

Elections – theatres of fears or circuses of hope?

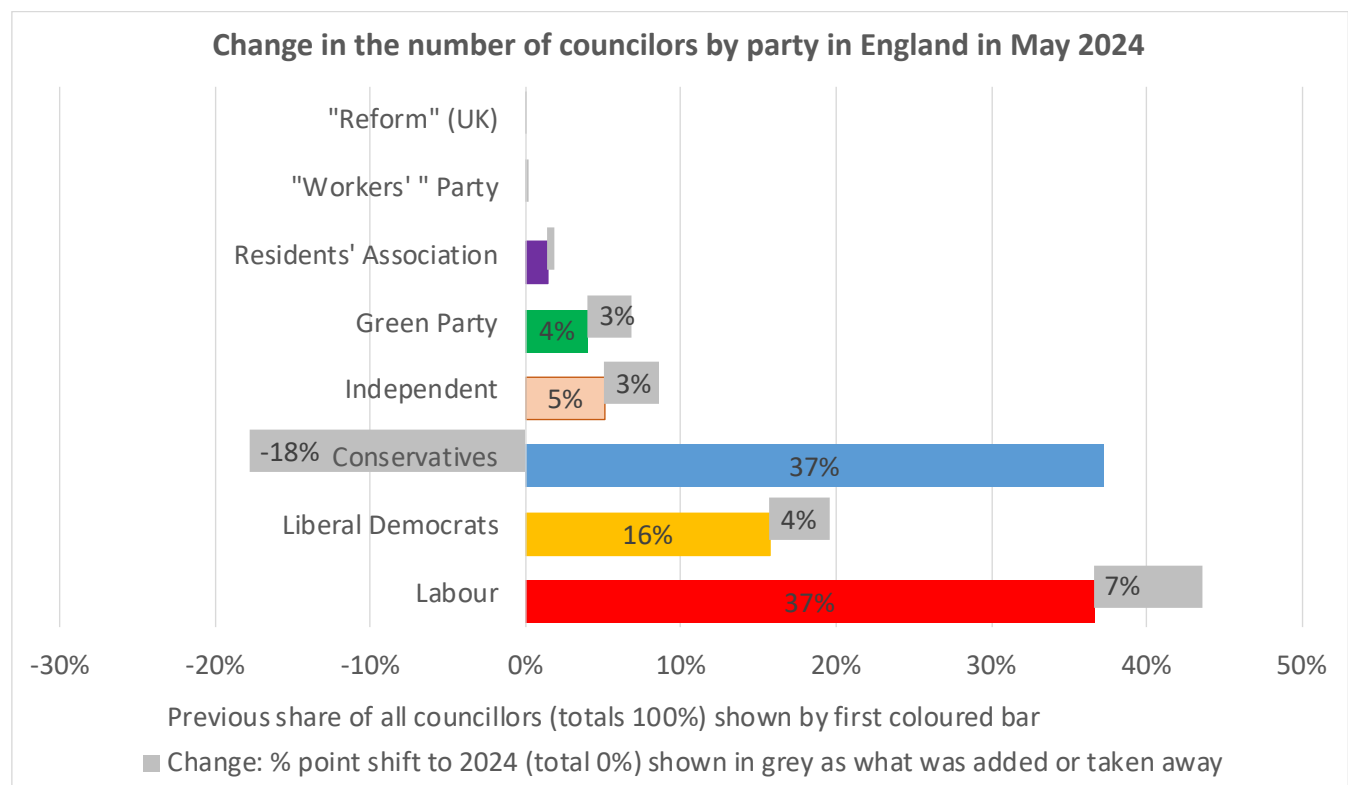
Danny Dorling

July 4th 2024, roll up, roll up, don't miss out! You could stay at home, but you will miss out! The travelling circus, the annual theater of political delight is in town! Your chance to express your views! To join the cavalcade! Show your support or vent your hate? Express your solidarity or your fear? Show your rage or express love? Do your duty or stay at home? Support *your* people – but who are *your* people? The circus master is on the television. A leaflet has come through your door. There are possibly posters in your street. You can be a part of it all. But don't miss out. Don't forget. The circus of hopes, the theater of fears, is here. You too can play your part. You can support your heroes. Defeat the villains. But just for one day.

I am writing this on June 4th, exactly a month before the UK general election of 2024 and exactly a week after the 4 May, 2024 local elections took place in England, in 107 councils, in 11 mayoralities, and in 33 police force areas. So, what were the issues then and what might come to dominate the next few weeks?

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As expected, most local councilors elected in May 2024, sported a red rosette. However those elected councilors were only 44% of those the crowd voted for, up by just 7% on those previously voted in for Labour at these local elections.



Note: the 44% that Labour won of councilors is 37%+7% (an increase on last time these elections were held).

There were good reasons not to vote for any party and in the local elections of 2024 far more people voted for none, than voted for all of them combined! The Conservatives were the party of hate; Reform were even worse (Nigel Farage took over leadership of that part on the day I write). Labour were very similar to the Conservatives now – in terms of economic and social policy, and the Liberals were somewhere in between those two. Imagine three clowns dress in red, blue and yellow huddling closely together. The Greens were not terribly clear what they really believed: ceasefire or no ceasefire in Gaza?, to build local houses or not?; and the minor parties were all very minor – although there were far more of them than before and there will be far more on July 4th for you to choose between.

Only 35% of voters on May 4th 2024 had chosen to support Labour and only a small minority of those who *could vote* actual chose *to vote for anyone*. One estimate published shortly after May 4th suggested Labour would be 42 seats short of a majority in parliament on the back of such a performance, were it to be repeated in the July General Election.¹ So low was the turn out in parts of London that on May 5th a political commentor, Stephen Bush, suggested that the Conservative candidate could win the London Mayoral race. Later that day he explained: ‘*Yeah - I just looked at the turnout figures and went “I think she could do this”, which was pure stupidity on my part...*’,² but he had a point – turnout was very low – fewer people wanted tickets for the circus this year, especially fewer younger people in London. It was not surprising that punters were not buying. So many of the messages were laced with hate and cruelty. We’ll show the feckless, the wasters, the weak! Join us! You can kick them when they are down too! Vote for us! Cleanse your soul! Vent your spleen! Get all that anger out!

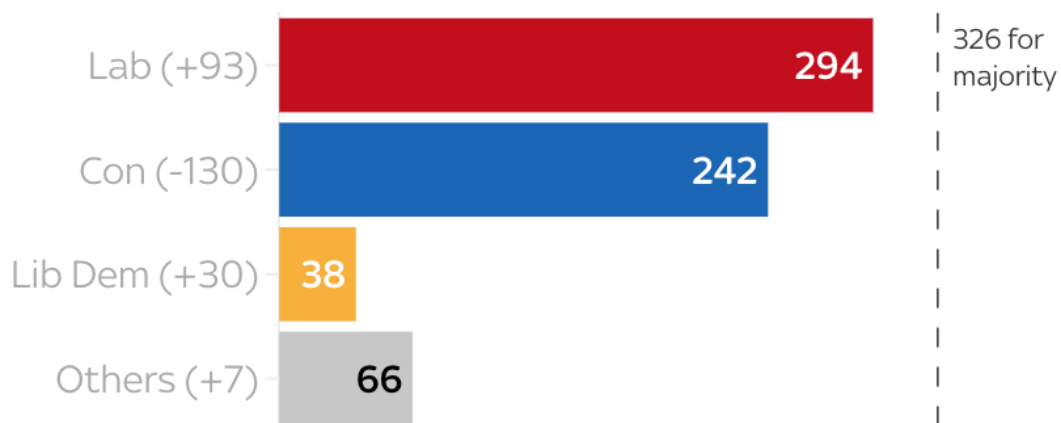
These messages work for a few, but they turn off the many. On May 6th, having won, and no longer needing to play to the gallery, the reelected mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, repeated the wise words of Jeremy Corbyn: *'The Government must publicly call for an urgent ceasefire and implore Israel to end this heart-rending attack on Rafah. A full-scale attack would be a tragedy, killing countless more innocent Palestinians, displacing families & making it harder than ever to provide lifesaving aid.'*³ Perhaps he felt he could not be so crystal clear before. Had he held his tongue until then because of the circus of hoe was really much more a circus of cruelty. Why was it that only before stepping off the stage after being elected during the theater of terrors could Sadiq Khan only say fully what he thought when accepting the prize? But Khan was no saint. He too had played a part in making the circus more cruel; in adding to the theater of denouncements of the past.⁴ The changes Khan wished in 2016 for and got in 2020 for his party were not a swerve towards kindness. A few weeks after he spoke about the atrocities taking place as Rafah his party barred Faiza Shaheen, and from standing in London along with other candidates who preferred peace. They almost managed to var Diane Abbot from standing; and Labour parachuted in dozens of mostly white candidates into places that many had never even visited once, just days before the nominations had to be made. Local parties and local voters were being taken for a ride.

The Conservatives were in a complete mess but still came second in May 2024 in terms of votes. Sky News' analysis suggested that they secured 26% of the popular vote, even at their nadir. They won 19% of the council seats up for grabs, 18% fewer than they had held before. So even after losing nearly half of their seats they still secured more than a quarter of the national vote. Sky

estimated that if these patterns were replicated at a national election, with no swing back towards the Conservatives, they would still hold onto 242 seats – too few to form a government, unless they did so with Labour. But that did not take account of the new far-right party, so-called ‘Reform’ pledging to put up candidates in every seat on 4 July 2024 and make the general election a referendum on immigration and places becoming ‘unrecognizable’ because of the colour of the skin of a few of those now walking the streets.

House of Commons projection: Hung Parliament, Labour largest party

Labour 32 seats short of a majority



SOURCE: Sky News

Source: <https://news.sky.com/story/vote-2024-the-story-of-the-local-elections-results-in-charts-13127897>

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The liberals won the second most councilors in 2024, 20%, up 4%, but their vote share according to Sky was only 16%. However, that was all they needed to win a fifth of all the council seats up for grabs given the weird way we vote in England. At a national election, this would secure them only 38 parliamentary seats, say Sky. Not enough to prop up Labour. Not enough to allow Starmer to form a government. But who knows? Maybe their leader will quickly become someone whose name you know? Did you vote in the local elections? Do you feel better now? Has the hurt and anger gone away a little, or the hope and kindness increased? Did you do the right thing? Did you show them? Did you stand up for your values? Does it feel any better?

In my home town of Oxford the local MP, Anneliese Dodds, said: *'the two main areas which may have lost the party votes were Israel's war on Gaza and Low Traffic Neighbour (LTN) schemes. "Neither are things we have a lot of influence over," she said. "People have strong feelings about both of those issues and we stand with them but in terms of what we can do about it is fairly minimal."*⁵

Dodds is Chair of the Labour Party of the United Kingdom. If there was anyone who had more power within Britain to have influence it is her. She could have said what Khan said about Gaza. She continued and continues to choose not to.

The Greens did well in Oxford, and nationally, but they started at a very low base for a European Green Party. They won 7% of all tickets to the theatrical circus stage, up 3% on their last showing, almost doubling the number of council seats they held.⁶ Sky estimate that the Greens and all the other minor parties combined would secure 22% of the votes in the UK, but that would result in very few new parliamentary seats for them (other than for the SNP in Scotland). Entry into the national winning stalls is not democratic.

Did you feel cleaner? Do you feel better having voted on May 4th? Will voting on the 4th of July be a moment of joy for you? Or, like most people, did you not vote in the local elections? And do you think you understand why others voted as they did? Or did not? What is your take on the display the theatrical circus had to offer that day and in these weeks?

Resident Association candidates won 2% of the tickets, up 1% on their last performance. George Galloway's 'Workers' party And Richard Tice's "Reform" secured so few councilors that a meaningful percentage or projection is not calculable, but now Nigel Farage has taken over from Tice he might after many attempts finally win a single seat in parliament. Perhaps these minor parties do so poorly because they are not parties of either workers or reform? But there is always the chance they might – and that chance drives their small bands of loyalists onwards.

But what is clean? For some, to vote for 'Reform' is the height of cleanliness, of hygiene: voting for the political party that will, in their imaginations, hose out the stables of filth. For far more, a fraction less extreme, it is Sunak's Tories that are clean, defending on the beach fronts and cliff tops. For even more it is Starmer's Labour, now the until very recently party of 'no benefits for the third or subsequent child', run by a leader who supported starving children and their parents in Gaza of food and denying them water. Maybe Labour will change its policy on child benefits if it wins power? We do not know for sure? Maybe Labour will call for a ceasefire and stop the supply of UK weapons to what the World Court is currently investigating as a war crime? We are asked to choose who to vote for without out knowing the answers to these questions.

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Next in the parade of possibilities comes Carla Denyer's and Adrian Ramsey's Green party, occasionally characterized as 'Tories on bikes' and lead by leaders with no name recognition. That may not be their fault, but if ever there was a time to be clearer about their views – it is now.

And then there are the circus wagons presented as the freak shows: those for whom no party would fit or no party would have. The independents, the protestors, the ones who cannot stand having blood on their hands and in their minds and stand to oppose killing. In the parade of freaks they too can be presented as misfits. Even if they are the only sane ones in the show. And one old man stands again in Islington North, for the 11th time since 1983.

References

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² <https://x.com/stephenkb/status/1787121978731544717>

³ <https://x.com/SadiqKhan/status/1787557829047357477>

⁴ <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/politics/sadiq-khan-savages-jeremy-corbyn-as-he-describes-election-result-as-catastrophe-for-labour-london-and-the-uk-a4313246.html>

⁵ <https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/24301695.oxford-city-council-leaders-continue-manifesto-delivery/>

⁶ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election/2024/england/results#mayor-scoreboard>

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*Danny Dorling is an English social geographer and academic. Since 2013, he has been Halford Mackinder Professor of Geography of the School of Geography and the Environment of the University of Oxford. He is the author of *All That Is Solid, Injustice: Why Social Inequality Still Persists* and *A Better Politics*.*

Here he discusses the choices in the forthcoming general election through the optics of the local elections and asks will you be voting for hope or hate or staying at home?



Prof Danny Dorling

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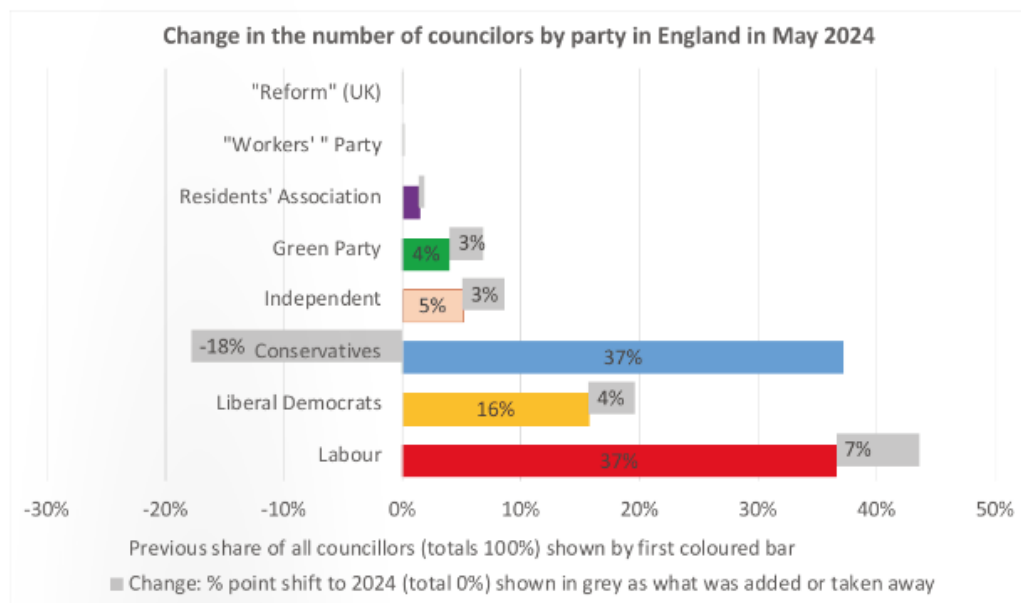
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