



# The July 2024 UK General Election

## CONTENTS

1. Introduction
2. The 2019–24 Parliament
3. Party policies and manifestos
4. Election campaigns
5. Results analysis
6. Post-election prospects

## 1. Introduction

Thursday 4 July 2024 witnessed one of the most significant reversals of post-war electoral history. Labour's 174-seat majority ended 14 years of Conservative dominance, inviting comparisons with Tony Blair's landslide victory in 1997. Like Blair, Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer had positioned his party in the political centre to appeal to uncommitted voters and disillusioned Conservatives. Another parallel was that the outcome of the election was never in doubt, with Labour consistently 20 percentage points ahead in the opinion polls long before parliament was dissolved.

The election gave Starmer a clear-cut **mandate** for his policies. Nonetheless, the result was much more a rejection of the Conservative record in government than a positive embrace of Labour's offer to the country. Labour won with less than 34 per cent of the popular vote, on an extremely low turnout of 60 per cent. There was evidence of widespread **tactical voting**, with the campaign group 'Best for Britain' advising centre-left voters on which candidate was best placed in each constituency to defeat the Conservatives.

### Key terms

#### Mandate

The authority granted to the winning party in an election, to implement promises made in its election manifesto, and to govern as new issues arise.

#### Tactical voting

Under First Past the Post, people who do not want a particular party to win, may vote for the candidate most likely to unseat them rather than for their preferred choice.

When he took over as prime minister in October 2022, Conservative leader Rishi Sunak arguably faced an impossible challenge. A series of adverse events – some the fault of the Conservative government, others outside its control – paved the way for the party's spectacular defeat. Although Sunak and his chancellor, Jeremy Hunt, defied predictions that they would lose their own seats, eight members of the cabinet did so, along with former prime minister Liz Truss and other senior figures.

The election was notable for other developments. The Labour victory was enhanced by the intervention of Reform UK (formerly the Brexit Party). Led by the controversial figure of Nigel Farage, Reform won five seats but may also have cost the Conservatives up to 80 constituencies by splitting the right-wing vote.

The Liberal Democrats, who had been languishing in the political doldrums since the end of the coalition government in 2015, recovered their historic position as the UK's third largest party. Their total of 72 seats was their best performance ever – in fact the strongest since their forerunner, the Liberal Party, won 158 seats in 1923.

Another feature was the collapse of the Scottish National Party, which had ousted Labour as the largest party in Scotland in 2015. An increasingly negative reputation, under three different leaders in fourteen months, caused the SNP to lose all but nine of its 48 Westminster seats. The party was widely seen as divided and scandal-ridden, and unable to deliver its core policy aim of Scottish independence. Voters, particularly in central and western Scotland, either abstained or returned to the Labour Party, seeing this as the most effective way of removing the Conservative government.

Some other minor parties enjoyed modest success. Plaid Cymru won four seats, although Labour remained the dominant party in Wales. The Greens increased their tally from one to four seats. In Northern Ireland, republican Sinn Féin narrowly overtook the Democratic Unionists to become the province's largest party.

## Key terms

### Israel– Hamas conflict

The current war between Israeli forces and Palestinian militants led by Hamas, the governing party in the Gaza Strip. For many Palestinians, the attack on 7 October 2023 by Hamas was part of its resistance to the Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip and occupation of Palestinian land, and the Israeli response, including the killing of large numbers of civilians, constitutes a war crime. For many Israelis, the atrocities against civilians and the taking of hostages by Hamas necessitates the removal from the Gaza Strip of Hamas and other Palestinians committed to the destruction of Israel.

Six independent MPs were elected at the expense of Labour. One, former party leader Jeremy Corbyn, who had been suspended from Labour for minimising the problem of antisemitism, owed his success to a strong local following in his Islington North constituency. The other victorious candidates were pro-Palestinian individuals, who ran in Muslim-dominated constituencies where the official party stance on the **Israel– Hamas conflict** had alienated many voters. It may be that left-leaning voters in these constituencies felt safe voting for independents because of the near-certainty of a huge Conservative defeat.

There had been a number of independent MPs in the 2019–24 parliament, but all had originally been elected under party labels, and had been suspended for alleged misconduct. The Israel– Hamas conflict had wider repercussions. Labour’s vote share fell by 25 percentage points in the 21 seats where more than a fifth of the population is Muslim. Shadow Health Secretary, Wes Streeting, retained his Ilford North seat by a margin of barely 500 votes.

## 2. The 2019–24 Parliament

The 2019–24 parliament began with the Conservatives in a strong electoral position, which gradually dissipated over the next five years. Boris Johnson won an 80-seat majority in December 2019, winning a mandate for his cornerstone policy of ‘getting Brexit done’. The most remarkable feature of that general election was Labour’s loss of a swathe of so-called ‘red wall’ seats in a region stretching from the borders of north Wales to the north Midlands, Yorkshire and north-east England. These historically Labour seats turned blue because of frustration over Jeremy Corbyn’s unclear position on Brexit (for which people there had voted in large numbers in the 2016 EU referendum) and more general mistrust of him as a potential prime minister.

Under a new leader from April 2020, Sir Keir Starmer, Labour dropped many left-wing policies associated with the catastrophic 2019 defeat. Although he had served as Corbyn's shadow Brexit secretary, Starmer rapidly distanced himself from his predecessor, in particular repudiating the antisemitism that had manifested itself on the party's left. Starmer stressed the issues that cut through to most voters – economic stability, the cost-of-living crisis, problems in the NHS – and relentlessly attacked the policy failures of the three Conservative prime ministers whom he faced as leader of the opposition.

Broader factors were at work in the Conservative decline. Support for the government in the former 'red wall' areas was always likely to disappear if it did not live up to its 2019 election pledges. In our [case study on the 2019 election](#), we wrote that 'the working-class northern and Midland voters, who turned to the Conservatives this time, have given the party their conditional support, and they could return to Labour if they do not see real improvements in public services and infrastructure'. This has proved to be the case. Seats such as Darlington, Redcar, Stoke-on-Trent Central, Bolsover, and Scunthorpe returned to the Labour fold in 2024.

The pattern of by-election results in 2022–24 had already indicated a Labour revival. The party took seven seats from the Conservatives and one from the SNP. The Liberal Democrats won four Conservative seats – two in south-west England, one in the south-east and one in Shropshire. This suggested that they were regaining ground in rural and small-town constituencies where the Conservatives would have been expected to win. Meanwhile, the Conservatives won just one Labour seat (Hartlepool), which returned to Labour at the 2024 general election. There was an unexpected result in Rochdale in February 2024, when former left-wing Labour MP George Galloway, now heading the Workers Party of Britain, won a by-election. But this was made possible by exceptional circumstances – Starmer had withdrawn support for his party's candidate in response to remarks about Israel – and Labour regained the seat at the general election.

Many commentators have traced the Conservative decline to the government's failure to overcome persistent problems of low economic growth. Starmer was able to point to the continuing high tax burden under the Conservatives – as a proportion of GDP it was at its highest since the late 1940s. Debt reached almost 100 per cent of GDP by the time that the general election was called. To some extent the state of the economy was the result of adverse external factors. Increased debt was partly due to the large-scale financial package put in place by Boris Johnson and his chancellor, Rishi Sunak, to protect businesses and living standards during the Covid-19 pandemic – a policy which enjoyed broad political support at the time. The outbreak of war in Ukraine in February 2022 interrupted supply chains and pushed up inflation, leading to a rise in interest rates. Inflation had come down again, and at 2.3 per cent was close to the Bank of England's target by the spring of 2024, but the government gained no credit for this. People were aware that consumer prices, especially of food and fuel, remained high compared to four years earlier. There was a widespread sense of malaise – the 'feel bad' factor encountered at some earlier turning-point elections, such as in 1979, 1997 and 2010 – that proved impossible to counter.

Another factor was the ongoing turmoil at the heart of government. During the 2019–24 parliament there were three different prime ministers and five chancellors. In July 2022 Boris Johnson was forced to announce his resignation following public outrage at the '**partygate**' scandal and colleagues' objections to his promotion of Chris Pincher, an MP accused of sexually predatory behaviour. Confidence in Johnson ebbed away after he was unclear about how much he had known in advance about Pincher's conduct. His successor, Liz Truss, lasted just 49 days in office – the shortest tenure of any UK prime minister – after her tax-cutting 'mini-budget' triggered a crisis on the financial markets. This catastrophic event led the Conservative Party rapidly to select Truss's rival, Rishi Sunak, as her successor. He and the chancellor, Jeremy Hunt, restored financial stability but the crisis was used by the Labour opposition as evidence of Conservative incompetence.

## Key terms

### 'Partygate' scandal

A political scandal involving parties held in Downing Street, at a time when the country was under lockdown regulations during the 2020–21 Covid-19 pandemic.

Sunak tried to present himself as the ‘change’ candidate, seeking at the October 2023 party conference to distance himself from what he called ‘thirty years of a political system that incentivises the easy decision, not the right one.’ But as the country had been under Conservative leadership for much of this period, it scarcely seemed credible for him to make the claim. Sunak made five pledges early in his premiership – to halve inflation, grow the economy, reduce government debt, cut NHS waiting lists and ‘stop the boats’ carrying illegal migrants across the Channel. By the summer of 2024, only the first of these had been achieved. This contributed to a growing impression of a lack of governing competence. Hospital waiting lists were perhaps the main issue for voters, but other failures added to the sense that public services had been seriously neglected. The discovery of unsafe aerated concrete in school buildings, potholed roads, tolerance of pollution by private water companies – all of these issues created an impression of a broken public domain.

Sunak’s failure to get a grip on cross-Channel migration was particularly embarrassing given the prominence given to his government’s plans to send asylum seekers to Rwanda. Although Sunak secured legislation for that purpose, at the cost of a prolonged parliamentary battle, no government-sponsored flights to the central African country ever left Britain. Dissatisfaction with Sunak’s lack of progress on the issue led to a damaging dispute with his first home secretary, Suella Braverman, whom he sacked from the cabinet in November 2023. Failure to control illegal migration was an important factor in the rise of Reform UK, which recruited rebel right-wing MP Lee Anderson and started to attract support from disillusioned Conservative voters.

As a result of all these pressures, by 2024 Sunak was losing the confidence of voters across the political spectrum. The 2019 promise to make the most of the economic opportunities supposedly offered by Brexit had not materialised. **‘Levelling up’** remained an empty slogan for disadvantaged communities across the Midlands and northern England. Sunak’s cancellation of the northern leg of the **HS2 project** in October 2023 symbolised the scaling back of investment in the north. Meanwhile traditional Tory voters were unimpressed by tax increases and the government’s apparent inability to protect the national borders.

## Key terms

### **‘Levelling up’**

A Conservative policy at the 2019 election, to reduce economic imbalances between different parts of the UK.

### **HS2 project**

The planned high-speed rail link between London and Birmingham, which was originally to be extended to Leeds and Manchester.

# Case Study

Party	MPs after December 2019 general election	MPs at dissolution of Parliament, May 2024
Conservative	365	344
Labour	202	205
SNP	48	43
Liberal Democrat	11	15
DUP	8	7
Sinn Fein	7	7
Plaid Cymru	4	3
SDLP	2	2
Alba	Not yet founded	2
Green	1	1
Alliance Party of Northern Ireland	1	1
Reform UK	0	1
Workers Party	Not yet founded	1
Independents	0	17

**Table 1** The House of Commons before the 2024 general election

## Pause point

Review what you have read so far about the run-up to the 2024 general election. In your opinion, which were the key developments that made a Conservative defeat the most likely outcome?



## Key terms

### Manifesto

A document in which a political party sets out the programme that it promises to implement if it wins an election.

### Renationalisation

The act of taking an industry or service back into public ownership.

### Triple lock

The idea that the state pension should increase by whichever is the highest of three metrics: wages, prices or 2.5 per cent.

### Two-state solution

The proposal to resolve the Israel–Palestine conflict through establishing an independent state of Palestine alongside the state of Israel.

### European single market

The free movement of goods, capital, services and people within the EU.

### Customs union

An arrangement whereby a bloc of countries, such as the EU, have a common trading policy with the outside world.

## 3. Party policies and manifestos

The Conservative and Labour **manifestos** offered less sharply contrasting alternative policies than in 2019. Starmer recognised that many voters had been alienated by the ‘tax and spend’ socialist agenda offered by Corbyn (whom he had served as shadow Brexit secretary). In 2024 Labour was careful to limit its planned tax increases to a handful of proposals which would not directly affect the bulk of the population, such as adding VAT to private school fees. The Conservatives offered significant tax cuts and spending promises but were less clear on how these would be funded. Of the three main parties, the Liberal Democrats had the most ambitious plans for public spending, proposing to raise £27 bn in taxes.

Labour did, however, offer some distinctive policies. To meet its pledge to decarbonise the economy, it proposed to set up a state-owned electricity generation company, Great British Energy. The party opposed the Conservatives’ plan to continue issuing licences for North Sea oil and gas extraction. Labour wanted to return the railways to the public sector. However, this was much less ambitious than their 2019 programme, which also promised the **renationalisation** of Royal Mail and the energy companies.

## Extension activity

1. Does **Table 2** (next page) suggest that there was more conflict or agreement between the three main parties on policy?
2. Choose one of the minor parties and research its policies at the 2024 election.

You could look at the SNP, Plaid Cymru, the Green Party or Reform UK.

The BBC website is a possible source of information:  
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cxeez8271nvo>



# Case Study

Policy area	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat
<b>Taxation and the economy</b>	No increase in income tax, VAT or corporation tax. Scrap main National Insurance rate for the self-employed. Simplify planning laws to speed up infrastructure and housebuilding.	No increase in income tax, VAT or National Insurance. Reform planning to allow more infrastructure and housebuilding. Establish state-owned Great British Energy company. Gradual <b>renationalisation</b> of railways.	Invest in green infrastructure and build more homes. Reverse tax cuts for banks and reform capital gains tax to fund NHS and social care.
<b>Welfare</b>	Cut benefits bill by £12 bn. Protect the state pension <b>triple lock</b> .	Remove age bands on the national minimum wage. Protect the state pension <b>triple lock</b> . 3,000 new nurseries and breakfast clubs at primary schools. Ban 'exploitative' zero hours contracts and increase employment rights.	Protect the state pension <b>triple lock</b> . Remove the two-child limit on child benefit, introduced by the Conservatives.
<b>Health and social care</b>	Increase NHS spending above inflation. Continue hospital building and recruitment of more doctors and nurses. Lifetime cap on cost of social care.	Cut NHS waiting lists with evening and weekend appointments. Train more doctors and provide more NHS dentist appointments.	Time guarantee to see a GP and improved access to dental care. Free adult personal care at home and more support for carers.
<b>Law and order</b>	Recruit 8,000 police officers. Increase sentences for serious crimes. Build four new prisons.	Recruit 13,000 police and community support officers. Build new prisons to tackle overcrowding. Respect Orders to ban antisocial individuals from town centres. Crack down on knife crime with 'youth hubs' to deter youngsters from crime.	Improve community policing and supervision of offenders in the community. More resources to prosecute 'hate crimes'.
<b>Foreign policy</b>	Raise defence spending to 2.5% of GDP by 2030. Support Ukraine against Russian invasion. Recognise Israel's right to self-defence and push for a <b>two-state solution</b> in the Middle East.	Aim to increase defence spending to 2.5% of GDP. Improve trade relations with the EU outside the <b>European single market and customs union</b> . Support Ukraine against Russian invasion. Push for Israel– Hamas ceasefire and a <b>two-state solution</b> .	Reverse defence cuts. Improve trade relations with the EU and eventually rejoin the single market. Support Ukraine against Russian invasion. Push for Israel– Hamas ceasefire and for a <b>two-state solution</b> .

**Table 2** Policies of the main UK-wide parties at the 2024 election

## 4. Election campaigns

### The Conservative campaign

#### Key terms

##### Prerogative power

A power traditionally held by the monarch but now exercised by the prime minister or cabinet.

The Conservative campaign attracted attention for a series of errors from the start. It was reported that several experienced Conservative advisers were unhappy with Sunak's timing. His decision is an example of the prime minister's use of the **prerogative power** to request a dissolution of parliament. It had been widely expected that Sunak would call the election in the autumn, to give time for the economy to recover and thus to win over disenchanted voters. Instead, he seems to have feared that things might get worse if he waited, and with inflation recently fallen to 2.3 per cent, this appeared a sufficiently positive indicator of recovery to justify calling an early election. The decision caused dismay among Conservative activists, who had not accumulated enough funding and still had to find candidates for many constituencies.

The Sunak campaign is widely regarded as one of the worst managed in modern times. The prime minister was drenched in pouring rain, standing at a lectern in Downing Street on 22 May without an umbrella to announce the election. Supposedly eye-catching initiatives, such as a promise to introduce national service for 18-year-olds, which may have been designed to win back older, Reform UK-leaning voters, failed to engage the public.

Arguably the most important event of the campaign was the announcement by Nigel Farage on 3 June, that he was returning to front-line politics as leader of Reform UK and standing as the candidate for Clacton in Essex. This boosted the prospects of the Conservatives' main challenger on the right. Unlike in 2019, when Reform's forerunner, the Brexit Party, agreed not to contest Conservative-held seats, Farage was adamant that he would run candidates across the country. Reform UK's poll ratings increased from 11 to 15 per cent, remaining steady despite ill-judged and offensive statements by some of the party's candidates and activists.

## Key terms

### Parliamentary private secretary

An MP who acts as an aide to a minister.

Another gaffe occurred on 7 June, when Sunak left the commemoration of the 80th anniversary of D-Day in France early, to attend a pre-arranged ITV interview. This offended the kind of traditional patriotic voters who would normally be well-disposed towards the Conservatives. Starmer, by contrast, remained at the event alongside other world leaders.

Further embarrassment was caused when it emerged that Sunak's **parliamentary private secretary**, Craig Williams, had placed a bet on the election date three days before it was announced. Sunak withdrew support for Williams but was unable to confirm whether the bet was based on inside knowledge. Another MP and two Conservative officials were also caught up in the scandal, which led to an investigation by the Gambling Commission. The affair tarnished the Conservative brand by reinforcing the impression that its representatives were motivated by petty greed.

By the final weeks of the campaign, the Conservatives had all but admitted defeat by appealing to voters not to give Labour what they termed a 'super-majority'. Polling suggested that this negative message backfired, actually encouraging some voters to support Labour or even Reform UK. Moreover, the Conservatives were necessarily focusing their resources on seats where they had won large majorities in 2019 and were consequently less able to defend the more marginal seats.

## The Labour campaign

Labour's campaign managers ran a carefully controlled operation, focusing their attention on critical marginal seats. The central theme was that of change – time to make a fresh start after the confusion and missed opportunities of the Conservative years. Launching the campaign, Starmer presented the choice as one between 'decline and chaos continuing under the Tories, or rebuilding our country under Labour'.

There was a minor hiccup when Starmer hesitated over whether veteran left-winger Diane Abbott would be allowed to stand as a Labour candidate. The emphasis throughout the campaign was on reassuring voters that Labour could be trusted with power. Starmer and his shadow chancellor, Rachel Reeves, constantly stressed the importance of economic stability. They shut down Sunak's disputed claim that a Labour government would increase tax by £2,000 for each household. The party was also keen to demonstrate that it had moved on from the Corbyn period, when Labour seemed weak on defence. Appearing alongside Labour candidates who had served in the armed forces, Starmer committed the party to the UK's nuclear deterrent.

It was a disciplined campaign which was careful to avoid any impression of complacency about the party's prospects of winning. Nothing was to be done that might put victory at risk. Labour made few dramatic policy announcements, concentrating instead on unflashy measures that would make a practical difference to people's lives – reducing NHS waiting times, investing in skills to boost the economy, reforming planning laws to build new homes and infrastructure.

### Pause point

In some general elections – 2017, when Theresa May lost her majority, is a good example – it can be argued that the party campaigns influenced the outcome. Is there any evidence that what happened in the 2024 campaigns affected the eventual result?

## The Liberal Democrat campaign

Liberal Democrat leader Ed Davey was widely ridiculed for trying to raise the profile of his party with a series of stunts – paddle-boarding, taking a theme park ride, bungee jumping. Davey insisted that there was a serious point behind his light-hearted campaign style – to raise the profile of his party, which has often been ignored by the media, and to highlight issues such as water pollution which mattered to voters. More seriously, he gained support for his policy on carers when he talked publicly about the challenges of looking after his disabled son. Davey's campaigning methods may have played a part in increasing the Liberal Democrat seat tally.

## The media and the election

2024 was unlike other recent general elections in that the newspaper press was no longer heavily pro-Conservative. On the eve of polling day *The Sun*, which had backed the Conservatives since 2010, recommended voting Labour with the headline, 'Time for a new manager' – a reference to the fact that the election coincided with the UEFA European football championship. *The Sun* has a track record of supporting successful political parties, switching to Tony Blair's New Labour as John Major's government disintegrated in the mid-1990s, and deserting Gordon Brown after the 2008–09 financial crisis. It usually confirms what voters are already thinking rather than determining the direction they will follow. *The Sun's* late switch to Labour in 2024 suggested that it lacked enthusiasm for the party.

Other Labour-supporting newspapers were the *Sunday Times*, *Financial Times*, *Independent*, *Guardian* and *Daily Mirror*. The *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express* and *Daily Telegraph* remained loyal to the Conservatives. *The Times*, unusually, did not endorse any party.

It is important to note that newspapers are less important politically than they once were, with circulation figures dropping by an estimated three-quarters since 1997. TV debates, too, have declined in significance since they were first introduced in 2010. Viewing figures for the first of two ITV debates between Sunak and Starmer were just 4.8 million. This compared to 6.7 million who watched the debate between Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn in 2019, and 9.4 million for the first debate between David Cameron, Gordon Brown and Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg in 2010.

The 2024 election confirmed the pattern established in 2017 and 2019, that social media provide the means by which an increasing number of voters acquire their political information. Its importance was reflected in the large amounts spent on digital advertising – on the eve of polling day, it was reported that Labour had spent a total of £2.9 million, dwarfing the Conservatives' £1.7 million across the six weeks of the campaign. Social media has the advantage of enabling parties to target voters by age, gender and locality, making it a powerful tool in modern politics. If an engaging message gains attention, it can also be shared widely by social media users, furthering its potential impact.

## 5. Results analysis

### Political participation

The low turnout – only slightly better than the post-war low of 59 per cent in 2001 – suggested a degree of public disenchantment with mainstream party politics. Turnout had been gradually improving, reaching 67 per cent in 2019, so 60 per cent in 2024 represented a marked setback for political participation. This raises some concerns for the health of UK democracy.

Turnout was lowest in northern England, the Midlands and Northern Ireland. As in other elections in recent decades, people from poorer socio-economic backgrounds were less likely to vote, possibly because they do not feel that they have a strong stake in society and that the outcome will improve their lives. This was also the first general election in which voters had to show photographic identification at the polling station. Some 400,000 people were reportedly barred from voting because they did not have the required ID. Research suggests that poorer and less educated voters, and those from ethnic minorities, are disproportionately likely to be disqualified.

### The results and the electoral system

Political expert Professor Sir John Curtice described 2024 as ‘the most disproportional electoral outcome in British electoral history’. Labour won 63 per cent of the seats on less than 34 per cent of the vote. To put this in context, Labour’s vote share in 2024 was smaller than the 40 per cent gained by Jeremy Corbyn in 2017 – yet the outcome then was a Conservative **minority government**, not an outright Labour victory. It was also the first time that Labour had won an overall majority of seats in England since the 2005 general election.

#### Key terms

##### **Minority government**

A government which lacks a parliamentary majority.

## Key terms

### Additional Member System (AMS)

A hybrid electoral system with two components. The voter selects a representative on a simple plurality (FPTP) system, then a second vote is apportioned to a party list for a second or 'additional' representative.

The Liberal Democrats – traditionally the strongest advocates of proportional representation – achieved a seat share that was, for once, close to their vote share. But as **Table 3** shows, other smaller parties such as the Greens and Reform UK were disadvantaged by the first-past-the-post electoral system (FPTP). Modelling by the Electoral Reform Society suggests that if the **Additional Member System** (used for the Scottish and Welsh Parliaments) had been in place at Westminster, Labour would have won 236 seats – 90 seats short of an overall majority – and the Conservatives 157. The Green Party would have won 42 and Reform UK as many as 94 seats.

The outcome of the 2024 election has strengthened the case for electoral reform but (as was the case after Tony Blair won his 179-seat majority in 1997) the governing party will have little incentive to reopen the issue. More positively, the election does provide support for the argument that FPTP usually produces governments with clear mandates.

## The results and the party system

The 2019 election had suggested that the UK's traditional two-party system was alive and well, with the Conservatives and Labour sharing 75 per cent of the vote and 87 per cent of the seats. In 2024 the rise of smaller parties (and the election of an unusually large number of independent candidates) cast doubt on this claim. Reform UK came second in 94 seats and the Greens were second in 40 seats, making them potential future challengers from the right and left. The two largest parties combined took almost 82 per cent of the seats but this was based on just 57 per cent of the votes cast. This is a striking outcome, as in most election campaigns, support for smaller parties is squeezed as the big parties regain supporters. It does suggest an increasing level of dissatisfaction with the established parties.



# Case Study

Party	Number of seats	Change from 2019 General Election	% of seats	% of votes
Labour	411	+211	63.2	33.7
Conservative	121	–251	18.6	23.7
Liberal Democrat	72	+64	11.1	12.2
SNP	9	–39	1.4	2.5
Independents	6	+6	0.9	2.0
Reform UK	5	+5	0.8	14.3
Green Party	4	+3	0.6	6.4
Plaid Cymru	4	+2	0.6	0.7
Sinn Féin	7	0	1.1	0.7
DUP	5	–3	0.8	0.2
SDLP	2	0	0.3	0.3
Alliance Party of Northern Ireland	1	0	0.2	0.4
Ulster Unionist Party	1	+1	0.2	0.3
Traditional Unionist Voice	1	Did not stand	0.1	0.2

**Table 3** The relationship between votes and seats in the 2024 general election

## Extension activity

Study the results for Portsmouth North below. What might the result have been if the Reform UK candidate had not stood – assuming that a large proportion of his supporters were former Conservative voters? What does this example show about the way that the FPTP voting system can work?

Candidate	Number of votes	Vote share (%)
Amanda Martin (Labour)	14,495	34.8
Penny Mordaunt (Conservative)	13,715	33.0
Melvyn Todd (Reform UK)	8,501	20.4
Simon Dodd (Liberal Democrat)	3,031	7.3
Duncan Robinson (Green)	1,851	4.5

## Opinion polls

The polling firms were in agreement about the prospect of a large Labour victory but they were wrong about some of the detail. There was a tendency to exaggerate the size of the Labour and Reform UK vote shares and to underestimate the Conservative and Liberal Democrat vote. The Labour lead was in fact 10 per cent whereas most polling companies estimated it at 15 to 20 per cent. The polls were generally less accurate than in 2019 but more accurate than in 2015, when most predicted a hung parliament rather than a Conservative victory, or in 2017, when they missed the surge in Labour support that delivered a minority Conservative government.

As usual, the **exit polls** – where voters are asked how they have voted as they leave the polling station – were more accurate than predictions during the campaign. The polling company Ipsos, which conducted the official 2024 exit poll, had Labour on 410 seats and the Conservatives on 131.

### Key terms

#### Exit polls

A poll of voters taken after they have left the polling station, asking how they have voted, as opposed to what their voting intentions were in advance.

## **Age, gender, class and other determinants of voting behaviour**

The 2024 results confirmed several patterns observed in other recent elections. Analysis by YouGov showed that age was once again the most important social factor determining voting, with 41 per cent of 18 to 24-year-olds voting Labour, compared to just 20 per cent of over-70s. One change from 2017 and 2019 was that the Labour vote share was consistently high among all age groups up to 50, instead of gradually declining with age. This may reflect the work done by Keir Starmer in making Labour appear less threatening to 'middle England' than it was under Corbyn.

Another similarity with the 2017 and 2019 elections is that there was little difference in the voting habits of men and women. 34 per cent of men and 35 per cent of women voted Labour, whilst the corresponding figures for the Conservatives were 23 and 26 per cent. Reform UK did better with men than with women, and younger men were more likely to vote Conservative or Reform than were young women.

The election also continued to show the declining importance of class. Labour won similar shares of the highest (ABC1) and lowest (C2DE) socio-economic groups – 36 and 33 per cent respectively. The Conservatives were behind Labour in all social groups, winning just 25 per cent of the ABC1 vote and 23 per cent of the C2DE vote. As in 2019, Labour did well with the more highly educated, gaining 42 per cent of the graduate vote, whilst just 18 per cent of this group favoured the Conservatives.

The Liberal Democrats scored quite evenly across all age groups, enjoying a slight preference among higher social groups – 14 per cent of ABC1 and 11 per cent of C2DE voters. They won 15 per cent of the graduate vote. The opposite was true of Reform UK, who attracted 20 per cent of C2DE but just 11 per cent of ABC1 voters. Only 8 per cent of graduates voted for them.

## Composition of the House of Commons

The new House of Commons was the most diverse ever and closer to the make-up of British society than previous parliaments. More than 40 per cent of MPs were women, compared with 34 per cent in 2019. MPs from ethnic minorities made up 14 per cent of the Commons, up from 10 per cent and close to their representation in the population at large.

More than half of MPs – 334 out of 650 – had never sat in parliament before. The figure for 2019, by contrast, was 140. An unusually large number of MPs stood down – 132 in total, of whom 75 were Conservatives – suggesting that a change of government was expected. By contrast, a total of 74 MPs stood down in 2019. The average age of an MP was 48, the lowest in 45 years.

Feature	2019 House of Commons (%)	2024 House of Commons (%)
Female MPs	34	40
Ethnic minority background	10	14
Attended comprehensive schools	54	63
Attended fee-paying schools	29	23
LGBT	7	10

**Table 4** Composition of the House of Commons: 2024 compared with 2019

## 6. Post-election prospects

Despite its low share of the vote, Labour had undeniably won a mandate to take the country in a more left-wing direction, with policies of investment in green energy, rail renationalisation, a major house building programme and enhanced workers' rights in prospect. However, the incoming government was anxious to moderate its supporters' expectations, claiming that the Conservatives had left the public finances in a poor state – dubbed the '£22 billion black hole' – which would have to be plugged by spending restraint and tax increases. Early in the new parliament Starmer refused to cancel the two-child cap on child benefit payments, **removing the whip** from seven backbench MPs who rebelled on the vote in the House of Commons. This was an early sign that he would not tolerate dissent from the party line.

### Key terms

#### Removing the whip

Expelling a rebel MP from the parliamentary party, forcing them to sit as an independent in the House of Commons until the whip is restored.

The Conservative opposition was left in a weak position, with just 11 MPs in south-west England – where the Liberal Democrats recovered lost ground – only three seats in north-west England, one in the north-east and none in Wales. Internal party divisions, between moderate 'one nation' Conservatives and right-wingers, some of whom who favoured an accommodation with Reform UK, came to the fore. Selecting a leader who could reunite the party, and make it a credible challenger for power in 2028–29, was problematic after a defeat on this scale.

For the time being, at least, the possibility of another push for Scottish independence has retreated. SNP leader and Scottish first minister, John Swinney, acknowledged that the party's core policy had suffered a major setback as the party came to terms with its worst performance since 2010.

With Sinn Féin now the largest party in Northern Ireland (in the Assembly as well as at UK level) and the Democratic Unionist Party reduced in representation, the nationalist goal of a cross-border poll on Irish unification came a step closer. However, given the sensitivities of the unionist–nationalist relationship, and the need for UK government approval for a referendum, this is unlikely to happen in the short term.

## Assessment practice

The Edexcel specification requires you to study three key general elections: the 1997 election, one from the period 1945–92, and one since 1997. You could use 2024 as your post-1997 example.

Choose one of the following questions, which have featured as Question 2 (a) or (b) on A Level Paper 1, to practise your essay writing. All are worth 30 marks and should be completed in 45 minutes in the examination.

1. Evaluate the view that general elections in the UK are lost by the government rather than won by the opposition.  
You must consider this view and the alternative to this view in a balanced way.
2. Evaluate the view that election outcomes are influenced more by the media than by any other factors.  
You must consider this view and the alternative to this view in a balanced way.
3. Evaluate the view that the outcomes of general elections are mostly decided by election campaigns and manifestos.  
You must consider this view and the alternative to this view in a balanced way.

## Exam tips

Take some time to plan your answer before you start writing. This will help you to be clear from the start which side of the argument you consider to be stronger.

Think carefully about your essay structure. You could write a brief introduction to frame the debate and state your view. Make sure that you include balanced arguments with clear judgements throughout your answer, and then reassert your view in your conclusion.