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Britain

# Six takeaways from the local and mayoral elections

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### **What we have learnt from the recent local and mayoral elections in England.**

#### **1. Tory support is not recovering with Sunak.**

In the run-up to these elections, Sunak tacked to the right. The government televised a roundup of migrants preparing for Rwanda flights. Sunak dramatically announced the threat of extremism after Galloway won Rochdale. He warmly welcomed the anti-trans Cass report. The Tories inaccurately attacked Labour as a party wanting to give amnesty to immigrants. They cut National Insurance to fool voters they may be better off amidst a cost of living crisis fuelled by huge rent and mortgage rises.

Sunak is not a great political operator or campaigner. Suella Braverman urges him to go further right by leaving the European Convention on Human Rights and setting a more brutal cap on net migration. Some of her allies are trying to cajole former Prime Minister Boris Johnson back into a front-line role. Damian Green and Andy Street, representing the shrinking one-nation conservatives, call for Sunak to return to the political centre. The hard right has deferred replacing him before the general election, as the pretenders likely want to avoid getting tainted by leading the Tories to a big defeat. Everything is being prepared for a major post-election reconfiguration on the right. Nigel Farage may be keeping his powder dry for now, aiming to mop up both the Tory Right and the Reform UK Party into a new outfit he can lead. The election results show that racist dog whistles, pro-motorist rhetoric and anti-woke hysteria are not resonating with the electorate. Susan Hall, the pro-Trump London mayoral candidate, led the Tories to an even worse defeat than last time.

#### **2. The Thrasher national vote projection of a hung parliament is not reliable.**

Sunak desperately clings to the dubious national vote projection by Professor Thrasher, an election specialist who predicted Labour would fall 30 seats short. John Curtice, known for his solid track record on elections, and the Ipsos team have both sharply criticised this projection.

People vote differently in local elections compared to national ones. Small parties are more likely to get a bigger vote share as winning a council seat is easier than a parliamentary constituency. Up to 25% of the vote in these elections went to independents, residents' associations, and smaller parties. When choosing the next government, these parties' votes get squeezed. Even the significant Gaza protest vote may not retain its impact in a November election. The projection also excludes Scotland, where Labour could win back up to twenty seats. Labour performed well in many of the Red Wall seats it lost to the Tory/Farage Brexit coalition in 2019. It also gained in the Blue Wall of the South, for example, by winning an area containing the garrison town of Aldershot. Reform UK is hurting the Tories, not Labour, unlike UKIP in 2019. The Liberal Democrats' vote recovery is also more likely to cost the Tories seats than Labour. Starmer is content with an unofficial pact that gives the Lib Dems a relatively free run in Tory/Liberal marginals.

The Labour leadership is happy to run with this projection as they want to avoid fostering complacency and can argue that a tight vote requires them to maintain a very moderate line to win over Tory voters.

#### **3. Reform UK performed well and is hurting the Tories.**

In Blackpool South, Reform UK narrowly missed second place by around a hundred votes. Where it stood against the

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Tories, the government support loss was approximately 5 or 6 percentage points greater. Its score in the West Midlands mayoral election offset Labour's vote leak to the pro-Gaza candidate. In London, it compensated for any Labour losses on the ULEZ (ultra-low emission zone) question in the outer boroughs. Although it only won a single London Assembly seat and one other seat, it achieved a vote share in line with recent national polls at 15%. Tice, the Reform UK leader, appears to rule out any deal similar to the one Farage made with Johnson. He states his aim is to 'destroy the Tory party'.

One risk of a resurgent far right party like Reform UK is how such an outfit could garner support in a crisis or dissatisfaction arising under the Starmer government. Its rise usually combines with the strengthening of actual neo-Nazi groups. John McDonnell has already warned of this danger.

### **4. The Greens performed even better than expected and won votes from Labour.**

In London, the Greens nearly tied with the Liberal Democrats at around 6% in the mayoral race. Previously, they had beaten them into fourth place, but the change to a First Past the Post system with no second preferences meant many progressive voters opted for Sadiq, fearing Susan Hall might sneak in on a reactionary agenda. In the past, many Green voters would give their second preference to Labour to keep the Tories out. Looking at the London Assembly elections, the Green vote held up, and they retained their three seats. In some areas, like North East London or City and East, they reached 20%. Clearly, many progressive voters chose Sadiq in the mayoral race but voted Green for the assembly and list vote. Relatively speaking, the Greens gained the most new seats compared to the ones they were defending in this election. They added a third to their total number of councillors, whereas Labour added a fifth. In Bristol, they are now the largest party, winning all the council seats in their target constituency of Bristol Central. They have picked up disillusioned Labour voters over Gaza and Starmer's U-turn on green energy plans. Former Corbyn supporters have flowed into the Greens for some time now. Although the undemocratic electoral system makes it very difficult for the Greens to replicate this progress in a general election, they appear to have a greater chance of holding their current seat and perhaps winning another.

### **5. Labour is winning from the centre but losing votes to its left and on Gaza.**

Around 60 pro-Gaza councillors, most of whom are ex-Labour, now sit in council chambers, primarily in areas with large Muslim communities. In the West Midlands, the very good vote (11%) for the pro-Gaza candidate meant the contest came down to about a thousand votes. Although a few align with Galloway's Workers Party, nearly all are independents and unlinked to any left wing current.

Starmer, for the first time, has now acknowledged that the Gaza question affected the Labour vote. He talked about 'listening' and having 'heard' the disquiet. There was no reference to the genocide or solidarity with the Palestinian people. His very weak, caveated ceasefire call remained unchanged. He made no mention of British arms supplied to the Israeli army. He gets concerned about losing votes among the Muslim community because it might slightly complicate his passage to becoming Prime Minister. He refuses to heed Muslim Labour activists' call for an apology and a different perspective on Gaza. No doubt there will be much more manoeuvring to highlight Labour's two-state solution and 'supporting the international community's efforts to find a solution.' Humanitarian aid will be on the agenda. Do not expect any Labour leadership to campaign to stop the Rafah assault or demand the opening of aid routes. It is a tribute to the mass campaigning around Palestine that the issue has become central to these elections. Activists outside the Labour Party have done much of the organising. The radical left has played its part.

Tory support is collapsing, but there is no great enthusiasm for Labour. Expectations about politicians' promises are indeed very low. Starmer's project even plays into this by emphasising that the situation is so dire that not much can really be done. Some left activists fear that without the activist army seen under Corbyn, a Labour majority is at risk. So they call for Starmer to look back to the left and bring it back on board. These elections show that Labour can win

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in the current circumstances without the foot soldiers. Canvassing teams have been very scant, bolstered only by councillors getting out. Just today, Hilary Schan, a Momentum leader, left the party to work in left wing networks outside. She is going to work with Owen Jones, who also recently quit over Labour's position on Gaza.

The London result shows that Labour can win without caving into the centre on every issue. Sadiq's ULEZ policy was openly attacked by the Labour leadership, and his call for a ceasefire came months before Starmer shifted his position. His policies also sometimes go beyond the official Labour line, for example, on rent controls or extending free school meals. These mayoral positions give those Labour politicians a certain relative autonomy and profile. Andy Burnham, the Manchester regional mayor, today noticeably called for a ban on council house sales, which is certainly not Labour policy. While most of the other mayors are handpicked Starmer loyalists, both Sadiq and Burnham could pivot for some internal and public opposition to Starmer as Prime Minister.

### 6. Building a left-leaning electoral alternative is very difficult.

Jamie Driscoll, a popular Labour mayor from the Corbyn Left, had his candidature for the new North East region ruled out by the Labour leadership because he had shared a platform with Ken Loach. Driscoll stood, set up a broad activist campaign, and got a very respectable 28% vote (Labour won with 41%). First Past the Post (FPTP) makes it extremely difficult to challenge what is essentially a two-party system.

Some on the left have gotten very excited about the possibility of left candidates, particularly given the scores for pro-Gaza candidates in these elections. However, although the left can build alliances with these councillors, they do not politically claim to be a left alternative. Galloway's Workers Party of Britain only won two seats on the Rochdale council, where he had won as an MP, and took another one in Manchester.

The Socialist Party, through its Trade Union and Socialist Coalition front, stood 280 candidates (as they like to put it, making them the 'sixth biggest party!'). One of their people got 32% in a ward in Southampton, and Hasan Tuney got 31% in Preston. But most of their candidates got very small votes. In London, two of their candidates got around 2.4% in the assembly elections. The TUSC fails to go much beyond a party front and is probably useful for its party building, but it is not the basis for a broad left coalition.

Attempts to unify or network these sorts of candidates are ongoing, with meetings of the No Vote No Ceasefire network and Owen Jones promoting We Deserve Better. Galloway has refused any real coalition and plans to stand even against decent left wing Labour MPs. It may still be the case that there will be a number of left wing Labour candidates worth supporting, such as Jeremy Corbyn. Even if left candidates do not win their campaigns, they can help develop resistance networks that will be important as the Starmer government fails to resolve the crisis in our society. However, these elections do not provide much evidence that we are close to even a network of credible candidates.

The left should actively intervene in the coming general election campaign, but in most areas there will not be a credible left-leaning Labour candidate. We should support Labour there to kick out the Tories, but at the same time keep all the big issues like Gaza at the centre of the campaign. We can organise public meetings independently, with activists both inside and outside Labour. We can link into the various national initiatives around policies we want a Labour government to implement. At the same time, we can win activists to organise an alternative to Starmer's Labour.

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Source: [Anti\\*Capitalist Resistance](#).

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