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**Promises and Polarisation:
Britain's 2025 Party Conferences**

By

Lāsma Kokina



4 November 2025

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For information about Rosa&Roubini Associates, please send an email to info@rosa-roubini-associates.com or call +44 (0)20 7101 0718.

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Lāsma Kokina

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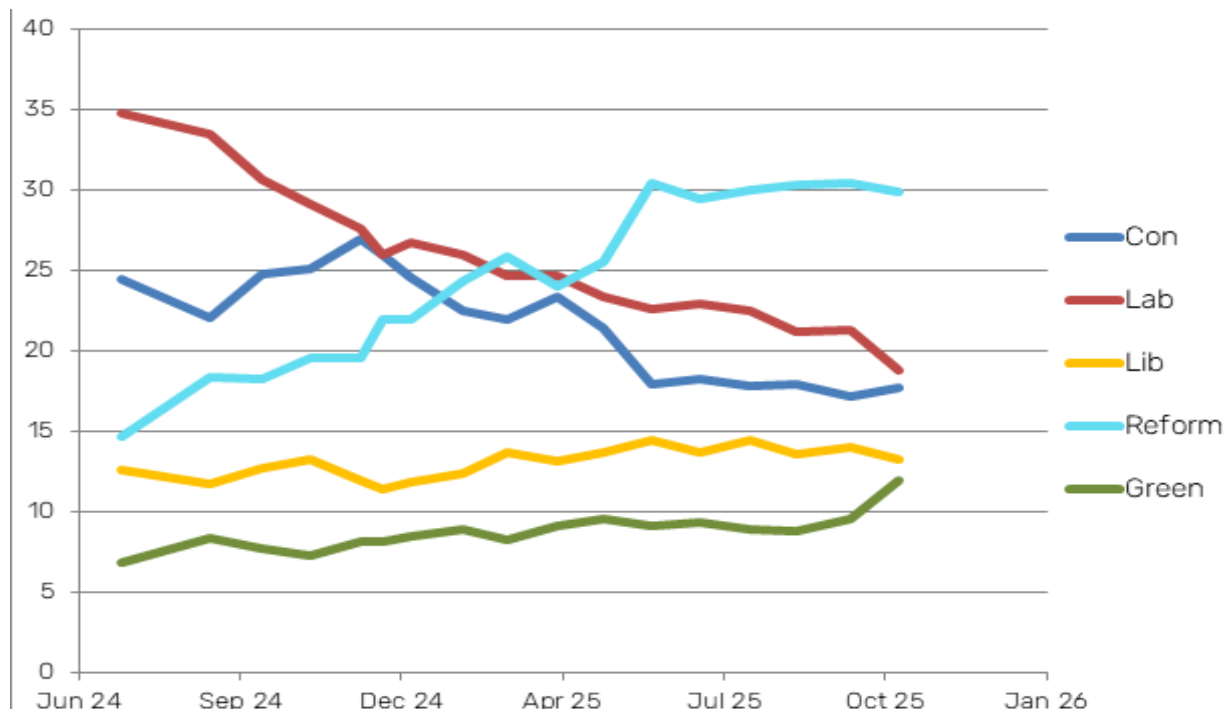
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Executive Summary

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- ✦ **Labour Party conference:** Keir Starmer focused on patriotism, economic responsibility, and national renewal, contrasting Labour's forward-looking vision with Reform UK's "politics of grievance." He ruled out wealth taxes or major borrowing, announced a new education target combining university and technical routes, and supported tighter immigration and ILR rules.
- ✦ **Liberal Democrats conference:** Ed Davey positioned the party as Britain's centrist, pro-democracy alternative to populism, warning against Nigel Farage's politics. The conference reaffirmed support for electoral reform, proportional representation, and votes at 16, while promoting tolerance and respect as core British values.
- ✦ **Reform UK conference:** Nigel Farage presented Reform as a government-in-waiting, promising deregulation, lower spending, and strict border controls. The party pledged to scrap HS2, boost private healthcare, abandon net zero, and expand oil and gas production.
- ✦ **Conservatives conference:** under Kemi Badenoch, the Tories unveiled a new fiscal "golden rule," abolition of stamp duty, and major spending cuts. They promised withdrawal from the ECHR, tighter immigration enforcement, rejection of net zero, cheaper energy via carbon-tax cuts, and limits on "low-value" university degrees.
- ✦ **Overall theme:** across parties, the 2025 conferences reflected deep political polarisation, with Labour stressing stability and patriotism, the Liberal Democrats promoting liberal democracy, Reform pushing populist nationalism, and the Conservatives shifting rightward toward fiscal austerity and hardline border policies.

KEY PICTURE: Opinion Poll Average Since July 2024 Elections



Source: [Electoral Calculus](#)

1. Labour Party Conference

At Labour's annual conference in Liverpool, Prime Minister Keir Starmer used his keynote speech to rally the party, define its vision for the country, and set out contrasts with Reform UK. His address mixed personal reflections with policy pledges and broader themes of patriotism, responsibility, and economic realism. While only one new policy was unveiled, the speech aimed to frame Labour as the party of renewal and steady leadership amid tough times.¹

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Starmer's speech marked another shift in the government's priorities. He declared that the central goal of his administration is to boost economic growth to **raise living standards** and **counter Nigel Farage's Reform Party**.² His speech focused on defining Labour's identity in a changing political landscape, positioning the party as the force of national renewal against what he called Reform UK's pessimism. Starmer devoted much of his address to criticising Farage and Reform UK, portraying them as the main threat to Britain's future. The Conservatives, by contrast, were barely mentioned.³

Turning to **immigration**, Starmer acknowledged that some of his party's decisions would be "uncomfortable" but necessary. He admitted that the government could no longer rely on globalisation or high immigration alone to fill labour shortages.⁴ In addition, in her speech, Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood announced plans to reform the rules for Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR), extending the required residency period from five to ten years. She outlined upcoming consultations on new eligibility tests, including being employed, paying National Insurance, not receiving benefits, having strong English skills, a clean criminal record, and contributing to the community through volunteering.⁵

The prime minister's sole new policy announcement was a shift in **education priorities**. He said the government would drop Tony Blair's long-standing target of 50% of young people attending university, replacing it with a goal of two-thirds entering higher education or "gold-standard" apprenticeships.⁶ In addition, by 2040, Labour's plan aims to have at least 10% of young people enrolled in higher technical education or apprenticeships essential to the economy.⁷

Additionally, a strong theme of **patriotism** ran through the speech. Starmer declared that Labour was "the patriotic party of national renewal," insisting that the Union flag belongs to everyone and should not be surrendered to extremists. He celebrated ordinary citizens who serve their communities and rejected the idea that Britain is "broken."⁸ Labour positioned itself in contrast to Reform UK, portraying itself as the party of forward-looking patriotism and national renewal, while Reform UK was portrayed as embodying a backward, grievance-driven politics.⁹

Finally, Starmer addressed the tough **economic choices** ahead. With speculation over future tax rises, he defended the government's cautious approach, ruling out a wealth tax or higher borrowing. Reflecting on the previous £40 billion in tax increases, he said difficult decisions would continue but insisted Labour would not risk economic stability.¹⁰

2. Liberal Democrats conference

At the 2025 Liberal Democrat Party Conference in Bournemouth, several key discussion themes emerged. Discussions on **electoral reform** focused on achieving fairer voting rather than debating specific systems. The Liberal Democrats for Electoral Reform hosted panels highlighting progress made by the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Fair Elections and the growing, though still cautious, support from Labour MPs for changing the voting system. Speakers emphasised the potential for reform through upcoming legislation such as the Elections Bill. Another panel explored the opportunities created by the government's decision to **lower the voting age to 16**, a long-standing Lib Dem goal. Overall, the party reaffirmed its commitment to proportional representation, votes at 16, and more substantial voter equality.¹¹

Further, Ed Davey used his closing speech to position his party as the **antidote to rising populism**, warning that Nigel Farage's Reform UK could turn Britain into "Trump's America."

He presented the Liberal Democrats as defenders of British values such as tolerance, decency, and respect, contrasting these with what he described as Farage's divisive politics. Davey accused Farage of admiring figures like Elon Musk, Vladimir Putin, and Donald Trump, claiming that only the Liberal Democrats stand on the side of the British people.¹²

Davey stated that his party now stands as the last barrier against what he called "the forces of darkness" led by Farage. Reflecting the party's growing view that Reform UK has become its principal rival, Davey directly linked Farage to Donald Trump, warning that a Reform government would pursue similarly extreme policies. He suggested such a government could undermine the NHS, normalise racism and misogyny, and even weaken gun control laws to the point where schools might have to prepare for mass shootings.¹³

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3. Reform UK conference

The 2025 Reform UK conference in Birmingham focused on projecting the party as a force for economic renewal and national revival, centred on deregulation, reduced government spending, and stricter immigration controls. While speakers promised rapid growth and efficiency, they offered few detailed policy commitments. Reform signalled its priorities: maintaining a free NHS while inviting more private provision, **cancelling HS2** in favour of regional transport investment, **opposing "woke" education, promoting domestic skills training over migrant labour, and launching an aggressive pro-oil-and-gas energy strategy** under the slogan "Drill Baby Drill."¹⁴

Its leader, Nigel Farage, pledged to begin preparing his party for government, arguing that Britain's two main political parties were collapsing and that only Reform UK could channel public frustration and restore hope in order to "make Britain great again." Farage claimed that many Britons tell him he represents "the last chance to get the country back on track," arguing that the nation has been neglected by Labour and is currently led by people he considers incompetent and unfit to govern.¹⁵

Looking ahead, Farage outlined an ambitious electoral strategy, identifying the 2026 Scottish Parliament and Welsh Senedd elections as vital stepping stones toward national power. Reform aims to vet around 5000 potential candidates in preparation for future contests, including a possible early general election. While avoiding detailed policy proposals, Farage energised supporters with pledges to **cut welfare spending, abandon "harmful" net-zero measures, and stop Channel crossings** within weeks of taking office.¹⁶

4. Conservatives' Conference

At its 2025 annual conference in Manchester, the Conservative Party sought to reassert its economic credentials and set out a programme to **revive growth and ease the cost of living**. Party leader Kemi Badenoch unveiled a new fiscal "golden rule" that would split any future savings from a Conservative government equally between reducing the deficit and funding tax cuts. Central to this economic pitch was the **abolition of stamp duty**. The move would be financed through an estimated £47 billion in spending cuts. The Tories also promised a **£5,000 tax rebate** for young people entering their first full-time job to help them save for a home deposit, though the details of how it would apply to those not looking to buy remained unclear.¹⁷

In addition, Badenoch unveiled a slate of hardline and economically austere policies aimed at redefining the party's identity. Central to the announcements was a pledge to **withdraw the UK from the European Convention on Human Rights, repeal the Human Rights Act, and ban irregular migrants** from ever seeking asylum. The party also proposed creating a British version of ICE, the US immigration enforcement agency, to carry out deportations. Alongside these border measures, Shadow Chancellor Mel Stride outlined almost £50 billion in annual spending cuts by 2029, **targeting welfare payments, the civil service, and social housing** for non-UK citizens. The Conservatives would also **abandon the net-zero commitment**, with savings redirected toward tax cuts, signalling a decisive shift away from environmental targets in favour of economic nationalism.¹⁸

On energy, the party also promised to cut household bills by 20% by **scrapping carbon taxes and ending support for wind farms**, while also vowing to **dismantle Great British Energy**, a Labour-created public body.¹⁹

In education, the party proposed capping so-called “debt trap degrees”, limiting university places on courses with poor job outcomes, and reallocating an estimated £3 billion from unpaid student loans to expand apprenticeships. Collectively, the conference revealed a party shifting sharply rightward: fiscally severe, anti-immigration, and intent on reasserting control over law, borders, and institutions.²⁰

NOTES

¹ “Five takeaways from Starmer’s conference speech”, BBC, accessed 29 October 2025, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c36krle3894o>.

² Tim Durrant, “Starmer and Labour wanted to talk about Reform and reform”, Institute for Government, accessed 29 October 2025, <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/comment/2025-labour-party-conference>.

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³ “Five takeaways from Starmer’s conference speech”, BBC.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Nando Sigona, “Labour’s plan for migrants to ‘earn’ permanent residency turns belonging into an endless exam”, The Conversation, accessed 29 October 2025, <https://theconversation.com/labours-plan-for-migrants-to-earn-permanent-residency-turns-belonging-into-an-endless-exam-266382>.

⁶ “Five takeaways from Starmer’s conference speech”, BBC.

⁷ David Kernohan, “The fifty per cent participation target is no more. Again.”, accessed 29 October 2025, <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/the-fifty-per-cent-participation-target-is-no-more-again/>.

⁸ “Five takeaways from Starmer’s conference speech”, BBC.

⁹ Alex Prior, “Labour conference: Starmer takes aim at political opponents but ties his own future to Reform”, accessed 29 October 2025, <https://theconversation.com/labour-conference-starmer-takes-aim-at-political-opponents-but-ties-his-own-future-to-reform-266003>.

¹⁰ “Five takeaways from Starmer’s conference speech”, BBC.

¹¹ Hannah Camilleri, “Strong support for fair votes and jubilant mood at Lib Dem Conference”, accessed 29 October 2025, <https://electoral-reform.org.uk/strong-support-for-fair-votes-and-jubilant-mood-at-lib-dem-conference>.

¹² George Parker and Mari Novik, “Don’t let Farage turn UK into Trump’s America, Davey tells Lib Dems”, *The Financial Times*, accessed 29 October 2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/d766f04c-3a40-4dbe-9731-e05320ff1801>.

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¹⁴ Chris Speight, “Reform UK Conference 2025 – “The Next Step””, accessed 29 October 2025, <https://wacomms.com/reform-uk-conference-2025-the-next-step/#:~:text=There%20was%20a%20dual%20narrative,harden%20and%20the%20door%20closes>.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Piper and Andrew Macaskill, “Reform’s Farage vows to start preparing for government to make UK ‘great again’”, Reuters, accessed 29 October 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/reforms-farage-vows-start-preparing-government-make-uk-great-again-2025-09-05/>.

¹⁶ GK Strategy, “Reform party conference highlights Farage’s professionalisation drive”, accessed 29 October 2025, <https://gkstrategy.com/point-of-view/reform-party-conference-highlights-farages-professionalisation-drive>.

¹⁷ Rebekah Evans, “Five policies from the Tory conference”, The Week, accessed 29 October 2025, <https://theweek.com/politics/five-policies-from-the-tory-conference>.

¹⁸ Kiran Stacey, “A British Ice and more stop and search: Badenoch’s Tories set out new policies”, *The Guardian*, accessed 29 October 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2025/oct/07/badenoch-tories-new-policies-british-ice-stop-and-search>.

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¹⁹ Rebekah Evans, “Five policies from the Tory conference”, The Week.

²⁰ Kiran Stacey, “A British Ice and more stop and search: Badenoch’s Tories set out new policies”, *The Guardian*.