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## **POLICY COMPASS**

### **The State of the Parties**

*And the State of British Democracy: What  
May 7th Will Reveal About Five-Way Britain*

**By**

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**1 May 2026**

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*The State of the Parties*

*And the State of British Democracy: What May 7th Will Reveal About Five-Way Britain*

**1 May 2026**

**Executive Summary**

- ✦ The 2026 local elections are the most volatile in modern British political history, with five parties polling between 9% and 30%.
- ✦ Labour is defending 2,500+ seats from a vote share that has nearly halved since 2022, with regional mayors openly attributing the doorstep difficulty to Westminster rather than local policy.
- ✦ The Conservatives face a more acute version of the same squeeze: an insurgent flank in Reform raising the genuine question of whether they are being defeated or replaced.
- ✦ Reform UK will gain heavily, but the meaningful litmus test of their Westminster ambitions will be illustrated by their performance in seats with parliamentary marginals.
- ✦ The Liberal Democrats and Greens are the quiet beneficiaries of fragmentation: the Lib Dems steadily dismantling the southern blue-wall through targeted by-election capture, with the Greens a significant threat to Labour in London.
- ✦ The deepest question is for Labour. A softer, less dramatic defeat may prove more damaging than a clean one — protecting the broad-tent ambiguous strategy from the strategic reckoning an unexpected defeat could impose.

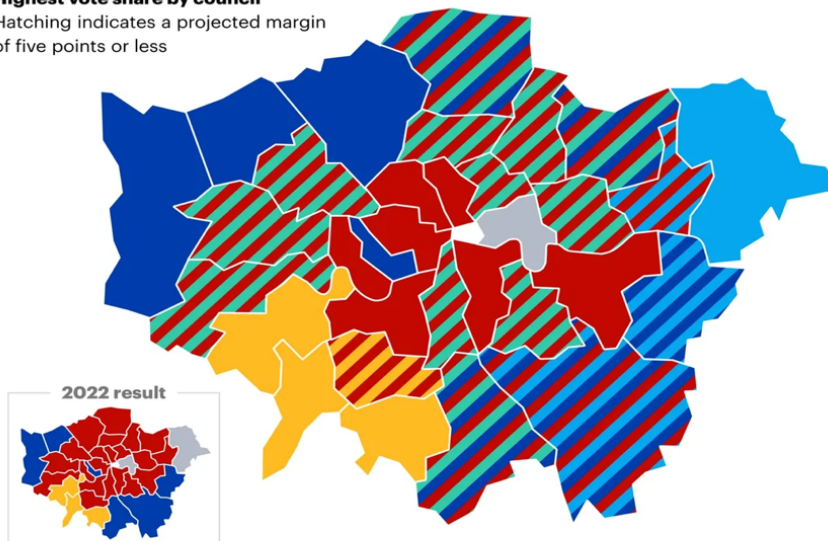
**Key Picture: 2026 London Projections: The Five-Way Squeeze**

On 7th May 2026, local council elections will be held in your local authority. In most wards, there are multiple seats up for election and so you will have more than one vote to cast. Thinking ahead to then, and to how many votes you will have in your ward, which party or parties do you intend to vote for in the upcoming local council elections? Based on modelled responses of 4,548 adults in London

■ Conservatives 
 ■ Labour 
 ■ Lib Dems 
 ■ Reform UK 
 ■ Greens 
 ■ Others / independents

**Highest vote share by council**

Hatching indicates a projected margin of five points or less



Source: [YouGov](https://www.yougov.com)

## Introduction

The upcoming 2026 local elections will be the largest political test of this parliament so far with over 4851 council seats across 134 of England’s 317 councils, and devolved elections to the Senedd and the Scottish Parliament set to be contested.<sup>1</sup> In addition, ‘shadow elections’ will be held for two new unitary authorities due to be created in Surrey in 2027. Many areas across England will also be electing parish and town councillors (**Figure 1**).

Specifically, all seats will be contested in:

- 32 London boroughs
- Six county councils
- Six unitary authorities, including the newly-created East Surrey and West Surrey
- 16 metropolitan districts
- Three district councils

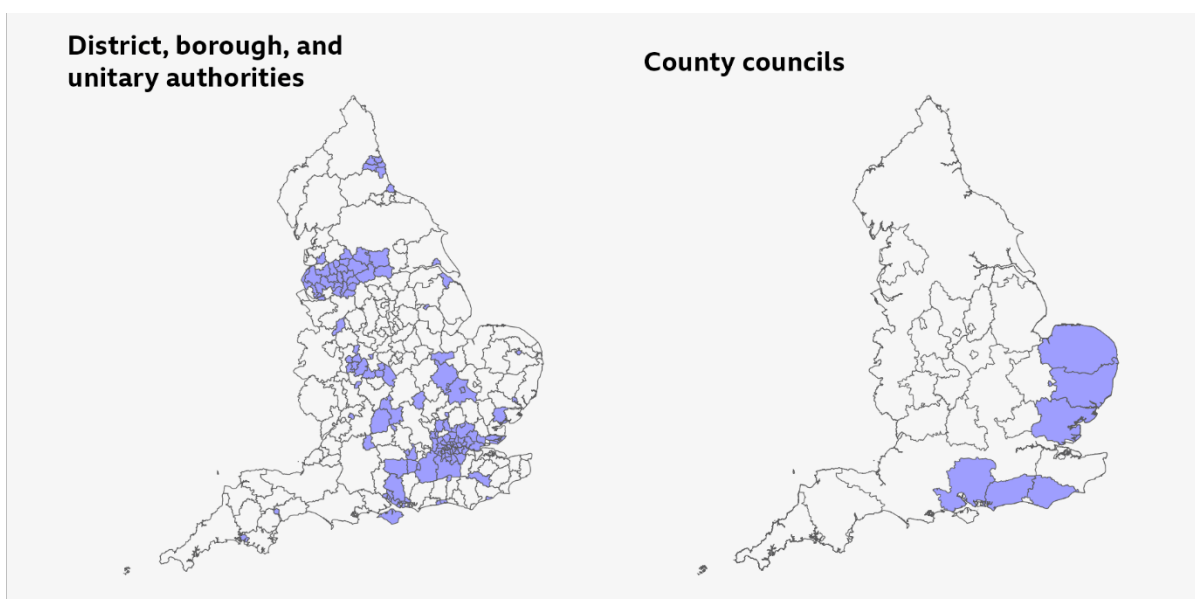
Of the 134 county, unitary and district councils holding elections (excluding the shadow elections being held for two new unitary authorities in Surrey), 96 have a single-party majority:

- 66 have a Labour majority
- 16 have a Conservative majority
- 13 have a Liberal Democrat majority
- One council has an independent majority

The remaining 38 councils are under no overall control. In these cases, either a minority administration or a coalition of several parties runs the council. Of these:

- 17 have Labour leaders
- Nine have Liberal Democrat leaders
- Six have Conservative leaders
- One has a Green leader
- Five have independent leaders
- In five cases the party with the most seats does not lead the council.

**Figure 1: English Local Authorities Holding Elections on May 7<sup>th</sup>.**



Source: [BBC research](#)

These elections are also, by almost every measure, the most volatile local contests in modern British political history. All five parties are polling between 9% and 30%, with Labour (21%), the Greens (18%), and the Conservatives (17%) clustered within a four-point margin, fracturing not only the traditional two-party competition but also the conventional vocabulary used to describe it.<sup>2</sup> The brief survey of where each party now stands explains why and points to three questions that will determine how 7 May is ultimately remembered.

### The State of the Parties

**Labour is in the most perilous position.** The majority of its seats up for election on May 7 were last contested at the peak of Partygate, when Labour polled 35%; it now polls at 21%.<sup>3</sup> As a result, it finds itself attempting to defend more than 2500 seats from a nearly halved vote share, with some projecting over 1000 seats lost.<sup>4</sup> This is not simply a problem of arithmetic. Regional mayors have been increasingly vocal about their discontent, with Sadiq Khan, Steve Rotherham and Richard Parker attributing difficulties campaigning to Westminster psychodrama – including the unresolved Mandelson scandal – rather than to voters’ judgement on labour-run councils.<sup>5</sup> Given this, leadership speculation is already attached to the result.

**The Conservatives face a different but no less acute problem.** Defending 1362 seats, the party is being squeezed simultaneously from two directions: Reform in the Leave-voting heartlands and the Liberal Democrats across the southern blue-wall. Kemi Badenoch’s strategy has tilted rightwards in an attempt to compete with Reform, but the consequence – illustrated by the string of by-election losses since late 2025 – has been an accelerating leakage of centre-right conservative voters to the Lib Dems.<sup>6</sup> Beneath the uncertainty lies a deeper and less openly discussed question, whether the Conservatives will continue to “be defeated” or whether their projected losses are symptomatic of a greater replacement for the historical home of the right.

**Reform UK enters as the dominant insurgent force in British politics,** polling at 30% in the recent YouGov MRP Poll.<sup>7</sup> Nigel Farage, their party leader, has publicly set a target of four-figure seat gains on May 7, backed by over £5 million in committed campaign spending.<sup>8</sup> Projections suggest reform will take outright control of councils in Essex, Norfolk and Suffolk, but as will be elaborated below, the real litmus test of serious national ambition lies in Reform’s metropolitan contests.

**The Liberal Democrats sit in the quietest but most strategically interesting position.** Defending half of the seats of the conservatives, the party has been strategically eroding once-safe Tory seats since autumn 2025.<sup>9</sup> Ed Davey has framed the strategy explicitly as targeted geographical capture in the southern blue-wall – a disciplined approach quietly dismantling centre-right conservatism.

**Finally, the Greens have become an unexpectedly disruptive force on the progressive flank.** Polling at 18% nationally and higher in some London-specific polling, Polanski’s refreshed leadership has begun to take seats once considered impregnable for Labour. Nowhere was this more evident than in the Gorton and Denton by-election in February 2026, which produced a 26.5% swing.<sup>10</sup> Ipsos polling for the New Statesman, suggests half of Londoners are considering voting Green on 7 May, with credible threats to Labour control in Hackney, Haringery, Newham, Lewisham and Camden.<sup>11</sup>

### Three Questions Beyond the Headlines

Three questions will determine how May 7 is ultimately understood and remembered, beyond the topline coverage.

*The first question concerns Reform UK.* Many will be focused on the absolute net gain relative to last year – an important measure, given the 2026 map is less favourable to Reform than the 2025 county-council-heavy one. But the more meaningful test will be geographic. Wins in Leave-voting heartlands such as Essex or Barnsley are already priced in, both substantively and rhetorically. The contests therefore that will demonstrate a plausible Reform UK route to a Westminster governing majority are councils that overlap with the parliamentary marginals that Reform need to flip to achieve their goals. Notably, Barking and Dagenham, Bromley, Gateshead,

Hampshire, Milton Keynes, West Sussex, Birmingham, and Wolverhampton. Reform will, as expected, gain heavily on May 7. Whether Reform gains in the *right* places is the question that determines whether Farage's framing of these elections as the "most important event before the next general election" is justified.<sup>12</sup>

*The second question concerns the Conservatives.* Defending 1382 seats while polling around 17% and squeezed by Reform on the right and Liberal Democrats in the South, they face a similar architectural problem as Labour – but with a credible threat to their insurgent flank. The question is whether 7 May marks the moment Reform becomes large enough and, per above, credible enough to functionally replace them. Reform now exceeds the Conservatives in membership; with senior defections shifting the parliamentary party rightwards. If the elections produce heavy Conservative losses to Reform in the Leave-heartlands and to the Lib Dems in the South simultaneously, Badenoch's tenure will be increasingly difficult to sustain. The more consequential question is whether any successor can move the party in a direction that does not accelerate either flank of decline within an increasingly narrow option set. May 7 may produce the empirical evidence that determines the evolving parliamentary debate over right-wing consolidation around Reform.

*The final and most consequential question is what the results mean for Labour.* Commentary frames 7 May as a referendum on Starmer's survival, but the more important question is what diagnosis the results impose on which voters the party most needs to win back. This is because the local elections will mark the moment Labour can no longer defer choosing its strategic centre of gravity. If the night is dominated by Reform gains in metropolitan boroughs, the internal argument that Labour must shift right on immigration, welfare conditionality and cultural questions may become near irresistible. If instead it is dominated by green gains across London the argument flips: the existential threat becomes the progressive flank, and the pressure may shift significantly towards a greater focus on international affairs, housing, and addressing inequality.

Labour's 2024 strategy was to hold both coalitions simultaneously through message discipline and broad-tent technocratic competence. 7 May may demonstrate that, in a credible five-party system, attempting to defend both flanks may mean losing both.

The most interesting scenario is one that produces no clean signal at all — significant losses to Reform in the Midlands and North *and* to the Greens in London perhaps. In that scenario, the temptation will be to continue deferring the decision and grip harder onto both flanks rhetorically, trusting message discipline to manage the contradiction. This would be the path of least internal resistance, yet maximum decline. A decisive defeat at least imposes clarity whereas a muddled one licenses further ideological drift, hardens the factional fault lines already visible across the PLP, and risks consuming the next two years in the kind of slow, attritional internal contest that has historically broken Labour governments.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Institute for Government. "Local Elections 2026." *Institute for Government*, accessed 22 April 2026. <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainer/local-elections-2026>.

<sup>2</sup> YouGov. "YouGov's MRP of the 2026 Local Elections Shows Reform UK on Course for Significant Gains in the West Midlands." YouGov, accessed 28 April 2026. <https://yougov.com/en-gb/articles/54628-yougovs-mrp-of-the-2026-local-elections-shows-reform-uk-on-course-for-significant-gains-in-the-west-midlands>

<sup>3</sup> ibid

<sup>4</sup> *Local Government Chronicle*. "Rallings & Thrasher: Labour Could Lose 'Well over 1,000' Seats." *Local Government Chronicle*, 31 March 2026. <https://www.lgcplus.com/politics/governance-and-structure/rallings-thrasher-labour-could-lose-well-over-1000-seats-31-03-2026/>.

<sup>5</sup> *The Independent*. "Local Elections, May, Mayors, Keir Starmer." Editorial. *The Independent*, accessed 28 April 2026. <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/editorials/local-elections-may-mayors-keir-starmer-b2964934.html>

<sup>6</sup> Liberal Democrats. "Surrey Shambles: Conservatives Lose Majority Control of County Council After Historic Lib Dem By-Election Win." Liberal Democrats, accessed 28 April 2026. <https://www.libdems.org.uk/news/article/surrey-shambles-conservatives-lose-majority-control-of-county-council-after-historic-lib-dem-by-election-win>

<sup>7</sup> YouGov. "YouGov's MRP of the 2026 Local Elections Shows Reform UK on Course for Significant Gains in the West Midlands." YouGov, accessed 28 April 2026. <https://yougov.com/en-gb/articles/54628-yougovs-mrp-of-the-2026-local-elections-shows-reform-uk-on-course-for-significant-gains-in-the-west-midlands>

<sup>8</sup> *Local Government Chronicle*. "Reform Aims for 'Four-Figure' Seat Gains in Elections." *Local Government Chronicle*, 23 April 2026. <https://www.lgcplus.com/politics/governance-and-structure/reform-aims-for-four-figure-seat-gains-in-elections-23-04-2026/>.

<sup>9</sup> Fiehn, Jack. "Lib Dems Win Six Seats in Surrey By-Elections." *BBC News*, 17 October 2025. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c7819gl3j61o>.

<sup>10</sup> Martin, Matilda. "Greens Sweep to Historic Victory in Gorton and Denton By-Election." *PoliticsHome*, 27 February 2026. <https://www.politicshome.com/news/article/gorton-denton-election-greens-sweep-to-victory>.

<sup>11</sup> Bloom, Dan. "Greens and Reform UK Both Set to Surge in London Elections, Poll Shows." *Politico Europe*, 22 April 2026. <https://www.politico.eu/article/greens-reform-uk-populist-surge-london-elections-poll-polanski-farage-starmer-labour/>

<sup>12</sup> *Sky News*. "Nigel Farage Vows to Go 'Double or Quits' with £5m Local Elections Spending Blitz." *Sky News*, 1 January 2026. <https://news.sky.com/story/nigel-farage-vows-to-go-double-or-quits-with-5m-local-elections-spending-blitz-13489434>.