

## Elections 2026: The Preview

*di Sam Freedman*

It's election time in the UK again and as always I'll be previewing all the contests and making predictions. As this is the biggest set of elections in this cycle, covering 5,000 seats across 136 councils in England, as well as votes for the Scottish and Welsh Parliaments, I'm going to split it into three posts. Today's will cover the overall picture; part two will look in detail at the contests outside of London; and the third (which I'm doing in partnership with the excellent [London Centric](#)) will cover the capital. We've also got some exclusive polling coming later this month, which I hope will add to our understanding of the fragmenting party system.

All this will be interspersed with plenty of other content on domestic and global events for those of you are, understandably, not interested in this much detail on UK elections.

### **The stakes**

At the headline level we know what will happen. Labour and the Tories will get hammered everywhere; Reform and the Greens will be the big winners in England; the Lib Dems will continue to do well in their battlegrounds; the SNP will win again in Scotland; and Plaid Cymru will likely be the largest party in Wales for the first time.

But the extent of these trends matters a lot. If the insurgent parties of left and right can meet high expectations they will consolidate control of their relative blocs, making it harder for the traditional parties to rely on their standard arguments about tactical voting in future elections.

The magnitude of Labour's defeat could determine how much time Keir Starmer has left. If his party can hold on to a decent number of its safer councils against the Reform/Green surge it will feel like a victory. Doing well enough in Wales to stay in government, albeit in a coalition with Plaid, would feel very different to ending up on

the Senedd backbenches, and not even as the main opposition party. In Scotland they could be the main opposition or come fourth.

It's unlikely that there will be an immediate move against Starmer after the elections, however bad the result. His position has been temporarily strengthened by the seriousness of the global situation and worries about alternative options. MPs have welcomed his handling of the Iran crisis, given limited options. But, as I've said before, the overthrow of leaders rarely happens in response to a known event. Instead bad election results destabilise leaders and leave MPs more worried for their future, which means they are more likely to panic when a sudden crisis erupts. This is what happened with Boris Johnson. Results in the May 2022 local elections were worse than expected for the Tories, and led to a no confidence vote being triggered a month later. He won that, but was destabilised enough that when the Chris Pincher scandal broke that July he was done for.

Starmer has few strong supporters in his party. There is widespread frustration at his lack of direction across all factions. He is still in place because there isn't agreement on a successor, but that means he remains vulnerable to a quick shift in mood. And the gloomier MPs are feeling about their future the more likely they are to join in.

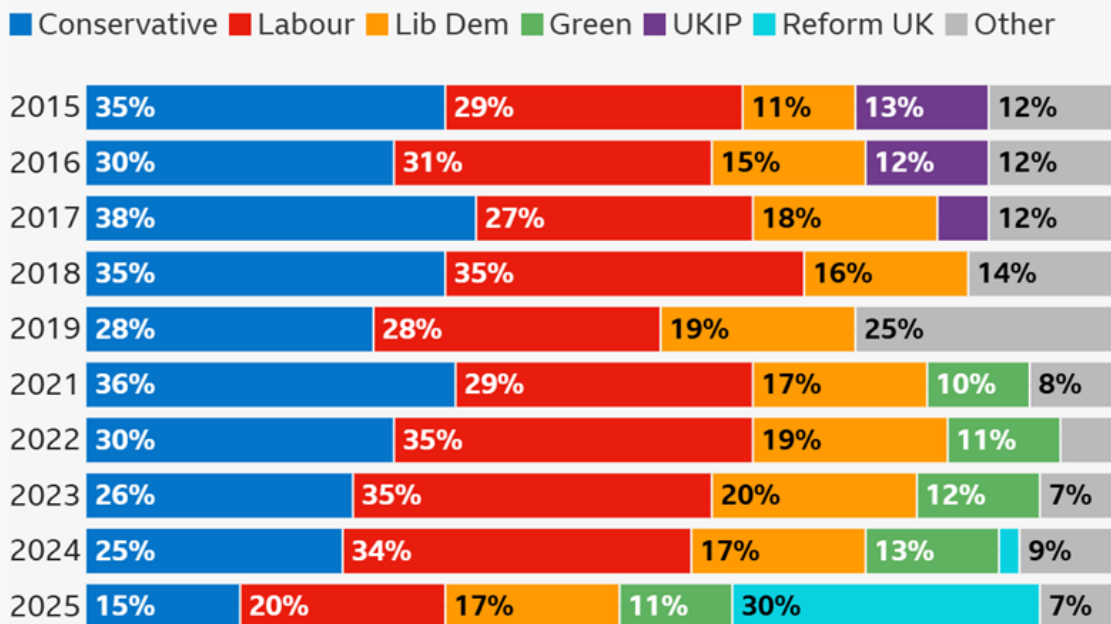
As for the Tories, they seem stuck in a strange equilibrium. They know they'll do badly, and their polling hasn't improved at all since last year. But there's also no interest in changing leader again and an apparent acceptance that there's no route to a majority without a collapse in the Reform vote. Remaining moderate MPs have largely checked out. How bad a result would they need to shock them into action?

### **England:**

To assess the likely shift in seat numbers across all councils we need to start with the national vote share for each party. This is how [it's changed over time](#):

## Predicted National Share over time

Estimate of how Great Britain would have voted if local elections had been held nationwide



BBC

It's tricky to predict because it's never an exact match with national polling, both because there are local factors at play but also due to differing levels of enthusiasm across parties. Turnout for locals is significantly lower than general elections, which makes enthusiasm more important.

In 2025 the Conservatives and Labour both underperformed their polling average by around four percentage points. Reform significantly outperformed, by six points, which meant then won more councils than anyone (including them) expected. The Lib Dems and Greens also outperformed by a couple of points.

Broadly we should expect the same pattern again but there are some important differences this year. In 2025 Reform were on a big upswing in the run up to elections, whereas this year their polling average has been falling for the past few months. It's now at its lowest level since December 2024. That [suggests waning enthusiasm](#) outside of their core support.

The other big change is that the Greens have doubled their vote share since last year to 17%, though this average hides a wide spread between different pollsters. Regardless of percentage, all pollsters are seeing Green momentum after their by-election win in Gorton and Denton which suggests enthusiasm is probably high. The party has started winning local by-elections in recent weeks too.

It's also worth noting that "Your Party" will be [backing around 250 candidates](#), mostly running as independents in areas like Tower Hamlets and Newham, where there is a large Muslim vote that's already moved strongly against Labour. Rupert Lowe's new "Restore UK" party is [only competing in nine Norfolk council seats](#) that sit within his Great Yarmouth constituency. If these parties were standing in more areas they would shave a few points off the Greens and Reform.

My guess is the net result of all this is Reform will not get quite the same level of boost as last time but the Greens will get a slightly bigger one, while Labour and the Tories will continue to underperform. So my estimated vote share is:

Reform: 27%

Greens: 20%

Lib Dems: 16%

Tories: 15%

Labour: 14%

Others: 9%

Needless to say a national vote share that looked something like this would lead to calamitous results for the two traditional main parties and the loss of most of the seats they are defending.

Translating these results into exact seat numbers is tricky because the 5,000 seats up were last contested at different times. Most of them were last fought in 2022 when the Tories were already declining, but there is a group of county councils that delayed their elections for a year due to reorganisation. This will exaggerate Conservative losses because they did well in these councils in 2021.

After adjusting for these factors, and for the fact a lot of contests are in London where the Greens are likely to do particularly well I estimate the net change in seats will be roughly:

Reform +2000

Greens + 650

Lib Dems + 300

Labour -2000

Conservatives -1000

Others +50

This assumes that, as in 2025, Reform win a lot of seats on a low vote share because their supporters are relatively evenly spread out across the country. Whereas the Lib Dem and Green gains will be more concentrated in areas of strength: the home counties and south west London for the Lib Dems and inner cities for the Greens.

A result like this would see the Tories [fall to third place in total councillor numbers](#), behind the Lib Dems, for the first time ever. They could even fall behind Reform as well, further weakening their activist base. It would also see the Labour party gutted in parts of the country where they've been dominant for most of their history.

I'll look at how this breaks down at council level in the next two posts.

## **Scotland**

The two big questions north of the border are: will the SNP will get a majority? And who will get to lead the opposition as the second largest party?

At the time of the last UK general election it looked like Labour might mount a serious challenge for the Scottish Parliament again, but their polling has slumped, meaning the SNP will win at least 60 seats (65 are needed for a majority).

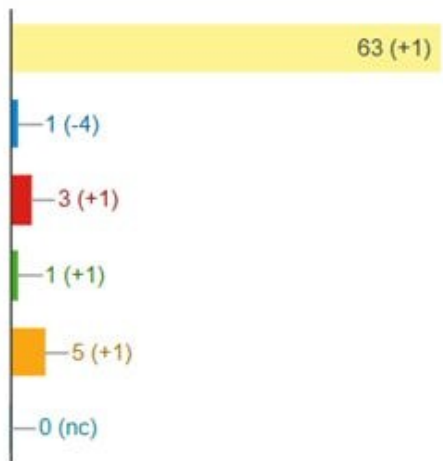
Whether they a majority depends on the vagaries of the Scottish electoral system which is theoretically proportional but isn't in practice. 73 MSPs are elected in constituencies, and another 56 in a separate regional list vote that is supposed to balance things out. A party that's won a disproportionate number of constituencies will get fewer from the list. The problem is that the SNP's constituency vote is so disproportionate that it can't

be balanced out. They'll win nearly all the constituencies on around 35% of the vote because their opposition is so split.

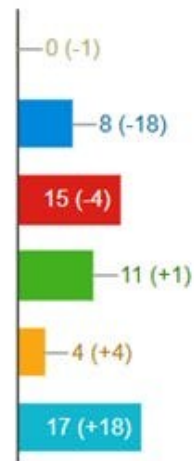
The only constituencies we can be sure they won't win are the four the Lib Dems already hold. There's one other constituency in the Highlands (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) the Lib Dems might win, and a couple Labour are competitive in. But whether the SNP can get to 65 will likely come down to their battle with the Tories in the three border seats. If Reform split the vote on the right enough that will allow the SNP to come through the middle and take them. The one MRP we have [gives the SNP 67 seats](#) and I think they might just do it, albeit on significantly lower percentage of the vote than when they last won a majority in 2011.

Because the SNP will dominate the constituencies, the other parties are dependent on the regional list vote. (You can see the disparity in this set of vote and seat projections from [Ballot Box Scotland](#)).

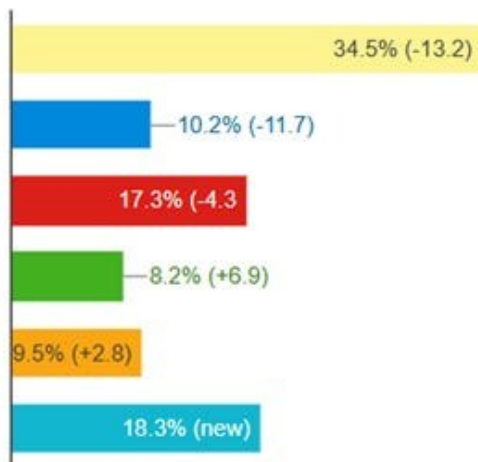
### Constituency Seats



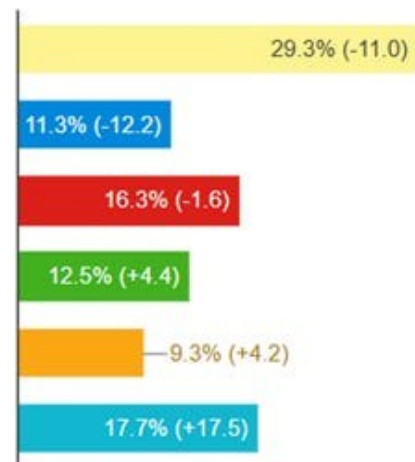
### Regional Seats



### Constituency Votes



### Regional Votes



*(It should say 18 next to Reform's regional seat total.)*

Reform are fractionally ahead of Labour in the regional list polling average, so will hope to come second but their campaign has been fairly disastrous. Five of their MSP candidates have [resigned for a variety of reasons](#) including: calling Scottish Labour's former leader Humza Yusaf an "Islamist moron"; allegations of fraud around a covid loan; and claiming to have never been a candidate in the first place. Their new leader, Malcolm Offord, who was a Tory peer until last year, [has struggled](#). He's been criticised for, amongst other things, a homophobic joke about George Michael and suggesting Catholic schools should be closed (not a popular view amongst Scottish right-wingers). They have started to slip in the most recent polls.

Whether Labour can take advantage of this may depend on how many regional list seats the Greens win. As in England they've seen their polling improve in recent months, though not to the same degree. They're currently averaging 12.5%. Tactical voting may boost this further, as any SNP voter who wants to hurt Labour and Reform could switch their vote to Green in the regional list without cost, as the SNP won't win any regional seats anyway. (Yes this is a stupid electoral system). So their vote may rise higher during the campaign as advocates of this [tactical ruse explain the logic](#).

All three parties will likely end up quite close together. Labour sneaking second place, and being the main opposition party would help build a narrative that things hadn't gone quite as badly as expected.

Meanwhile, the Tories will probably come fifth with a single digit seat total. Given they were second last time, it will be another indication of their irrelevance and prevent them rebuilding their party machinery in Scotland.

## **Wales**

Previously Wales used the same electoral system as Scotland. But this year they've shifted to a new one, with sixteen multi-member constituencies each with six seats that will be allocated proportionally. So this will be the first parliamentary election in Britain where no one will vote for an individual, just a party list.

Because this system is more proportional it's unlikely that anyone will win a majority (though it is still possible to do so without winning 50% of the vote because it's not pure PR, votes for parties that don't meet the threshold for a seat in a constituency are "wasted").

In polls last year Plaid Cymru and Reform were neck and neck, but in the last few months, since the Caerphilly by-election, the nationalists have moved in a lead of around five points (33% to 28%). As in Scotland, Reform has had a poor campaign, with [four candidates resigning already](#) – one when a picture of him doing a Nazi salute emerged. Their new leader, Dan Thomas, was, until last year, a Tory councillor in Barnet, which has caused disquiet amongst the membership.

Even if Reform were able to win the most seats it's very unlikely they could form a government as their only viable coalition partner are the Tories who will, as in

Scotland, only win a handful of seats. And the better Reform do the worst the Tory position.

The most likely outcome is a Plaid/Labour coalition, with the nationalists as the dominant partner. Labour’s leader, Eluned Morgan, has said she’s open to this. But if Plaid can get to the top of their potential range it may be possible for them to form a government with Green support instead, freezing Labour out. [My projection](#) below has Plaid and the Greens on a combined 43 seats, six short of a majority, but it would only take a small increase in their votes to get them there.

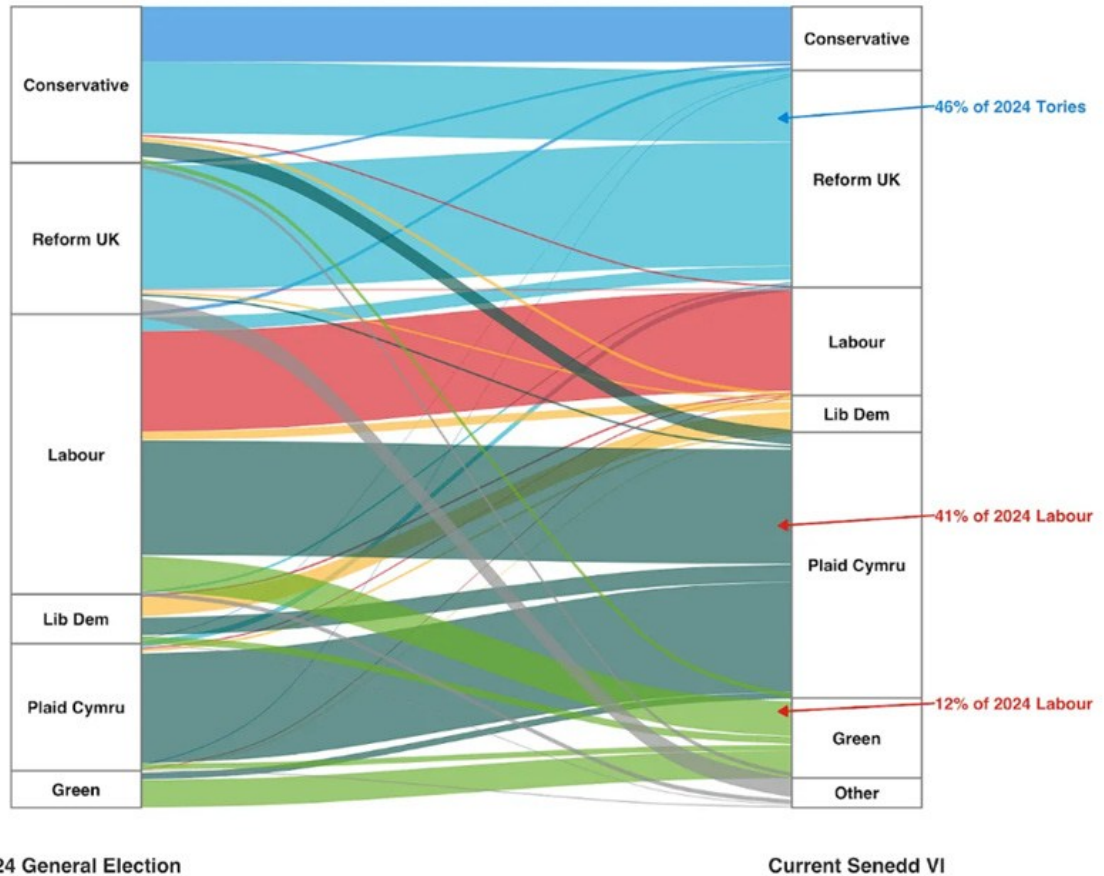


Labour’s fortunes are dependent on the constituencies in their traditional valley heartlands in south Wales. If they can get their vote out in these areas they could add some precious seats even if their national percentage is as bad as expected. If they can match their best polling, 20+ seats is not out the question, which would count, in the circumstances, as a good result.

The movement of votes in Wales since the general election really illustrates the extent of within bloc changes since 2024. As this chart from Jac Lerner (taken from Will Hayward’s [excellent substack on Welsh politics](#)) shows nearly all of the Plaid vote has come from Labour and the Reform vote from the Tories.

## Voter Flows: 2024 General Election > Current Senedd Intention

Source: ITV Cymru Wales/YouGov March '26



Width of flows proportional to number of voters. Flows < 1 excluded for clarity.  
Jac Larnier

It's a good demonstration of why these elections are so important.

If the Tories and Labour are no longer the dominant party in their relative bloc it will make it much harder for them to recover than from previous low points in their history. In England it's the Greens rather than Plaid who represent the main threat to Labour. Over the next two posts we'll look in detail at whether English politics is on track to be transformed to the same degree as in Wales.