two candidates; there’s everything to play for, with an amazing number of Labour activists on the ground campaigning to win tomorrow.”

While Parker has been heavily promoting the Labour brand, Street has been distancing himself from the Conservatives, promoting his own image and leaning into his pledge of growing the regional economy, citing his successes since being elected in 2017.

Meanwhile in the Tees Valley, Labour is carefully managing expectations. With over 70% of the vote last time around, incumbent Tory Ben Houchen is in a relatively strong position and Labour don’t want to give any impression of complacency. With this said, Houchen has been somewhat embattled of late, with accusations of corruption levelled at him publicly by local Labour MPs. Houchen, like Street, has distanced himself from the Tory brand.

Other contests have also drawn close attention from political observers. In the North East region, Labour’s Kim McGuinness is polling just three points ahead of the now-independent incumbent, Jamie Driscoll. Driscoll, a left-winger on the Corbynite wing of the Party, was barred in 2019 from running again as the Labour candidate and subsequently resigned from the Party. He is now presenting a strong challenge in the seat. Although Labour is expected to take it, the race could finish narrowly – a reminder to Starmer that there is a chunk of Labour supporters who remain unconvinced by the change he has sought to bring about in the Party.

There is also talk of Labour taking the York and North Yorkshire mayoral seat, which captures the Prime Minister’s Richmond constituency – a result that may be lost in the figures on the night, but would hurt Sunak personally.

Across the 10 contests, local issues have been a key driver for all the mayoral races for this year’s elections, with Labour seeking to create dividing lines with the Conservatives on improving transport, crime and antisocial behaviour and job creation.

Smaller parties

Although the traditional duopoly remains, smaller parties – the Liberal Democrats, the Green Party and Reform UK – are predicted to achieve notable advances, especially in council seats currently held by the Conservatives. The Liberal Democrats are defending 410 seats and their control of 10 councils; the Greens, meanwhile, will today defend 107 seats along with Mid-Suffolk Council. Reform UK is preparing to hold their 10 seats throughout England.

As has become commonplace at elections, the Liberal Democrats are targeting their heartlands in the South-West and the Home Counties. Their Leader, Sir Ed Davey, will be keen to Hoover up votes in the so-called “Blue Wall” from disillusioned Conservative voters who have no appetite for Starmer’s Labour. Championing key local issues that resonate with their voter base has long been a blueprint for Liberal Democrat success at local election time, and the Party is hopeful to make gains today, following a 2% drop in its vote share last time around.

Reform UK is adopting a narrower approach, focusing on wards where it sees an opportunity to capitalise on their key policy, immigration. The Party is aiming to establish a larger elected foothold in local government, which could serve as a springboard for future electoral success. Though only fielding candidates in around a sixth of English wards, Reform’s localised brand is a powerful one. For example, in Derby, the party runs as ‘Reform Derby.’

The Green Party, meanwhile, is operating a highly targeted campaign, including in areas it believes ecological concerns to be at the forefront of people’s minds. This includes their campaigns in Norwich and Bristol, which have had a strict environmental focus. These smaller parties are not just trying to win seats but are also striving to influence the policy direction of local councils. This is particularly relevant in councils with no overall control, as their success could disrupt the traditional balance of power.

The potential for smaller parties to tip the scales in such regions adds an element of unpredictability to the elections. Ultimately, the chance of capitalising on a damaged Conservative Party is one they will be disappointed not to take up – particularly as they seek electoral momentum ahead of a General Election.

London

Londoners heading to the polls today will have three ballot papers to fill in, as they are invited to return a Mayor of London and two representatives on the London Assembly.

Comparatively little discussion has taken place regarding the contest in London, for the simple reason that nobody is credibly predicting anything other than a third consecutive victory for Labour’s Sadiq Khan.

Sadiq Khan is a tough, skilful politician. While it’s true that London is demographically favourable territory for any Labour politician, since taking the post in 2016 Khan has deftly navigated a series of major changes both in the Government in Downing Street and in the political direction of his own party. This is rather compounded by the lacklustre – and occasionally bizarre – approach taken by his Conservative rival Susan Hall.

But the Labour Party has never had a majority at the London Assembly.

The Party currently has the largest share of seats, with 11 of the 25 up for grabs. Although the Assembly has little real power, the 9 Conservative Assembly Members have vociferously opposed Khan’s agenda for years, capitalising on his perceived failures, most notably on crime, which is significantly up in the capital compared to when Khan took office.

But achieving a majority will be tougher than one might expect. A Labour source at City Hall – who believes Labour is on course for a landslide at the General Election – told EGA that while things are by no means looking bad for the Party, ‘don’t expect us to sweep the board in London. I’m hopeful for a majority but that’s by no means a foregone conclusion.’

Given the comparatively limited powers the Mayor can wield through the Assembly, a Labour majority should be viewed primarily as a significant PR win; a morale-boost, if any were needed, for the Party as it gears up for a General Election. Indeed, it is when the UK goes to the polls later this year that the real prize for Khan will be up for grabs: it is a Labour Government in Westminster that will truly unlock the London Mayor’s ability to carry out the ambitious policies he has set out in his manifesto.

Blackpool South by-election

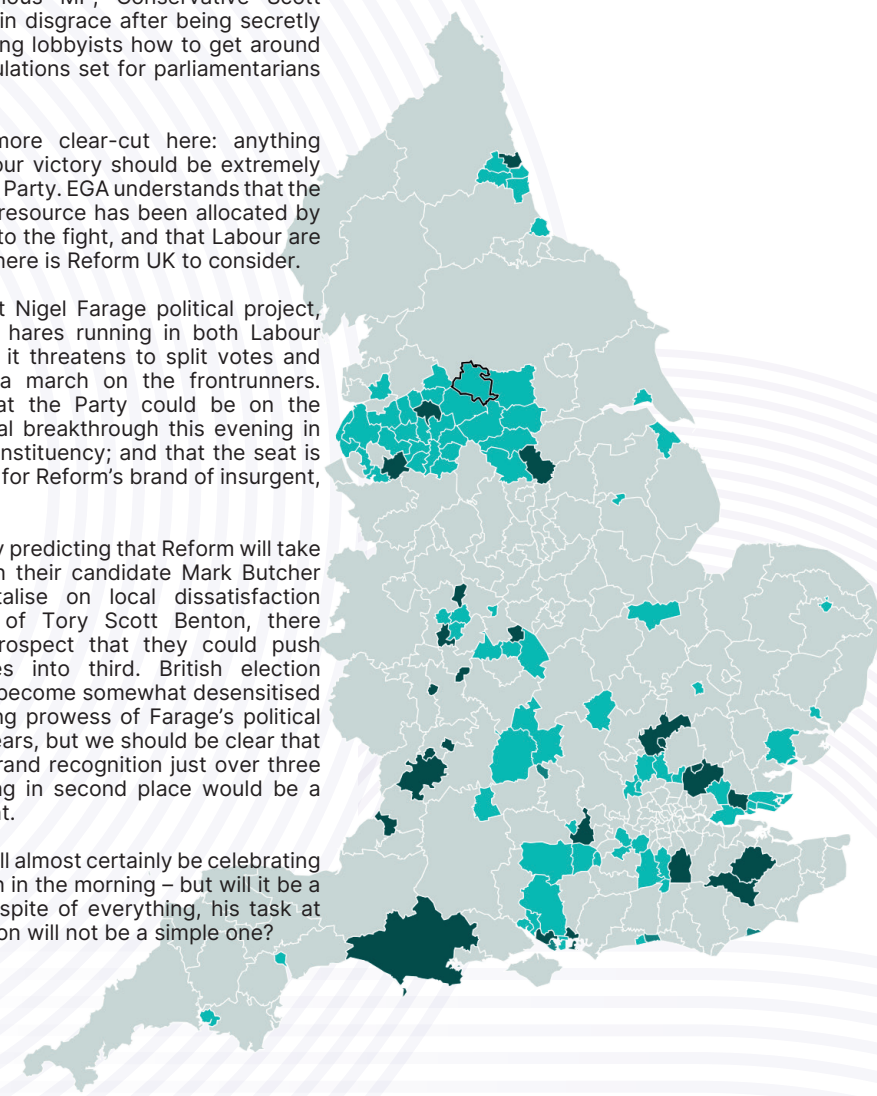
As well as the thousands of local council seats and other offices in contention today, there is a parliamentary by-election in Blackpool South. The previous MP, Conservative Scott Benton, resigned in disgrace after being secretly recorded instructing lobbyists how to get around transparency regulations set for parliamentarians such as himself.

The picture is more clear-cut here: anything other than a Labour victory should be extremely concerning for the Party. EGA understands that the bare minimum of resource has been allocated by Conservative HQ to the fight, and that Labour are bullish. But then there is Reform UK to consider.

Reform, the latest Nigel Farage political project, has been setting hares running in both Labour and Tory HQs as it threatens to split votes and potentially steal a march on the frontrunners. Some believe that the Party could be on the verge of a political breakthrough this evening in the Lancashire constituency; and that the seat is the perfect target for Reform’s brand of insurgent, populist politics.

Nobody is credibly predicting that Reform will take the seat. But with their candidate Mark Butcher seeking to capitalise on local dissatisfaction with the sleaze of Tory Scott Benton, there is a very real prospect that they could push the Conservatives into third. British election enthusiasts have become somewhat desensitised to the campaigning prowess of Farage’s political outfits over the years, but we should be clear that a party with no brand recognition just over three years ago finishing in second place would be a major achievement.

Sir Keir Starmer will almost certainly be celebrating in Blackpool South in the morning – but will it be a reminder that, in spite of everything, his task at the General Election will not be a simple one?



Police and Crime Commissioners

- Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) make sure local police budgets are spent effectively, appoint chief constables, engage with the public and victims of crime to help set police and crime plans, and work closely with the local council and other community organisations on these plans and projects.
- All 37 Police and Crime Commissioners in England and Wales are up for election on Thursday.
- The Conservatives currently dominate the picture. Last time they won 30 PCCs to Labour's 8, with Plaid Cymru holding a single seat in Wales (two Commissioners have been abolished since 2021).
- There is little reliable polling conducted which exclusively refers to PCC elections, but with results having tended to reflect the parties' performances nationally, Labour should be expecting to make gains from a disappointing 2021 low.

Final Thoughts

The results that filter through over the next few days will shape the narrative for the remainder of the Parliamentary Session. If things go particularly badly for the Conservatives, it could be the most serious threat yet to Rishi Sunak's ailing premiership. If the Conservatives fare better than expected – for example, by comfortably holding the West Midlands and Tees Valley mayoralities – it will serve as a rare beacon of hope for Conservatives that a turnaround may just be possible.

Whatever the outcome, it is vital that this is viewed in the wider context: Conservative losses are effectively guaranteed, due to the vast number of seats up for grabs that they already hold, won three years ago when they held a respectable lead over Labour in the polls.

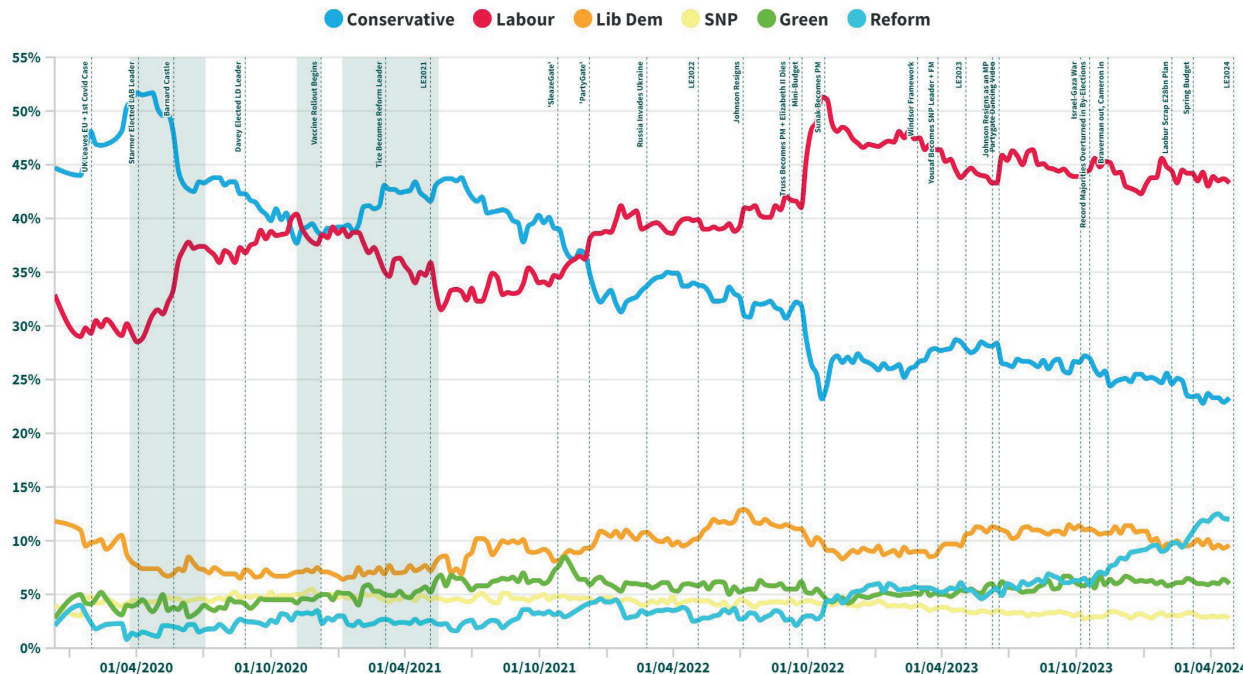
But times have changed, and so too have expectations. Labour will – at least internally – be hoping to win several hundred seats back, and make ground in mayoral contests and the London Assembly. If Sir Keir Starmer's Labour Party falls short in this regard, fears may start to creep in that the job isn't quite done yet. For Rishi Sunak, meanwhile, tonight's results may be rather more existential.

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CONTACT

edelmanglobaladvisory.com
Mohammed.Hussein@edelmanega.com