




UK General Election Analysis 2024: Media, Voters and the Campaign

Early reflections from leading academics

Edited by:
Daniel Jackson, Katy Parry, Emily Harmer, Darren Lilleker, Scott Wright, Julie Firmstone, Einar Thorsen

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This is the eighth Election Analysis report. In some ways it gets easier every time, but in other ways it gets harder. We are getting too old for the all-nighters that the 10-day turnaround demands! It is a privilege to share this journey with contributors to this report: many of whom we know well, and many of whom we met through this collaboration. This project requires contributors to work at short notice and with very tight deadlines – during the holiday season for some. In this context, we were delighted with the response to our invitations to contribute and we are grateful for our contributors' expertise and commitment throughout the project.

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This report is dedicated to the memory of Jay Blumler, Jonathan Dean, Ron Johnson and, Kerry Moore, who are previous contributors to these reports, and whose contributions to the field of politics and media will be sorely missed.

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Introduction

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After months of speculation about the timing of the next general election, Rishi Sunak surprised many by plumping for July and announcing the news during a rainstorm, apparently signaling the campaign difficulties ahead for his Conservative Party. Labour's substantial lead in the polls leading to and throughout the campaign led to an unsurprising landslide for Keir Starmer's party, gaining 411 seats to the Conservative Party's 121. Given the perceived inevitability of the result, it might be tempting to suggest that the campaign made no difference. Still, the mid-campaign rise of Reform UK and the election of multiple independent candidates in previously safe seats could challenge such a reading.

While the election of a Labour government was not unexpected, there were plenty of noteworthy results for other parties (covered more fully by our contributors), including the rebound of the Liberal Democrats, the SNP collapse, and the aforementioned rise in successful independents and Reform UK candidates. The results also proved favourable for smaller parties like the Green Party, which increased its seats from one to four. Election night also brought drama, with several prominent Conservatives losing their seats, including former Prime Minister Liz Truss.

This election has prompted many questions and talking points, which pollsters, journalists, academics, commentators, and politicians are now busy analysing. This report is our collective contribution to making sense of the 2024 election. To do this, we have again turned to leading academics in the UK and beyond – a mix of established experts and early-career researchers – to offer their reflections, analysis, and preliminary findings on the election campaign.

For analysts, this election offered continuities from recent campaigns but will also be remembered for its implications for democracy and representation. Much of the post-election analysis has focussed on the size of the Labour majority versus its share of the vote, with increasing calls for a more proportional electoral system. Accordingly, we devote **Section 1** to discussions of the performance of the electoral system alongside wider reflections on the status of the UK's democratic culture.

In **Section 2,** we turn to voters, polls, and results. At 60%, turnout was the lowest since 2001, indicating that politicians of all parties have much work to do in rebuilding trust with voters. Chapters of this report unpack the causes and consequences of this, alongside analysis of age, gender, and religion as important factors in voting patterns and electoral outcomes. This was also an election where tactical voting likely played a crucial role in the outcome of certain seats, to the benefit of the progressive Left.

After a series of disastrous elections for Labour in Scotland, 2024 saw a remarkable reversal of their fortunes north of the border. **Section 3** discusses how we got here and its implications. Wales remained red, but as with other nations and regions, Labour's future is still uncertain.

With new parties launched, remarkable changes in fortunes from 2019, and a notable number of independent candidates returned, there is much to unpack for the UK's political parties (**Section 4**). Of relevance here are the policy platforms on which the parties campaigned (**Section 5**). Compared to 2017 and 2019, Brexit was relatively absent, with both major parties campaigning around tax, the economy, public services, and the cost of living. Despite the campaign seemingly being called to benefit their Rwanda policy, the Conservatives remained relatively quiet on immigration, allowing Reform to dominate this space.

Digital media (**Section 6**) was again a major battleground, where for the first time a UK general election was fought in light of generative AI, which proved a talking point for our contributors. 2024 also saw TikTok emerge as a significant platform for reaching younger voters, though contributions also demonstrate how Facebook and other established social networks remained relevant.

Since the time of Gordon Brown's leadership, the Labour Party has routinely faced hostility from the UK's predominantly right-wing press. The evidence gathered in **Section 7** of this report from 2024 suggests that Labour was given a far greater hearing. However, the nature of press endorsements suggest that any hopes of sympathetic coverage will be short-lived. 2024 also saw televised leader debates further established as a central staple of election communication in the UK. However, given the public dissatisfaction with some of the debate formats and the emergence of an increasingly multi-party system, they remain a work in progress.

Finally, in **Section 8** we capture perhaps one of the most interesting dynamics of the election: the interplay between politics, performance and popular culture. Here, contributions explore the sounds, iconic images, mood, and feel of the election as voters experienced it, particularly outside of explicitly political places and spaces.

Published within ten days of the result, these contributions are short and accessible. Authors provide authoritative analysis – including research findings and new theoretical insights – to bring readers original ways of understanding the campaign. Contributions also benefit from a rich range of disciplinary influences, from political science to cultural studies, journalism studies to geography. We hope this makes for a vibrant, informative, and engaging read.

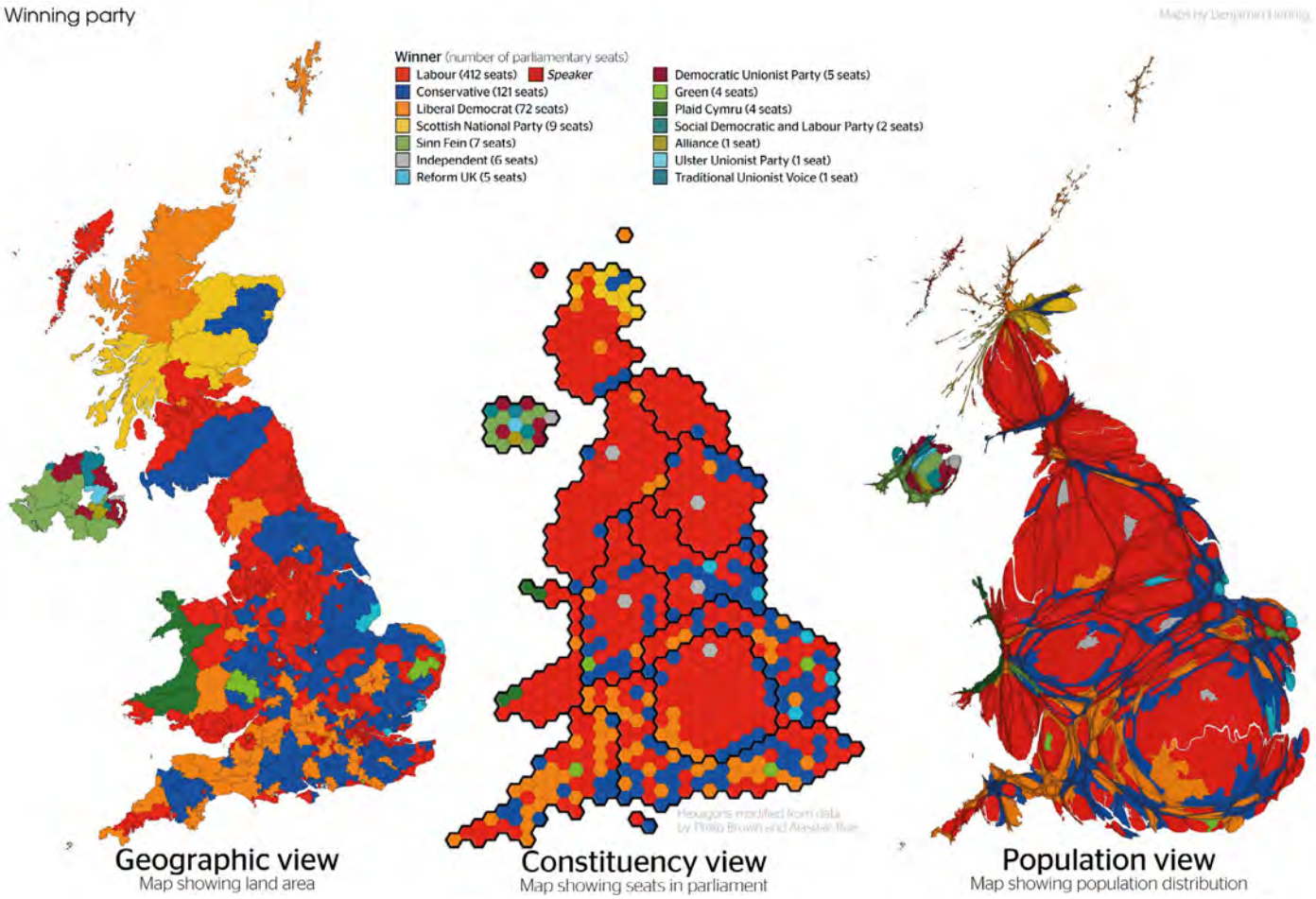

Figure 1: Winning party

1

Democracy and representation

Public anxiety and the electoral process

Between 2019 and 2024 Labour went from crushing defeat to colossal majority, notwithstanding that its share of the votes cast was, remarkably, much the same. Important though that constitutional issue is, here I'll compare the two elections in some other respects. Firstly, there was a difference in the nature of their campaigns. In 2019, still in the wake of the Brexit referendum, the Conservative Prime Minister Johnson offered delivery of 'Leave', the rhetoric for which had offered Brexit as a panacea for anxieties about deteriorating public services, poverty, housing, and the loss of community. That approach triumphed over the Leftist programme offered by Jeremy Corbyn's Labour. In 2024, however, shorn of both Corbynism and the confused and partly confected passions of 'getting Brexit done', the electoral competition was heavily technocratic in tone. Clear ideological differences between the major parties were marginal, despite Conservative attempts to invoke the big-state tax-predator image of Labour. On five issues of most concern to the British public, very similar solutions were offered – reform the NHS, grow the economy, relieve cost-of-living pressures, build more houses and reduce immigration.

So unlike 2019, the debate was largely about how much one or other of the parties would be able to deliver the broadly desired aims, rather than about basic value or policy differences. This return to a more 'boring' politics of competence was at one level a welcome contrast to the anger-provoking and anxiety-building politics of recent years: the dismal period of Johnsonian sleaze and chaos, and the hare-brained arrogance of the momentary Truss premiership. Both Labour and Conservatives stressed how they had rejected extremism (i.e. Corbyn and Truss), and how they would restore integrity.

Ideology still lived somewhere, restrained behind the parties' deployment of technocratic centrism. Their promises of combining pragmatism and probity were strategic attempts to win public support with calm reassurance. This takes us to a core issue. While public anxiety, and how to manage it, is always an element in government-citizen relations, it has become more so as globalisation has increased our reasons to feel anxious. An underlying sense that we live in a very unsafe world has been building at least since the turn of the century. Perhaps it was longer thus, but the end of the Cold War and the global spread of democracy allowed that sense to fade in the 1990s. Since then, however, it has grown, fed from different sources for different people, including all the societal fears manipulated by the Leave campaign, and the civilisational focus of climate anxiety. Also, the pandemic brought the fear of death into everyday politics, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine began to revive the fear of war, long absent in Great Britain. On top of all that, the manifest incompetence, irresponsibility, and perceived extremism of our own political class added another layer of fear: they are supposed to protect us from it all.

Hence the 2024 convergence of the parties on a pitch of safe moderation, purged of reckless extremism. But while different from 2019, this actually indicates an important similarity between the two elections. On both occasions the decisive shifts in voting were driven by public anxieties. In 2019, Labour failed (as did the 2016 Remain campaign) to address these, and so the field was left open for Brexiteers to echo the Leave campaign, to appropriate the widespread sense of insecurity and loss, and to express the wish for the delusional cure to be delivered. In 2024, despite their centrist campaigning, the Conservatives had no way back - after Truss - to a credible image of competence and responsibility, so half their 2019 voters fled in various directions in search of containment for their anxiety. Meanwhile, Keir Starmer's reconstruction of Labour as a safe option enabled them to hold on to the same level of support which, for different reasons, they had in 2019.

So both elections have reflected the 'postmodern' departure from rationalistic politics based on stable inter-class tensions, and the turn to a more volatile and psychologically-driven contest, with trust at its heart. Yet there remains a crucial difference. In 2019, 'Brexitism' was electorally powerful because it manipulated public anxiety, misrepresenting it and conveying – falsely – that it had a single source which could be simply dealt with. In 2024, Starmer's Labour claimed trustworthiness, while avoiding delusions, lies and offers of fake panaceas. From a moral and psychological point of view, this is a much better start, both for the effective containment of anxiety, rather than its manipulation, and (perhaps the same thing) for political success.

The Government's technocratic campaign offerings will now need to be taken forward around an explicit set of substantive values that define its centrist, social democratic mission, and inform its policies, especially in relation to the most contentious political issues. Foremost amongst these are likely to be questions about our national identity and culture, which are presently 'owned' mainly by the five Reform and five independent MPs. Securing majority public support for answers to those questions (e.g. about the optimal level of legal immigration, and how to achieve it) will be as difficult as it is important.

Prof Barry Richards

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How Nigel Farage opened the door to No. 10 for Keir Starmer

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The 2024 UK General Election proved a watershed contest, with a stunning rejection of the Conservative government. The party's share of the vote (24%) was its worst ever. In contrast the Labour Party made a historic leap, doubling the number of MPs (412) and winning almost two-thirds (64%) of all Westminster seats despite securing only one-third (34%) of the vote.

In the following days, heated post-mortems sparked a lively debate about the underlying reasons for this remarkable event. In particular, from a comparative perspective, why did the Labour Party achieve such a substantial victory, sweeping them back to power? This is all the more remarkable because it seems to buck the trend for the flagging electoral fortunes of centre-left social democratic parties, and the rise in popular support for authoritarian populists in parts of Europe as well as prospects for the reelection of Donald Trump in America.

Why did the Conservatives lose?

Many blamed the Conservative defeat on an anti-incumbency vibe and 'time-for-a-change'. Fourteen years of Conservative rule saw multiple leadership contests, five prime ministers, sexual misconduct and corruption, and policy failures from the cost-of-living crisis to austerity cuts in public services. In particular, the public became widely disillusioned with Brexit when Boris Johnson's sunny upland populist promises about the benefits of leaving the EU confronted the reality of falling living standards, growing inflation, and rising net migration. Under the Conservatives, Britain had sluggish productivity growth and high inequality.

Why did Labour win?

Therefore, the anti-incumbency mood helps to explain the historic loss of Conservative support. Why Labour won, however, needs to focus on the workings of the UK First Past the Post (FPTP) electoral system and patterns of multiparty competition.

As discussed elsewhere in this volume (Renwick), there are many ways to summarise the proportionality of any electoral system. The simplest is to divide the proportion of votes into seats. The plurality electoral system for Westminster resulted in a seats: votes ratio of 1.88 for Labour, the largest 'winners' bonus' for any party in first place during the post-war era (see Figure 1). The overall share of the vote and its geographic concentration are essential for winning seats under this system. Minor parties and independent candidates can be elected if they campaign resources strategically in constituencies where their support is most concentrated, for example, in seats with high proportions of Muslim and young people for the five pro-Palestinian independent candidates returned to parliament. However, if minor parties like the Green and Reform parties try to campaign across the whole country, they may increase their overall share of the nationwide vote but still fail to win seats.

Party competition is also critical. In Downsian models, in any contest parties seek to compete for the median voter in the centre of the political spectrum across the issue space. The December 2019 UK General Election model is illustrated in a two-dimensional issue space in Figure 2. The horizontal axis shows where experts located the UK parties on economic values, dividing those favouring state management versus free markets. The vertical axis shows where they placed the parties in their liberal or conservative social values, such as on minority rights and nationalism. Party competition in the liberal-left space, in the bottom left-hand quadrant, was a crowded field in 2019. Labour was flanked by the Greens, the nationalist parties, and, to a lesser extent, the Liberal Democrats. All these opposition parties divided the pool of British voters with liberal-left values. By contrast, the Conservative party enjoyed 'clear blue waters' in the top right-hand quadrant, with only the more extreme Brexit Party and the Democratic Unionists sharing this conservative-right space. In 2019, Nigel Farage announced that the Brexit Party would not contest Conservative seats. Instead, it would compete in opposition-held constituencies, where they failed to gain a single MP. This strategic decision allowed Boris Johnson to consolidate support among Leave voters, contributing towards his 80-seat majority.

By contrast, in the 2024 General Election, Nigel Farage decided to field 609 Reform candidates nationwide. The party won 14.3% of the vote share, or over four million votes, the third-highest popular vote of any party. For the first time, Nigel Farage was elected along with four other MPs, a critical breakthrough for the party, although the highly disproportional result is due to the FPTP system. By splitting the right-wing vote, however, the net effect of the Reform strategy was essentially to steal support from the Conservatives, to allow Labour and the Liberal Democrats to gain seats where they were in second place against the Conservatives, and thereby to throw open the door of No. 10 to Keir Starmer.

Therefore 'throw-the rascals-out' forces and negative partisanship make reelection challenging for all governing incumbents. Western governments face similar pressures from inflation, migration, cultural change, and international security, providing opportunities for minor parties to gain votes and seats. However, as argued elsewhere, the way that parties compete strategically within the rules of the electoral game is critical for understanding the outcome in each country, including the fortune of authoritarian populist parties.

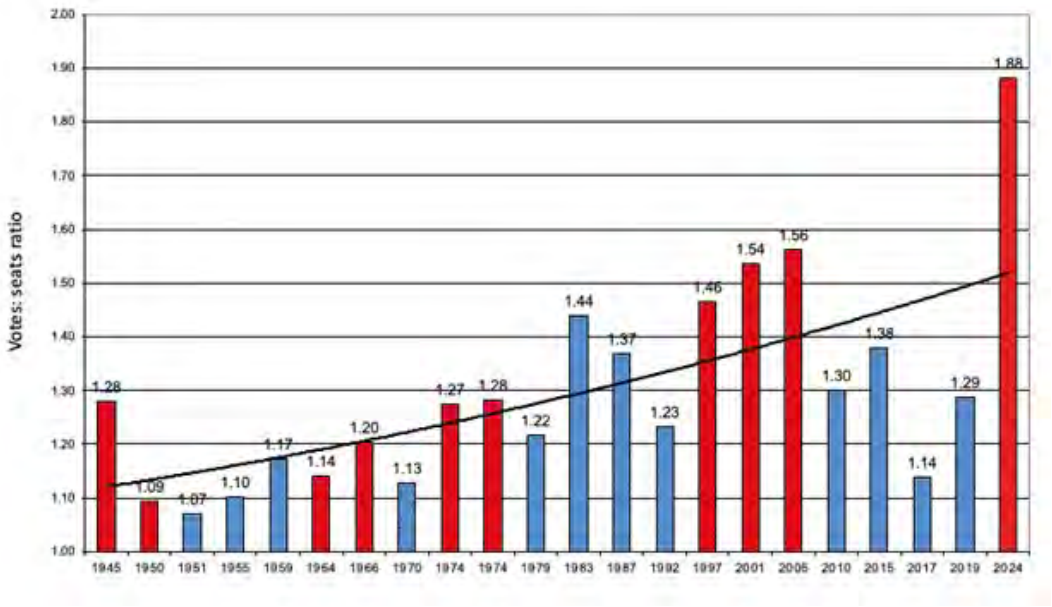

Figure 1: The votes: seats ratio for the winning party in post-war UK General Elections

Note: The votes: seats ratio is produced by dividing the percentage of votes for the winning party into their percentage of seats. A ratio of 1.0 would be perfectly proportional.

Source: House of Commons Library

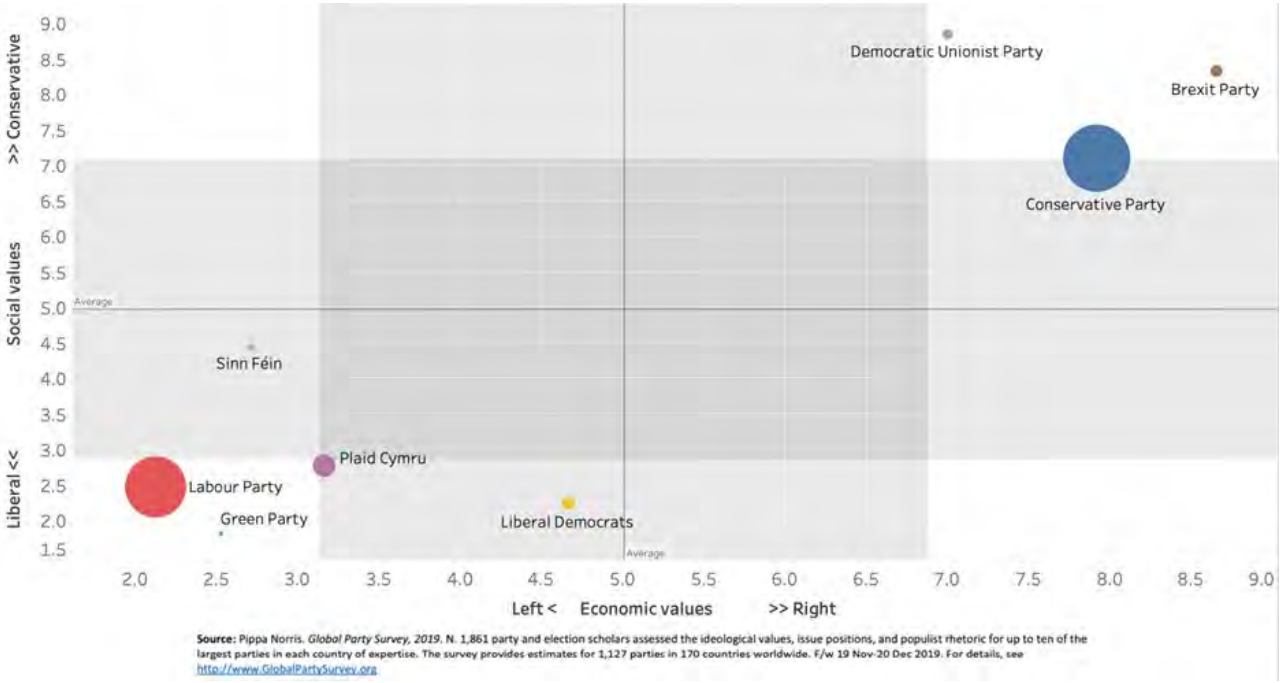

Figure 2: Party competition in the 2019 UK General Election

The performance of the electoral system

Prof Alan Renwick

Professor of Democratic Politics and Deputy Director of the Constitution Unit, in the UCL Department of Political Science. His research examines the formal mechanisms through which citizens' voices are heard in politics, including elections, referendums, and deliberative processes such as citizens' assemblies.

At least at first sight, the election result perfectly illustrates the cases both for and against the First Past the Post electoral system.

The greatest benefit of that system – at least according to its advocates – is that it allows the voters, rather than post-election negotiations between political parties, to decide who will govern. It does this by, typically, giving a single party a majority of parliamentary seats, so voters can throw out a government they dislike and install another. In fact, such clean transitions are rarer than the system's cheerleaders would have us believe: only once before since 1945 – in 1970 – had a secure governing majority for one party been replaced by a secure governing majority for another. But the 2024 election delivered the most decisive transition of the post-Second World War era: a Conservative government originally elected with a majority of 80 was replaced by a Labour government with a majority of 172.

First Past the Post's critics, meanwhile, focus primarily on the disproportionality of the results that it generates. Parliament is supposed to represent the nation. It cannot adequately do that if the seat shares of the various political parties are markedly out of kilter with those parties' shares of the votes cast. Exactly how electoral disproportionality should be measured is debated. By any reasonable measure, however, the 2024 election was – by a long stretch – the most disproportional since 1945. Figure 1 shows two such measures. The Gallagher index is the most widely used, while the Sainte Laguë index, I have argued previously, better captures the underlying concept.

The major factor in that pattern was the over-representation of the Labour Party, which secured 63.4% of the seats on just 33.7% of the votes. In absolute terms, this was the largest over-representation for any party in postwar history; it was also the most favourable ratio of votes to seats obtained by either of the main parties over the same period. Reform UK and, to a lesser extent, the Conservatives were meanwhile under-represented. For once, the Liberal Democrats secured almost their proportional seat share.

The arguments both for and against reform of the First Past the Post system thus seem to be strengthened by the result. But we have looked so far only at the headlines. If we scratch further beneath the surface, the election also illustrates those arguments' weaknesses.

As regards the case for First Past the Post, there is clearly a difficulty in saying that the result illustrates voter control over government formation when the winning party secured only a fraction more than a third of the votes cast. Indeed, when we also take account of turnout – which, at 59.7%, was only fractionally above the post-1945 low reached in 2001 – Labour's claim to a governing mandate is, as Figure 2 shows, weaker still. Just 20.1% of eligible electors cast a ballot in Labour's favour, beating the previous post-1945 record of 21.6% reached in 2005.

Turning to the pro-reform argument, the claim that seat shares ought to equal vote shares asks us to assume that there are discrete viewpoints in the electorate that the various parties represent, and that voters choose the party that is closest to them. Yet the 2024 election has illustrated perhaps better than any previous one that this picture is too simplistic. Many electors voted tactically, casting their ballot not for their first preference, but for a candidate they could tolerate who was better placed to defeat another. Furthermore, several parties – particularly Labour, the Liberal Democrats, and the Greens – ran very effective targeted campaigns, further skewing the results. We cannot read off from the overall vote totals what the parties' seat shares in a 'fair' contest ought to have been.

In sum, supporters of electoral reform will see their case as strengthened by this election result, and will push hard for change; but advocates of the status quo will also find much to solidify their own view. Having secured a landslide majority, Labour's leaders are hardly likely to seek change in the system that gave them victory. And, believing in the value of clear government accountability to voters and strong majorities, they may feel that they have right as well as self-interest on their side. At least in the short term, therefore, electoral reform seems highly unlikely.

Yet the longer term is less certain. The combined Labour and Conservative vote share, at 57.4%, was well below the previous post-war low of 65.1%, reached in 2010. This fits with a gradual, though jagged, trend towards greater party system fragmentation evident since the 1970s. Such fragmentation tends to make election results less predictable and single-party majorities harder to build, thereby weakening both the democratic case for First Past the Post and the large parties' self-interest in maintaining it. Should such trends continue, therefore, electoral reform may rise up the agenda in the years to come.

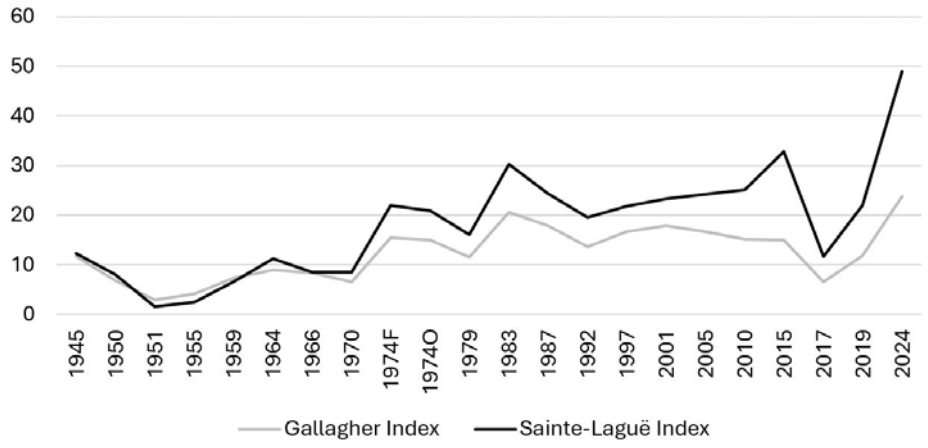

Figure 1. Disproportionality at UK General Elections since 1945

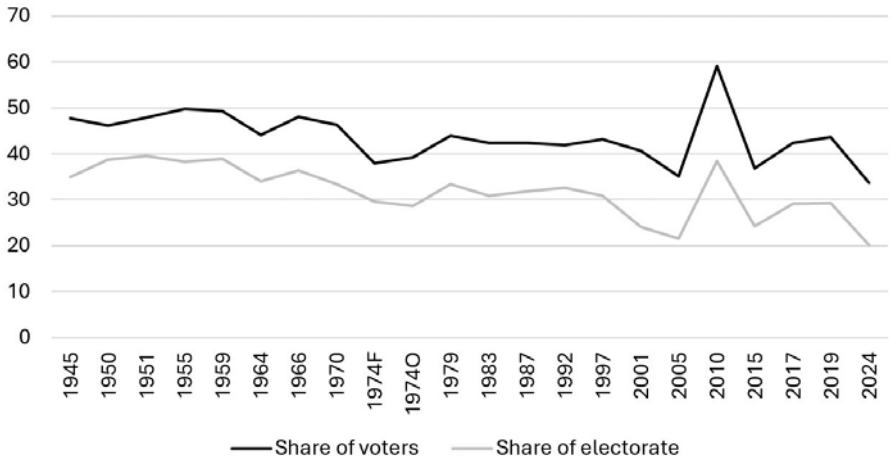

Figure 2. Vote share of the party/parties forming the government, since 1945

Tory downfall is democracy rectifying its mistakes

Prof Stephen Barber

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Democracies are no better than other forms of government at avoiding catastrophic mistakes. But they are much more effective at rectifying them. While the 2024 British General Election might have seemed a long time coming, as the country meandered from one failure to the next, the utter scale of defeat for the Conservatives is testament to the ability of a democratic system to reject, reverse and renew.

It is easy to see this election in the tradition of other big defeats like 1997, 1979 or 1964. A powerful theme of "time for a change" was at play and the governing party seemed to have run out of steam. It can even be interpreted as sending a powerful message to Rishi Sunak's Conservative party that voters wanted to inflict punishment for incompetence, economic mismanagement and sleaze. But this one is more than that.

The now former governing party, returned with a majority of 80 in 2019, has been beaten to within an inch of its life. A generation of politicians long criticised for treating public life with contempt, have been ejected from office and parliament.

Step back, and this election can be seen as democracy rectifying the catalogue of its own glaring mistakes. Since the calamitous Brexit referendum eight years ago, Britain has suffered economic decay and a cost of living crisis (briefly exacerbated by Liz Truss and Kwasi Kwarteng's disastrous so-called "mini-budget").

It has endured a government with a lengthy record of rule breaking reflected in the UK falling to its lowest ever ranking in the Global Corruption Index. It has seen dodgy pandemic procurement contracts handed out, party donors appointed to the House of Lords and a sustained attack on its constitution, institutions, and rule of law. Tiresome culture war crusades have divided communities and polluted public life.

Denigration of public services from education to the NHS to the armed forces, crises in housing, the climate and inequality have been left unchallenged. Damage has been done to the country's international reputation and relations strained with the UK's closest allies in Europe.

What these errors have in common is that each one sits firmly at the door of 10 Downing Street and its four most recent inhabitants. This election emphatically draws a line under them.

Parties can fall

The more existential question is whether this election is also a watershed moment that will permanently change the shape of British politics. Could we be witnessing the demise of the Conservative party and the end of its hegemonic position at the centre of public life?

It happened to the previously dominant Liberal party a century ago when it split down the middle and was replaced by a new emerging Labour party. Such a shift is rare, of course, and requires some sort of major disruption.

In the years following the First World War, Labour's rise was fuelled by an extension in the franchise so significant that it makes the proposed votes for today's 1.5 million 16 and 17-year-olds appear trifling. Indeed, the Representation of the People acts more than doubled the electorate by giving the vote to women and the 40% of (working-class) men who were also previously disenfranchised.

There is nothing quite so seismic heading Westminster's way today (though plans for automatic registration could add millions of voters). But the potential for comparison should not be dismissed.

Post-Brexit realignment, realigned

Party identification in the electorate, which has been in decline since the 1960s was turned on its head in 2019 when Boris Johnson's Tories won a swathe of red wall seats in the midlands and the north of England. For the first time, Labour voters were wealthier than Conservative. Labour, of course, went down to its worst defeat since 1935. There was talk of a new political cleavage, where class divisions had been replaced by leavers and remainers.

That this has all been reversed in the space of one parliament demonstrates the incredible fluidity in the electorate today. The more than 70 seats that have gone to the Liberal Democrats show the determination of the electorate to vote tactically to remove Conservatives in spite of an electoral system that has historically kept them in office.

And then there is Reform. Nigel Farage's rag bag of a party has proved to be the ultimate protest vote for disenchanted Tory voters, attracted to the open acknowledgement that few if any seats could be won but the higher the vote, the harder the beating for the Conservatives.

As it happens, millions more voted Reform than was reflected in their seat share. While there are some leading Tories who would still welcome him into the fold, Farage perhaps overplayed his hand during the campaign making the Conservatives defensive of a rival, hell bent on their destruction. Time will tell if the Conservatives can resist the onslaught but for now the psychodrama of the right will be a political sideshow to the main event: an innocent new government and a refreshed parliament.

Britain's parliamentary democracy facilitated this catalogue of mistakes which have proved so damaging to the country over recent years. But in this election it has also proved highly effective at beginning the work to rectification. If Starmer gets a moment to catch his breath, he might reflect upon this as the key reason he has been handed such a decisive majority.

Votes at 16 and decent citizenship education could create a politically aware generation

Keir Starmer has pledged that a Labour government would introduce voting for 16- and 17-year-olds in Westminster elections.

Rishi Sunak has claimed that votes at 16 is simply a tactic to shore up future support for Labour, given that younger people are less likely to vote Conservative.

But research conducted in countries where young people already vote at this age suggests that the move would actually be beneficial for overall democratic engagement in the UK. It would be even more powerful if it was paired with lessons at school on citizenship and political involvement.

Sceptics tend to worry that young people lack the maturity to participate in elections. However, there is significant positive evidence of the capacities of young people in these countries and of the benefits of votes at 16.

Several countries, including Austria, Argentina and Malta, have lowered the voting age to 16 for national elections. Some other countries, such as Scotland and Wales in the UK and some states in Germany, allow 16- and 17-year-olds to vote in local or regional elections. Research in these places allows us to understand more about the impact of introducing votes at 16.

In particular, evidence shows that 16- and 17-year-olds have similar levels of motivation to participate in politics as older age groups, and are able to select candidates whose policies most align with the teenagers' own standpoints. Their youth does not mean that they are less able to make reasoned political decisions.

There is also evidence that 16- and 17-year-olds are actually more likely to vote than 18- to 24-year-olds when their schools provide them with appropriate political information and help engage them with voting. This can include discussing key issues and ensuring young people have information about the process for voter registration, the powers and duties of those being elected and the policy differences between candidates and parties.

What's more, if high turnout rates can be achieved among 16- and 17-year-olds this should then bode well for their future levels of turnout. There is evidence that if voters cast their ballot in one of the first elections they are eligible to, they are more likely to continue to do so in future.

Informed and involved

A key way to encourage 16-year-olds to engage with elections – and set them on the path to lifelong political engagement – is through citizenship education. Evidence from the UK and internationally has shown the positive impact that well-delivered citizenship education can have on students.

For example, a research study conducted in 28 countries suggested that classroom discussion of political issues increases civic knowledge. Subsequently, that increase in civic knowledge make future political participation more likely.

Research carried out in the UK has found that citizenship education leads to increases in political knowledge and political participation. It also increases young people's confidence in their ability to act in the political realm, and their belief in the value of the political system and their ability to effect change.

UK citizenship education

Citizenship education was introduced in secondary schools in England by Labour in 2002. It was intended to help young people understand political concepts and promote civic and political participation. Although citizenship education has been retained in the national curriculum by subsequent governments, it is not really up to scratch.

Under the Conservatives it has been slimmed down and its focus shifted towards constitutional history and financial literacy. A greater emphasis has been placed on voluntary work. In addition, academies and free schools have been given the freedom to opt out of following the national curriculum.

What is needed now is a more comprehensive citizenship curriculum in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. It should be designed to prepare 16- and 17-year-olds to vote and to engage confidently in other forms of political action.

To be effective, this citizenship education should be taught to all secondary school students. It needs to be underpinned by a commitment from the government and schools to get young people involved in politics. It should equip them for critical and informed political thinking, so they possess knowledge about the political system and how to engage in political activities.

Media literacy is also important. Young people need to be able to recognise problems associated with fake news and conspiracy theories in society.

Activities such as mock elections and classroom debates would help young people hone their political understanding and reasoning skills. Crucially, citizenship education should show young people that they can make a difference.

Together, the introduction of votes at 16 and improved citizenship lessons in UK schools would provide young people with a greater voice in politics. It would allow them to confidently play a bigger role in helping society address significant contemporary problems.

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"An election about us but not for us": The lack of communication for young people during GE2024

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While featuring in many critical policy debates, the 2024 UK general election alienated some younger citizens. The quote used in the title of this piece comes from my ongoing interviews with young people in England who experience inequality, exploring how they navigated political communication during the campaign. Those I have spoken to were surprised by how, in an election dominated by the cost of living, the state of the NHS, and immigration, youth issues could be so present in electoral discourse yet disconnected from their priorities.

Cast your mind back to the first week, when parties competed to establish the narrative of their overarching plans, and Prime Minister Rishi Sunak launched a proposal to require 18-year-olds to participate in National Service. This flagship policy for the Conservative Party led 16-year-old Henry Hassell to ask Sunak why "he hates young people so much" in a viral video on TikTok. By week two, the party committed to scrapping "rip-off" university degrees to fund new apprenticeships. This rallying cry was endorsed on the front pages of the *Daily Express* and the *Daily Mail*. Both policies were deeply unpopular with young voters.

Beyond the governing party, Nigel Farage, leader of the Reform Party, told Good Morning Britain that "a growing number of young people do not subscribe to British values, in fact, despise British values". Meanwhile, Sarah Vine, a columnist in *The Mail on Sunday*, stated that she wouldn't trust a 16-year-old to "collect her dry cleaning", let alone vote, in response to the Labour Party's proposal to extend the voting age to 16. This policy was later described as an attempt to "rig future elections" on the front page of the *Daily Mail*. These examples demonstrate open hostility toward this generation. Rather than seeking to represent their concerns legitimately, youth issues were used to garner electoral support from older voters.

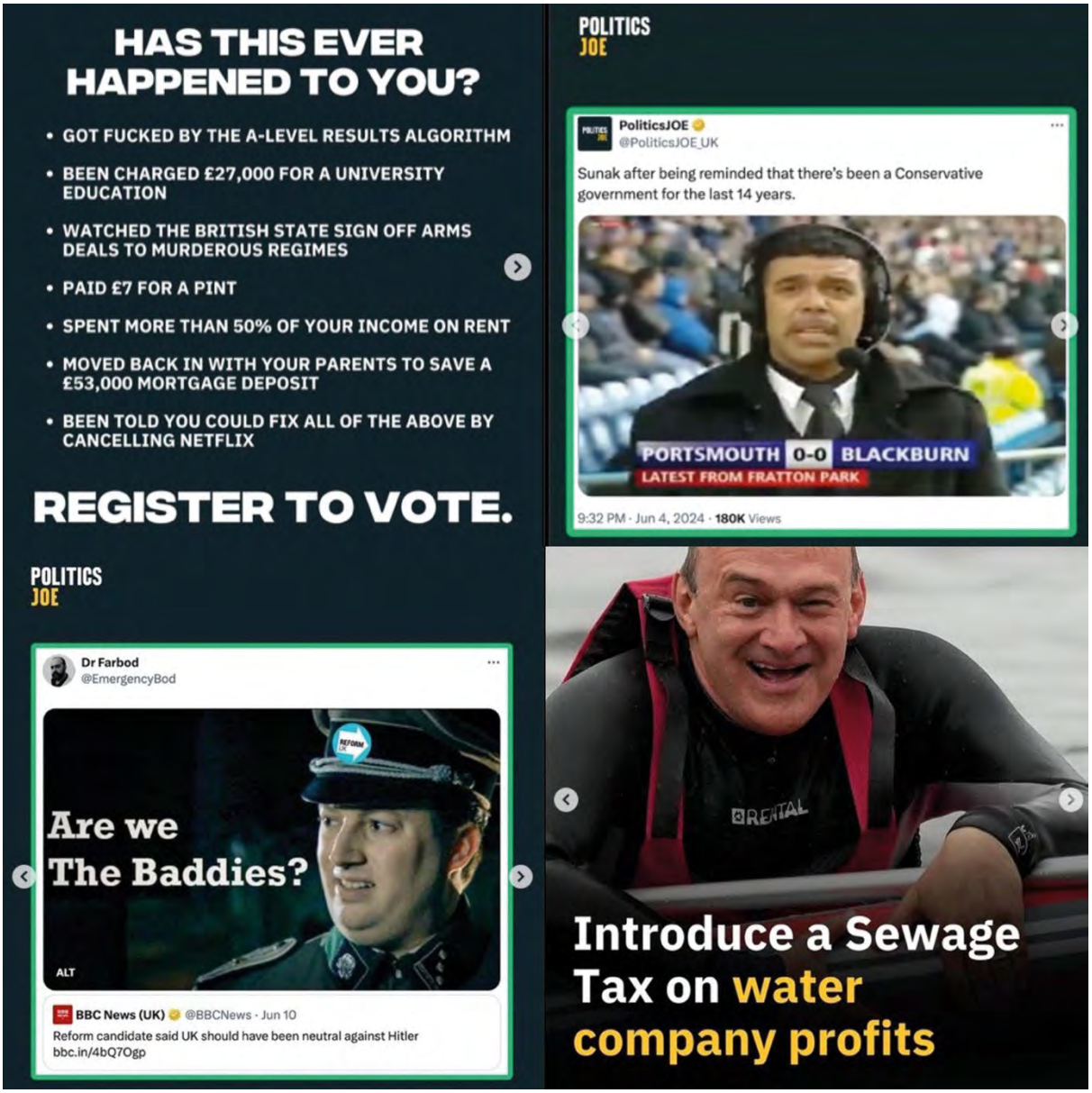
Interviewees were also opposed to the conflict frames used in electoral discourse, with one citing coverage on the climate crisis as an example where the substantive issue and its long-term impact was overlooked in favour of stories about "these terrible vigilante type people". For instance, the decision of Just Stop Oil protestors to spray soluble paint on Stonehenge during the campaign was described by the then Home Secretary, James Cleverly, as a "reckless and idiotic assault on the fabric of our nation". The response advocated on the front page of the *Daily Express* was to "just lock them up!".

As an alternative, interviewees outlined a vision of the type of political reporting they wanted to see: information that takes the priorities of young people seriously, listens to and amplifies their perspectives, and gives awareness to topics that this population perceives to be minimised.

Unsurprisingly, young people looked elsewhere for such campaign news, with many turning to social media. Despite well-documented fears about the accuracy of information on Instagram and TikTok, the reality was somewhat less dystopian. Some of the most widely shared deepfakes on these platforms were funny rather than dangerous, with the National Service plan being adapted for the video game Fortnite and Keir Starmer blowing up Nigel Farage's favourite pub on Minecraft. Instead, for my interviewees, social media offers access to stories and perspectives that are relatable to their lived experience, which they do not feel were covered by legacy news media or political parties during the campaign. This information comes from a variety of sources, including non-traditional actors, such as alternative media.

PoliticsJOE, the politics and current affairs section of youth-focused publisher JOE and one of the most recognisable news brands on social media in the UK, was mentioned in several interviews. During the election, they published a range of content, from long-form features on the scale of the food bank crisis, to a weekly round-up of the best memes on the election, to informative summaries of the manifestos weaved around humorous imagery. Crucially, this reporting is relatable to their young audience in the topics covered, but also in its form: *PoliticsJOE* reported on the election using the language and conventions that are representative of the communicative norms of this generation.

During the BBC Prime Ministerial Debate, Keir Starmer criticised the Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, stating, "If you listened to people in the audience [and] across the country, you might not be so out of touch". This feeling of not being heard was common in my interviews and represents a significant problem in British democracy. Young people who are passionate about social issues and their community are alienated by formal politics. If political elites care about the disengagement of this age group from mainstream political institutions and want to address the age gap in British politics, whereby young voters have stopped turning out to vote to the same degree as older citizens, they need to make meaningful attempts to integrate them into future elections.



PoliticsJOE screenshots: https://www.instagram.com/politicsjoe/

Election timing: masterstroke or risky gamble?

Prof Sarah Birch

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A defining feature of parliamentary systems is that the government has the power to decide when to call an election. The 2011 Fixed-Term Parliaments Act created a temporary hiatus to this aspect of the British constitution, but before and since that time, one of the most significant political tools of UK prime ministers has been the ability to determine when they will reapply for their jobs.

The 2024 General Election was not called when it was expected. Most media outlets and political commentators had been predicting an autumn campaign. Yet voters trooped to the polls on 4th July, making this the first parliamentary election held in that month since the unusual circumstances of 1945. In fact, there have only been two previous polls in months other than May or June since the October 1974 general election (April 1992 and December 2019).

The timing of the 2024 election raises two principal questions: what accounts for the choice of 4th July? And, was this a wise choice?

There was potentially some logic to the date, as the economy was showing signs of stabilising. Moreover, the longer Sunak waited to go to the people, the more homeowners would come to the end of their fixed-term mortgages and face steep interest rate hikes. An early poll also meant that other parties had less time to select candidates and fill their campaign war chests.

Indeed, inflation fell to the Bank of England's target of 2 % during the election campaign, which might have been expected to have helped the Tories. But there was little they could do about interest rates, due to the political independence of the Bank. We know from the distribution of election results that seats with larger numbers of mortgage-holders were more likely to vote Labour, suggesting that interest rate rises were one of the principal reasons why the Conservatives fared so badly. Had Sunak delayed further, the result could have been even worse for them.

Whether the timing of the election was a wise choice in other respects is a different question. Even without the benefit of hindsight, July was a dubious time to call a poll, due to the risk of heatwaves. The stereotypical British summer is hardly scorching, but it can be and it has been. Temperatures reached 40 degrees for the first time in history in July 2022, and this is the hottest month in much of the UK. There had already been several elections in 2024 that were adversely affected by heatwaves, including those in India, Mexico, Romania and the Maldives. In administrative terms, July was therefore arguably not an appropriate time to call voters to the polls and to ask local authority staff to enable them to vote, especially given that the average UK poll worker is a 53-year-old woman, and more vulnerable to heat-related health problems than the majority of the population.

The potential for a midsummer heatwave was risky in political terms as well. Sunak's gamble in fact paid off. The penultimate week of the election campaign saw a three-day heatwave in the south of England with temperatures in the high 20s, which meant some sticky canvassing and some sweaty candidates, but overall, the mercury never rose to dangerous levels during the election period, and election day itself was downright cool in most parts of the country.

Yet had temperatures been higher, this would likely have been felt most keenly in the Tory heartlands of southern England. This would in all probability have had two major political consequences: the Conservative base of older voters would undoubtedly have been less willing to make their ways to polling stations; studies of other countries suggests that extreme weather often depresses turnout. The second consequence is that high temperatures would have turned voters' minds to the environment. There is a considerable body of evidence suggesting that heatwaves increase concern about climate change, and climate change is not an issue on which the Conservatives are perceived as being strong by the electorate; floods that took place before the 2019 election have been found to have benefitted Labour, due to the fact that it had by that time managed to portray itself as the major party that was strongest on climate change.

It remains a puzzle as to why the Prime Minster opted for a July poll, despite the political and administrative risk. The most obvious answer is that the possibility of a heatwave was factored into his decision, but that other considerations proved more persuasive. Another possibility is that the PM's own tepid attitude toward climate change skewed his perception of the risk of extreme heat in July 2024. We are unlikely ever to know the answer to this question, but there are reasons to believe that the election date was not an entirely responsible choice, and that in future prime ministers should take greater account of the dangers of extreme weather when calling elections.

The dog that didn't bark? Electoral integrity and administration from voter ID to postal votes

Running a general election is a vast logistical and administrative exercise. There are over 40,000 polling stations in Britain, and over 100,000 people will have been working on polling day to ensure everyone entitled to vote could do so and have their vote counted accurately. Around a quarter of the electorate now vote by post. This is normally all taken for granted, although election administration has been underfunded and under pressure for years.

Yet, the run-up to General Election 2024 was when election administration became part of the story. Postal voting problems became front page news. Voter identification requirements were implemented for the first time in a general election, part of a package of reforms introduced by the Elections Act 2022. Voters were turned away for not having the correct ID, while queues built up at polling stations. There is likely to have been some variation in practice in checking ID across polling stations.

Postal voting was first to hit the headlines. It emerged that some Scottish councils were setting up emergency centres so voters could pick up postal ballot packs. This was due to three factors colliding: the beginning of the Scottish school holidays in July meaning many voters would be away on polling day; a lack of specialist printers to print ballot papers and packs; and (increasingly) poor Royal Mail service. Postal voting problems soon extended to parts of England.

A separate problem emerged with overseas voters, many of whom had been encouraged to register by the extension of the franchise beyond 15 years outside the UK. Many overseas postal vote packs did not arrive through the international mail in time to be sent back to be counted. This was not a new problem but was made worse by the extension of the franchise. *The* Telegraph covered postal vote issues extensively as did other outlets.

Photographic voter identification was also expected to cause difficulties. This had ostensibly been introduced to help secure the ballot. Critics were not slow in perceiving a vote suppression measure.

English local elections in 2023, the first elections with voter ID, had seen voters taking longer to process in polling stations. The Electoral Commission estimated that around 14,000 voters (0.25% of those who tried to vote) had been turned away in those elections because of not having the correct ID. This was probably an underestimate.

In a general election, with almost twice the turnout, voter ID was expected to cause a significant problem. There were around 56,000 applications for a voter authority certificate, the substitute for voters with no photo identification, between the election being called on 22nd May 2024 and the deadline six days in advance of polling day.

Polling day saw social media reports of polling station queues from early in the day. It also saw numerous claims of would-be voters being turned away. As with postal votes, it is difficult to get an exact sense of how widespread these difficulties were and to what extent they were related to voter ID. Yet, queues in polling stations are hard to square with the low turnout experienced on polling day. This might be suggestive of voters taking longer to process in some locations. Alternatively, queues may just have been at a particular pinch point during the day. The extent to which prospective voters were turned away for lack of ID is, at time of writing, unknown.

Post-election reports from The Electoral Commission, Association for Electoral Administrators and others will pore over the details of these issues in due course. Both the Electoral Management Board for Scotland and the Electoral Commission have promised reviews of the postal voting system.

While there were some suggestions of legal action over postal votes, including from narrowly defeated candidates, this is probably unlikely. Election Petitions are private legal actions. They can only be submitted up to 21 days after polling day and can only be raised by constituency. There are substantial financial costs involved for litigants, including costs awarded against them if they are unsuccessful.

It is unlikely that the actual effects of either the postal voting or voter ID issues will ever be known accurately, whatever estimates are produced in post-election reports. These issues do however point to the need for a root and branch review of electoral administration post-election. At minimum, issues that need examined include:

- The resourcing and capacity of electoral administration
- How on-demand postal voting might be delivered when around a quarter of the electorate now vote by mail?
- The implementation of voter ID

The electoral timetable, with the needs of both voters and administrators balanced – these do not necessarily point in the same direction.

Labour have already signalled the intention to deal with voter ID's implementation and also electoral registration, but these are only two among several pressing issues made worse by the complexity of electoral law. It is vital that the new government listen to suggestions to improve the electoral system in a way that its predecessor didn't.

Prof Alistair Clark

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A political gamble? How licit and illicit betting permeated the campaign

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Rishi Sunak's decision to call a summer election was a failed political gamble. The old saying that "hindsight is 20:20" applies aptly to disastrous election campaigns. However, Sunak's surprise decision made little sense to electoral analysts in real-time. If the snap election call was the act of a political gambler – it seemed to the psephological community to be a punt that ran contrary to their understanding of the odds.

The Economist estimated the Conservatives' chances of winning a majority at less than 1% when Sunak took the plunge, asserting that the decision "makes no sense, but is good news" – in the sense that it was a clear tactical mistake for the Conservatives but had the potential to unblock UK politics. Indeed, this sentiment was widespread beyond those who study public opinion, with polling indicating that 49% of voters thought the early election was "Good for the country", but only 13% agreed that the decision was "Good for the Conservatives".

If the surprise decision was designed to wrongfoot political opponents, any such discomfiture was offset by the chaos that followed in the heart of the Conservative Party. *Politico* reported on a party that was unprepared for its own snap election, with one candidate saying, upon hearing the news, "I was thinking to myself, 'what the f*** are we going to do?' because we just weren't ready for it".

The lack of a coherent political, economic, tactical or strategic rationale for an early election created a tempting gambling opportunity for individuals who, either as political insiders or as members of their police security details, knew which way the political wind was about to blow.

The election date betting market had become stagnant by early May. There was a general consensus that the date would be between October and December, with July seen as an unlikely outcome. Odds available on a July election expressed implied probabilities of between 8-16%. However, in the days before the formal announcement, these prices shortened considerably – with gambling website Oddschecker observing that the market surged in terms of activity on the evening of Tuesday, May 21st and morning of Wednesday, May 22nd, with the implied probability of a July election jumping to 56% by midday on the 22nd. Political logic be damned – the news was out, and the formal announcement in the pouring rain just after 5pm that day.

On 12th June news broke that Craig Williams, a Conservative candidate in Montgomeryshire and Glyndwr and the Prime Minister's Parliamentary Private Secretary, admitted to betting £100 on a July election date (at odds of 5/1) 3 days before the election was called. Cheating on a bet with 'inside information' is a criminal offence in UK law. The UK's Gambling Commission launched an inquiry (still ongoing at the time of writing) that would unfurl across the middle weeks of the campaign to encompass and sideline more Conservative candidates and key members of the Conservative campaign team, including the Campaign Director and Chief Data Officer. It should be noted that all politicians publicly identified as being under investigation deny any illegal behaviour.

The cavalcade of gaffes, tactical blunders and strategic miscalculations that followed (and, indeed, included) the launch of the 2024 UK General Election campaign is well documented. Not for nothing did Rishi Sunak spend his final day as Prime Minister apologising to all and sundry. But the spectacle of the betting investigation went beyond mere political incompetence. The affair resonated with the 'Partygate' scandal of the Johnson regime, cementing a widely held image of a Conservative party elite suffused by entitlement and avarice. Sunak's personal judgement was undermined by the fact that those accused were among his close inner circle and by his agonisingly slow realisation that the Party would have to withhold support from candidates under investigation.

As we have seen, this campaign was uniquely and grotesquely intertwined with illicit political gambling. We will likely see a tightening of norms and rules surrounding political gambling by politicians following the 2024 campaign. However, legitimate political gambling is very popular and a source of insight into the probabilities of various results and their dynamics as campaigns unfold. Indeed, the long odds initially available on a July election illustrate the insanity of the decision to call an election so early. The Conservatives were never seen by the markets as serious contenders to win a majority (or even the most seats) at any point in the campaign. As the polls were closing, prices of more than 500/1 (an implied probability of about a fifth of one percent) could be found on a Tory majority. Viewed through this lens, licit and legitimate political gambling sums up this election as a campaign where the clear favourites won easily. That members of the public can access and participate in such markets is, in this writer's opinion at least, no bad thing for political transparency and even engagement – after all, it matters more when there's money on it.

Ethnic diversity in politics is the new normal in Britain

With an all-change election, it is very telling that the one result that did not hinge on whether the polls predicting a Labour landslide were right has been that ethnic diversity of Members of Parliament went up again. An early report on ethnicity of candidates at this General Election from British Future showed that all possible election results would have ended with an increase in the number of non-White MPs. As it happens, on the night, an estimated record 89 were elected, up from 65. This, for the first time, makes political representation of an approximately 14 percent non-White British voters numerically perfect.

The election also marked a very important symbolic moment in British political history, by returning an ethnic minority MP from a constituency associated by name with the infamous, openly racist, election campaign in 1964 General Election: Smethwick. That this seat is represented by a Sikh MP winning an election held exactly 60 years later, is truly a symbol of how far we have come in political representation of ethnic minorities. Another memorable moment came with Wales electing their very first non-White MP, Kanishka Narayan.

One of the reasons for this pre-determined outcome is that another historic rise in ethnic diversity among MPs is a continuation of a long-term trend. Since the 2010 election, where the virtual monopoly of Labour in representing minority voters was finally broken, both Labour and Conservatives have increased the numbers of ethnic minority MPs at each election.

This steady progress has been a result of central parties' commitment to having a more diverse slate of MPs as result of a damning Speaker's Conference 2008 Report on diversity in Parliament. Media scrutiny on ethnicity of candidates and elected officials increased, and both Labour and the Conservatives worked to increase the numbers of ethnic minority MPs elected, achieving a doubling in numbers in 2010 and similar rises at each election since. This has been largely achieved through both parties putting minority candidates in more safe and winnable seats, and in a wider variety of seats, including those that were predominantly white. This has been particularly important for the Conservative party, as their safest seats are usually less ethnically diverse.

In fact, the very poor result for the Conservatives, combined with their previous efforts to increase diversity by placing minority candidates in their safest seats, means that the Party emerges more diverse in percentage terms, than before the election. Although the raw numbers were down from 22 to 14 with one early resignation, five retirements, six losses and only four non-White MPs elected, the remaining MPs of non-White origins were defending majorities of over 20% and in the face of a poor electoral outcome overall, this is an increase in the proportion of their Parliamentary Party (from 6% to 11%).

The effect of a particularly large Labour victory on overall ethnic diversity in Westminster is still felt. Even after Labour lost their near monopoly in representing minority voters, they remained a leader, with the largest number of ethnic minority MPs in each Parliament since 1987. In this newly elected House of Commons, their Parliamentary Party now exceeds in number all of the ethnic minority MPs elected for any party at the last election, at 66.

A small blot on Labour's record is that the new Cabinet is considerably less ethnically diverse than the historically most diverse Conservative Cabinet of 2019, with just three ethnic minority ministers. This has historically been the case with Labour: electing minority MPs, but rarely putting them in positions of power.

It is clear from the fact that it has been largely pre-determined that the 2024 election would see a rise in the ethnic diversity of Westminster, whatever the result of this election, that representation of non-White voters is a new normal for both Labour and the Conservative parties.

However, 2024 also saw a significant rise in numbers of Liberal Democrat MPs, and this party has been subject to much less scrutiny in terms of ethnic diversity. It has historically been a bit of a laggard in promoting under-represented groups in their formal candidate selection rules and arrangements. Currently, they are behind both main parties, with only an estimated 7% of their MPs being of minority ethnic heritage. While both Labour and Conservatives relied heavily on the central parties' interventions, Liberal Democrats resisted any form of selection shortlists quotas until 2016. These kinds of quotas are the surest way of increasing representation, as we know from the huge progress Labour made on gender thanks to their All Women Shortlists, and in fact the Liberal Democrats themselves made on gender since 2016. Now that the party no longer can use the excuse of not having many winnable or indeed having very few safe seats, all eyes will be on their efforts to improve ethnic diversity of their Parliamentary Party. All eyes will now be on them to conform to the new normal, of fair representation of ethnic minority groups in Parliament.

Prof Maria Sobolewska

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Bullshit and lies on the campaign trail: do party campaigns reflect the post-truth age?

Prof Darren Lilleker

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An IpsosMORI poll found only 25% trusted a Conservative government to behave according to high ethical standards, 45% trusted a future Labour government.

NatCen data at the beginning of the election campaign showed 45% 'almost never' trust governments of any party to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party. 58% said they 'almost never' trust 'politicians of any party in Britain to tell the truth'. The data shows an increase of 20% in mistrust since 2020.

It is likely that the decline in trust results from the context of Partygate, the Johnson post-truth style of communication and the various scandals that have engulfed the party. My research found Johnson's government were responsible for peddling bullshit, spreading misinformation and lies and using alternative facts while in government. But is this purely a problem with the Conservatives, one that is damaging the reputation of politicians generally, or have all parties embraced post-truth campaigning where the philosophy is that truth is malleable and having confidence in delivery is sufficient?

Drawing on data from UK factcheck sites (BBC Verify and Full Fact) we assess the honesty of campaign claims across the parties. Factcheck sites are imperfect, they choose who and what to factcheck and as media organisations focus on high profile parties and events. However, they allow us to understand the scale of falsehoods and the form they took. We utilise a coding strategy developed by Lilleker and Perez-Escolar, these included:

1. Alternative facts: ideological interpretations of data or a particular situation a normal feature of party-political communication and how it is read by citizens.
2. Bullshit: employing Henry Frankfurt's definition of a claim that can include truth but there is no publicly available evidence to prove or refute the substantive element of the claim.
3. Lies: a verifiable falsehood which evidence can demonstrate to be wholly inaccurate.

Following the grounded theory approach we include for this analysis a further type of falsehood: misuse of statistics. Partially these are alternative facts, partially bullshit. In practice they involve the careful selection of statistics to make a point. The statistics are true but reported out of context. Examples from each category are included when reporting the analysis.

Firstly, the Conservatives gain just under half of all factchecks with some parties receiving almost none. Perhaps due to the prominence or style of Nigel Farage, Reform get a higher number of factchecks than other parties with similar size and support. Some claims factchecked are true, although it is likely factchecks target claims they think might be misleading and many claims are not examined at all. But there are significant other forms of falsehood which feature in the communication of most parties.

Statistics are misused in several ways, for example Labour's claim their energy policy would save up to £300 on their average household bills every year from 2030 is based on outdated data. Similarly, immigration figures are selected from various time periods and figures by the Conservatives, Labour and Reform to prove their points. There are similarly dubious figures and we find, what constitutes a new hospital, or whether manifestoes fully costed, are now matters of party-political perspective. Although independent assessors questioned the veracity of all parties' costings.

Bullshit comes in various forms. While not a lie, Sunak's claim that Labour's plans would cost each family £2000 based on partisan calculations of projected costs and inclusion of items not in their manifesto is dubious. It is challenging to prove their claim either way. Similarly Labour's claim that that the Conservatives promised £71bn unfunded spending pledges was based on partisan assessments. Farage's claims that postal votes cause fraud are also unprovable and so bullshit. There are also a variety of lies. Sunak claimed that behind the U.S., Britian was the highest contributor to NATO when they were on average third or fourth and eight in 2023. Starmer similarly claimed the Conservatives would abolish National Insurance (an aspiration not a manifesto promise) and Sunak claimed Labour would introduce a retirement tax (also false). Conservatives also shared a doctored video of Rachel Reeves with a time lag to make her look confused and claimed in Facebook advertising that ULEZ, the controversial emissions zones in London, would be rolled out nationally. These all represent false fear campaigns.

Based on the prevalence of falsehoods, we can argue that the election had features of the post-truth era. Making claims often enough and with enough confidence is sufficient, independent of their veracity. One expects this from more populist and extremist parties and the data perhaps indicates the Conservatives' rightward drift at least in style. But Labour are not innocent in peddling bullshit or lying albeit on a lesser scale. Exposure of falsehoods, and the impression parties are willing to manipulate voters to win, contributes to mistrust. The communication across the election is unlikely to change these perceptions.

	Total Fact Checks	Truth	Misuse of Stats	Alternative Facts	Bullshit	Lies
Conservative	78	11 (14%)	14 (18%)	24 (31%)	15 (19%)	14 (18%)
Labour	43	11 (26%)	6 (14%)	12 (27%)	11 (26%)	3 (7%)
LibDem	6	1 (17%)	2 (33%)	3 (50%)	0	0
SNP	8	1 (12.5%)	2 (25%)	4 (50%)	1 (12.5%)	0
Reform	14	0	2 (14%)	2 (14%)	6 (44%)	4 (28%)
Green	5	3 (60%)	1 (20%)	0	1 (20%)	0
Plaid Cymru	3	1 (33%)	0	1 (33%)	1 (33%)	0
Total	155	28 (18%)	27 (17%)	46 (29%)	35 (22%)	21 (14%)

Table 1: Overall numbers of claims and form of falsehood (percentages in parentheses)

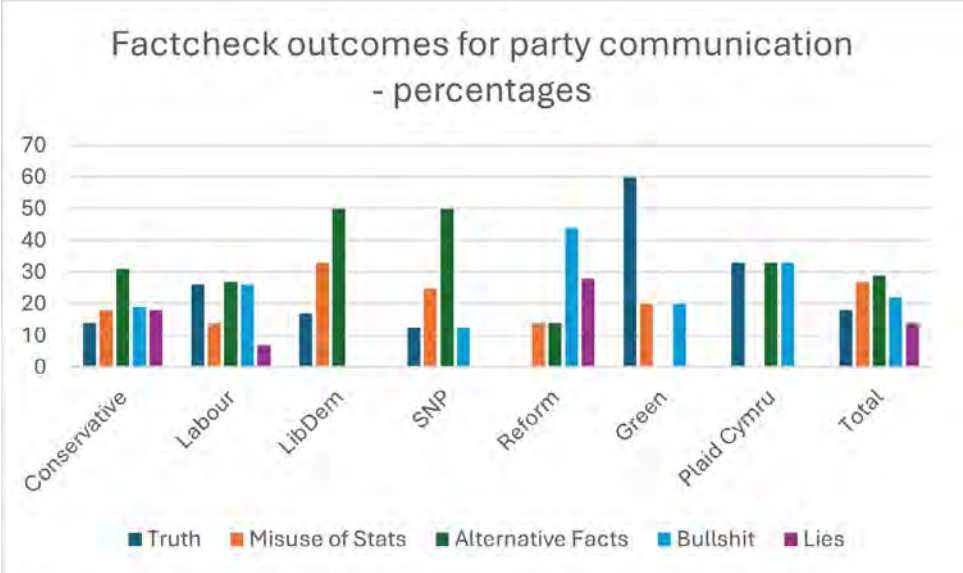

Figure 1: Factcheck outcomes for party communication - percentages

Stoking the culture wars: the risks of a more hostile form of polarised politics

Dr Jen Birks

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An interesting consequence of the increasing electoral volatility of recent years is that parties face the challenge of trying to serve an increasingly diverse set of supporters. Politics has always been about values as well as interests, even on the economic issues that define the traditional left-right divide, but more so the divide between social liberalism and conservativism. The underlying values are illustrated in Figure 1, with the war between culture warriors such as Kemi Badenoch, Priti Patel and Suella Braverman and what the latter has called the "Guardian-reading, tofu-eating wokerati" taking place between hierarchist-communitarians and individualist-egalitarians.

The salience of disagreements along these fault lines increased significantly during the fractious Brexit debates. But the reason that this is potentially damaging to British democracy is that it was not an ideological polarisation so much as an affective one. Affective polarisation involves partisans regarding their opponents not just as wrong, but as bad people with malevolent motivations. This kind of hostility is well-established in the US, where it is implicated in democratic dysfunction including conspiracy theory cults such as QAnon and the 2021 insurrection.

In this context, it is not entirely accurate for Labour's John Healy and the Lib Dems' Daisy Cooper to dismiss Conservative culture warring as merely a distraction from the issues people care about. Surveys show that while Labour are closer to voters on economic issues, the Conservatives are closer to voters on social values. They're especially close to voters who switched from Labour to Conservative in 2019, largely in Brexit-voting areas – the so-called 'red wall'. It is true that, other than immigration, culture wars issues are not especially salient to most voters – polling last year placed identity politics issues and freedom of speech at the bottom of a list of 21 issues in terms of what would determine respondents' vote. However, research suggests that even those who are not ideologically polarized "may be susceptible to 'affective polarization' in aggressive disputes." The risk is that a woke/anti-woke identity becomes the new Brexiter/Remainer.

With the opportunity to appeal both to red wall voters and many in the southern Tory shires, we might have expected to see culture wars taking a more prominent role in the campaign than they did (see John Steel in this volume) but there were some eye-catching policy announcements in the first week. The proposal that most animated the anti-woke media – GB News, Spiked and Unherd, in particular – was Kemi Badenoch's policy to amend the Equality Act to clarify that sex, as a protected characteristic, means biological sex. She argued that this was necessary because definitions of sex and gender had shifted over time, so clarification was needed to ensure that organisations such as women's refuges could refuse trans women entry, although legal guidance already states they can. Challenged on what material difference this would make at the door of a refuge, Badenoch told the BBC it was "not a paperwork issue." While she appealed to genuine concerns about the balance between women's and trans women's rights in some circumstances, the key purpose of this policy announcement was rather an expressive one. It spoke directly to the key definitional nub of the gender-critical position, which is against the notion that 'trans women are women.' This entrenched disagreement on how we interpret reality is what makes this debate so toxic.

One aspect of this is refusing to even countenance the other side of the argument or offer counter-arguments. For instance, Joan Smith, writing in Unherd, refused to recognise trans women's identities, describing them as "men who claim to be women," and othered them as less important than "actual women." Similarly, Joanna Williams in Spiked said that gender recognition "would force women to accommodate men in their spaces." Lauren Smith, also in Spiked, argued against a straw man version of Labour and the Lib Dems' position by portraying them as dismissing concerns over single sex spaces.

These commentators also questioned the motivation of those who support trans rights, as "posing" and "parading their credentials," implying a common accusation of 'virtue signalling' – in other words, being motivated by a communal sense of moral superiority – or alternatively as being afraid to stand up to a powerful trans rights lobby. They also accuse their opponents of being intransigent ideologues while framing their own position in intransigent terms as unambiguously 'true.' For instance, Joan Smith described gender identity claims as "unreasonable and unscientific", and claimed "rights" for women while attributing only "demands" to trans activists.

It is important to be able to disagree on socio-cultural political issues, but much needs to be done to enable people to disagree well, whilst believing their opponents to be reasonable and well-intentioned. After a shallow win in terms of the share of the vote, Labour needs to win over those who didn't vote for them. But there is also a threat of disillusionment from those who did vote Labour but feel culturally alienated from them. The magnanimous remarks of both Sunak and Starmer in the handover of power should set the tone for mending our broken approach to political debate.

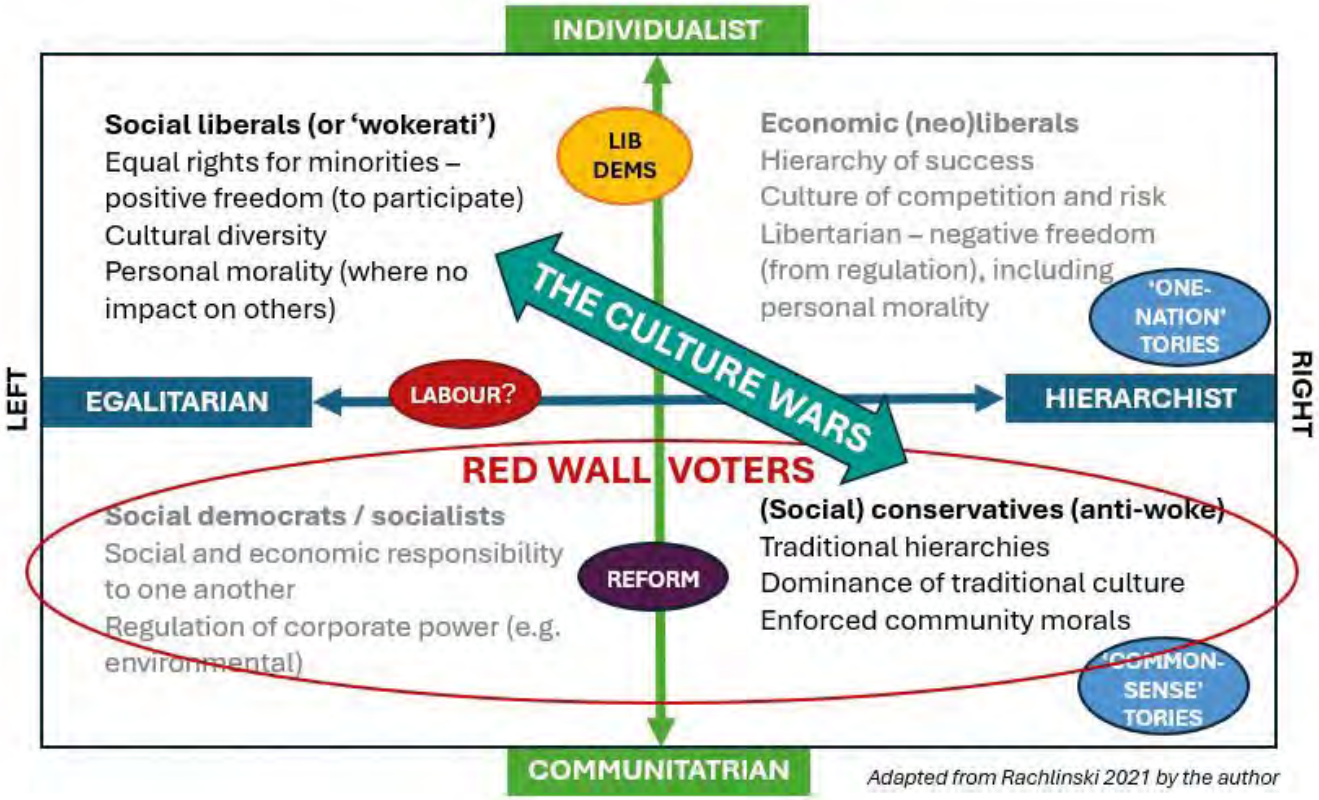

Figure 1: Value division

2

Voters, polls and results

Forecasting a multiparty majoritarian election with a volatile electorate

The 2024 general election seemed like a foregone conclusion, but in reality it was fuelled with uncertainty. The UK has a majoritarian electoral system, colloquially known as First Past the Post (FPTP), which has long been theorised should always produce a two-party system and for decades this proved at least close to correct. However, this began to break down in the 21st Century as more and more parties rose to prominence, gaining both votes and seats in the House of Commons. This coincided with a decline in partisanship and participation, that is citizens having weaker ties to politics, parties and politicians. The culmination of these factors occurred at this election.

Opinion polls play an increasingly important part in elections now that we live in a data-driven world. Dr Mark Pack's PollBase records 30 standard vote intention (VI) polls in the six-week 2024 campaign, meaning there were five each week, from 13 different polling companies. These give a projected share of the vote for each party. In addition, there were numerous MRP polls – multilevel regression with post-stratification – which estimated the number of seats each party would get. Every time one was released, there would be media headlines from almost every major outlet, and they significantly impacted the narrative of the campaign.

On the 22nd May when the election was called, the VI polls stood at 21% Conservative, 46% Labour, 9% Liberal Democrat, 7% Green, 12% Reform, 3% SNP and 2% others. On the eve of polling day, the Conservatives were up 2%, Labour down 5%, Liberal Democrats up 2%, Greens no change, Reform up 3%, SNP down 1% and others down 1%. There was movement in between but largely within the margin of error that comes with polls. Yet notice the number of parties that needed a vote share estimation – five mainstream parties stood in 90% of constituencies at this election, plus the SNP in all of Scotland and Plaid Cymru in all of Wales. There were more candidates than ever before. In itself, that makes forecasting more difficult because it reduces the certainty in the point estimates for each party, and it becomes even more challenging when that vote share is spread across a majoritarian seat where only one person can win the contest for MP.

When it came to MRP polls which do just that, the average number of seats the Conservatives were expected to get was 95, with a 73 seat range of 53-126. Labour's was 452 with an almost hundred seat range 418-516. The ranges became smaller as the parties did, Liberal Democrats at 59 (38-72), Reform at 3 (0-7), Greens at 2 (0-4) and the SNP 17 (8-29). The reason for this variation is the extent of voter volatility, that is citizens changing the party they vote for (or say they'll vote for) between elections and even between polls. There was also a high number of people who were undecided right up until polling day and fewer people who were certain they'd turn out to vote at all. Pollsters had to make decisions on how to treat all of these factors, the likes of which had not been seen before.

It meant that there were nearly a quarter of seats (151 out of 632) on average where the forecasted margin for the winner was less than 5%. That's almost three times higher than the actual number of marginals in 2019. Therefore, any small changes in responses from those surveyed, or in polling methods, resulted in a different party being allocated those seats as winners, ultimately altering the predictions substantially.

The Conservatives falling to less than a quarter of votes also meant there were no safe Tory seats. That is, there wasn't a seat where they had a 100% probability of winning. Even Rishi Sunak's own seat of Richmond & Northallerton gave him a 20% probability he'd lose. Uncertainty was rife even though Labour were projected to be by far the biggest winner.

In the end, the results show that forecasts overestimated Labour's success, and underestimated the Conservatives' and Liberal Democrats' seats. They were correct on SNP share but not seats. There were 109 seats won with a margin less than 5%. Labour won a landslide majority on just a third of all votes. It highlights that FPTP behaves in unpredictable ways when there are multiple parties and a volatile electorate. Pollsters did pretty well considering. Yet the polls do raise a question about the role they play in election campaigns. Turnout was down more than 7 points to just 60%, one point off the lowest we've seen. It might be that the polls saying the election was sewn up, when actually each individual vote mattered more in this contest, meant that people stayed home. It's something for us all to reflect on.

Dr Hannah Bunting

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The emerging infrastructure of public opinion

Dr Nick Anstead

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It became a familiar refrain to say that opinion polling played too large a role in media coverage of the 2024 Election. Certainly, polling was central to much of the discussion during the campaign period.

This obsession with polling might seem surprising. After all, the overall result of the election and the likely winner was rarely in doubt. However, the clarity of the "Labour march to victory" narrative during the election campaign hides significant confusion in published polling numbers. Taking MRP polls as an example, the statistical range covered by the results suggested anything from a 1997-type result to a Labour victory on a scale not seen since the National Government in 1931 coupled with a Tory wipeout, which would have made the Liberal Democrats the official opposition. For some companies, the ultimate scale of the "miss" was comparable with the most infamous polling misfires, such as 1992 and 2015.

This vast range of predictions hints at a much more complex public opinion research landscape than in any previous election. The information being gathered and communicated to the public via the media is more diverse and complex than ever before.

The American political scientist Susan Herbst offers a useful theoretical device for understanding these changes, which she terms the public opinion infrastructure. Despite being a hugely discussed phrase in both popular discourse and academic research, public opinion tends to be an under-theorised concept, not least because its meaning is often assumed to be self-evident.

Herbst responds by historicising and breaking down the concept of public opinion. In a study of the 1930s, when the modern opinion polling industry developed in the United States, Herbst argues that we can understand public opinion as a combination of evolving measurement methods, the significance attributed to the output of those methods, and the way this significance is communicated more widely. In the 1930s, the technique developed by pollsters such as George Gallup was the representative sample opinion poll. The significance of the data generated was based on the claim to measure the electorate's preferences accurately. Thus, polling enjoyed a level of democratic legitimacy. The communication of poll results was handled by mass media, who placed it at the centre of their political coverage (and paid for many of the polls).

The 2024 UK election may indicate the emergence of a new infrastructure with distinctive characteristics. These include:

Advanced statistical methods are used, distinct from traditional representative sample opinion polling. While not a new innovation, MRP (multi-level regression and post-stratification) polling was used at an unprecedented scale in 2024. This approach combines large sample polls with demographic data to predict the House of Commons post-election make-up.

Related to this is a much greater awareness of the institutional context in which the election is being fought, with a move away from just presenting national vote share figures and an increasing focus on seats won. Arguably, the defining feature in any modern UK election is the first-past-the-post election system and its consequences. The effects of the electoral system were magnified by politics which is increasingly multi-party in character, creating more challenges for pollsters.

While political parties have used qualitative methods, including focus groups, for decades, they are now increasingly used in political media coverage. These mediated focus groups often draw on demographics pollsters argue have particular electoral significance.

This leads to two related observations. First, we can defend public opinion research having a significant role in the campaign because it can potentially empower voters. For example, it may help them make the best use of their ballot in their constituency. But, related to that, if voters are going to be empowered by public opinion research, we need to develop new ways in which media coverage talks about that research, recognising the diversity and contradictions that exist and explaining that in a way voters can understand.

This was a tension very evident in political coverage in the 2024 Election. While it seems reasonable to suggest that contemporary public opinion research has become post-Gallupian in methods and scope, the language used to report public opinion data still draws heavily on the ideas and tropes from when the representative sample opinion poll was dominant, the Gallupian era. For example, MRP polls model the overall shape of the House of Commons by producing individual seat predictions. However, the margin of error for any particular seat can be huge, especially a seat with atypical features (such as an independent candidate standing). Often, though, this data was quoted uncritically and without appropriate caveats.

This mattered in an election marked by more parties winning more seats, more localised constituency campaigns, and higher levels of voter volatility. This pattern could well continue in future elections. In that sort of environment, voters need—and deserve—the best quality data explained in the clearest possible way.

A moving target? Voter segmentation in the 2024 British General Election

During the 2019 campaign Conservative party commentators and strategists were focused on securing the support of so called 'Workington man'. The centre right think tank Onward coined the term to describe a crucial target, Brexit supporting voters in historically Labour constituencies whose main concerns were immigration and regional economic inequality. As with all voter segmentation the term is an oversimplification of reality, but it conveys an image that brings together the characteristics of voters the party needed to persuade. These voters were disproportionately middle aged and older men, without university degrees living in post-industrial parts of Britain.

In the two years preceding the 2019 election a quick Nexis search of national newspapers suggests that there were 174 stories that included the term, it was everywhere. The combination of the 'get Brexit done' message, with a promise of economic 'levelling up' proved a very powerful electoral strategy. Workington men gave the Conservatives, under Boris Johnson, an historic victory securing seats in 'red wall' constituencies never previously held by the party. The success was built on an unlikely electoral coalition among economically and socially liberal voters in more prosperous parts of the country and socially conservative but economically more leftwing voters in traditional Labour heartlands.

We now know that this coalition was exceedingly fragile. In the two years prior to the 2024 Election 'Workington man' remained a popular label used to describe voters (71 references made in national newspapers); but he was joined by 'Stevenage Woman' (74 references), 'Whitby Woman' (28 references) and 'Waitrose Woman' (25 references).

In April 2023 the thinktank 'Labour Together' argued that Labour could not secure a working majority simply by regaining the support of 'Workington Man' in the 30 red wall seats, they also had to persuade 'Stevenage Women' in 120 other constituencies. Stevenage women were younger voters, disproportionately women, living in marginal seats, who were struggling with the cost of living, concerned about the NHS, had previously voted Conservative but were now undecided.

In June 2023 More in Common added the term 'Whitby Woman' to the lexicon; these were undecided, home owning older voters living in suburbs and small towns, who backed Brexit and previously voted Conservative but were worried about the state of the NHS and public services. This group is disproportionately female because, although women voted for Brexit in equal proportions to men, they tend to give the issue less priority and are less attracted to Reform.

Finally, 'Waitrose Woman' was a Liberal Democrat target in the campaign. The term has been in circulation since at least June 2022, when the *Financial Times* ran an article claiming that she was key to the Conservatives regaining popular support. They argued that the focus on socially conservative voters in red wall seats had driven away socially liberal but economically right-wing voters in the Conservative heartlands. Waitrose women were described as economically well off, small 'c' Conservatives, who love British institutions (BBC and the National Trust), were in favour of remaining in the EU, were alienated by culture wars debates and concerned about pollution.

There is a common theme running throughout these voter segmentations in 2024; it is no coincidence that they all identified woman as a key electoral targets. Women are over-represented among the undecided voters who make up their minds how to vote later in the campaign, but they are equally likely to turn out and vote. Thus, when party strategists are scanning through polling data to identify specific sections of the electorate to target, women are often overrepresented. The focus in 2024 on women voters was a correction to the 2019 campaign where the emphasis was most definitely on Workington Man. Whilst the Conservatives secured an historic victory in 2019 their support among men was notably higher than among women.

The labels Stevenage and Whitby Woman drew attention to concerns about the NHS and the cost of living crisis, which are more often cited as the most important problems facing the country by women than men. Another addition was the focus on Waitrose Woman. Living in historically safe and economically prosperous seats, her vote was taken for granted by the Conservative party; much as Workington Man was arguably neglected by Labour from 1997. The consequence for the Conservative party is the mirror of Labour's drumming in the red wall in 2019. The Liberal Democrats cut through in swaths of Conservative heartlands in the 'blue wall' in 2024. Seats that had been held by the Conservatives throughout the modern period were taken by the Liberal Democrats standing on a platform of prioritising care, education and pollution, with a subtle hint of remainism.

We will need to wait for the British Election Study 2024 data to draw strong conclusions about how accurate these nomenclatures were for describing the sections of the electorate that helped Labour and the Liberal Democrats break through in their target constituencies, and beyond. The Conservatives lost support across the board, but I suspect that these segmentations remained critical to how their lost votes were divided, with Reform and Labour making gains among Workington Men, Labour winning back a significant proportion of Stevenage and Whitby women and the Liberal Democrats securing an unprecedented proportion of Waitrose women.

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Don't vote, it only encourages them? Turnout in the 2024 Election

Prof Charles Pattie

Professor of Politics
University of Sheffield

Before a single vote was cast, conditions already seemed set for an unusually low turnout at the UK's 2024 General Election. Since Boris Johnson's defenestration and the collapse of the ill-fated Liz Truss premiership, Labour's poll lead over the Conservatives had been very large and steady. It persisted almost unchanged throughout the campaign itself. Furthermore, the overheated election debate notwithstanding, the gap between the Labour and Conservative (the two main contenders for government) 'retail offers' was smaller than either claimed. Both factors reduce the incentives to vote in any election. When similar conditions held in previous elections – most notably in 1997 and 2001, when New Labour seemed sure to win (and retain) large majorities while being seen as not so very different from their Conservative opponents – turnout had been lower than in previous elections (substantially so in 2001).

And so it proved. Only 60% of all registered electors voted in 2024. As figure 1 shows, this was well below not only the long-run average for UK general elections since 1918 (the solid red line), but also the lower 95% confidence interval around that average (the dotted red lines) – a mark of just how unusually poor it was. Over the last century or so, turnout has been lower than in 2024 only twice – in 1918 and in 2001.

What is more, the sharp fall in turnout between 2019 and 2024 effectively cancelled out the slow improvement in electoral participation at most elections after the previous low point in 2001, when only 59% voted. Turnout rose at the next two elections, reaching 69% in 2017 before dropping slightly in 2019 to 67%. But in 2024 it plunged back to a level only marginally higher than in 2001.

At the constituency level in 2024, turnout ranged from 40% in Manchester Rusholme to 76% in Richmond Park. Its geography was largely similar to past elections (figure 2). Where turnout had been relatively high previously, it remained so in 2024: where it had previously been low, it was still low. That geography largely mirrored the UK's economic geography: voters in more affluent, middle-class communities tended to turn out at higher rates than their peers in less affluent communities.

That said, turnout fell in almost all constituencies (it rose – by miniscule amounts – in only four seats). But it did not decline uniformly. Figure 3 shows the average percentage point fall in turnout between 2019 and 2024 in seats held by the Conservatives, Labour, the Liberal Democrats, the SNP, and all other parties combined. The circles represent the average decline, and the bars on either side the 95% confidence intervals around those averages. Because we are looking at falls in turnout, the lower the average dot on the graph, the larger the decline. On average, turnout fell more in Labour-held seats (down 9.7 % points) than in seats defended by the Conservatives or the Liberal Democrats (both down 6.5 % points). And closer inspection shows that it fell more in seats Labour held in both elections (down on average by 9.7 % points) than in seats Labour took from other parties in 2024 (where the average decline was 7.8 % points). This suggests that one factor, over and above the depressing effect of a widely expected landslide, was campaign mobilisation. In 2024, the major parties expended little effort in turning out votes in Labour-held seats as these were widely expected to remain Labour (hence the large drops in turnout there). Instead, they all focused their efforts on seats (many previously considered safe) defended by the Conservatives, where Labour and the Liberal Democrats hoped to make substantial gains, and the Conservatives tried to stem their losses – hence the lower falls in turnout there.

Was the decline in turnout experienced at the 2024 Election exceptional? In one sense, no. The overall fall in turnout from 2019 to 2024 was 7.4 % points. That is similar to the fall experienced in the last landslide defeat of a long-serving Conservative government: between 1992 and 1997, when it fell by 6.4% points. That size of decline is more or less in line with what we might expect given the size and persistence of Labour's pre-election poll leads at both elections. Overall turnout was lower than in 2024 than in 1997 not because of the size of the anticipated landslide, in other words, but because the previous 'high' in 2019 was considerably below the 'high' in 1992.

But in another sense, 2024 is more troubling. While the election looks like 1997 in terms of the size of the new government's landslide, in other ways it looks very different. New Labour took power in 1997 on a tide of optimism, inherited a strong economy, and had the support of around 42% of voters. Keir Starmer's government faces a much more challenging situation. That is reflected in the turnout figures at recent elections. While the fall in turnout is similar at both the 1997 and 2024 contests, the turnout level in 1997 was within the 95% confidence interval around the long-term average since 1918: it was not unusual. Since the early 2000s, however, turnout at every election has been below the lower bound of the confidence interval. Compared to the 20th century, British politics seems stuck in a rut of relatively low electoral participation rates. Historically low turnout seems to be the new normal and (unless the new government can raise trust in government) that looks unlikely to change - a worrying prospect for those concerned about the health of our democracy.

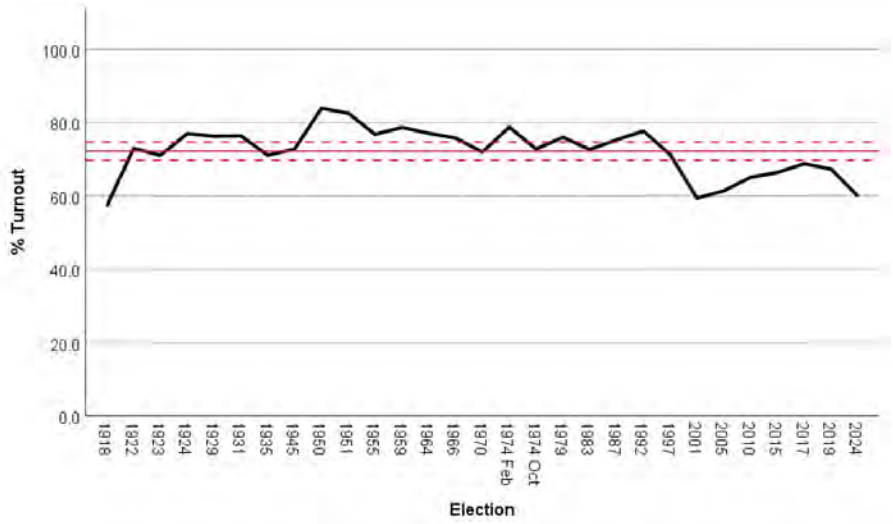

Figure 1: UK General Election Turnout, 1918-2024

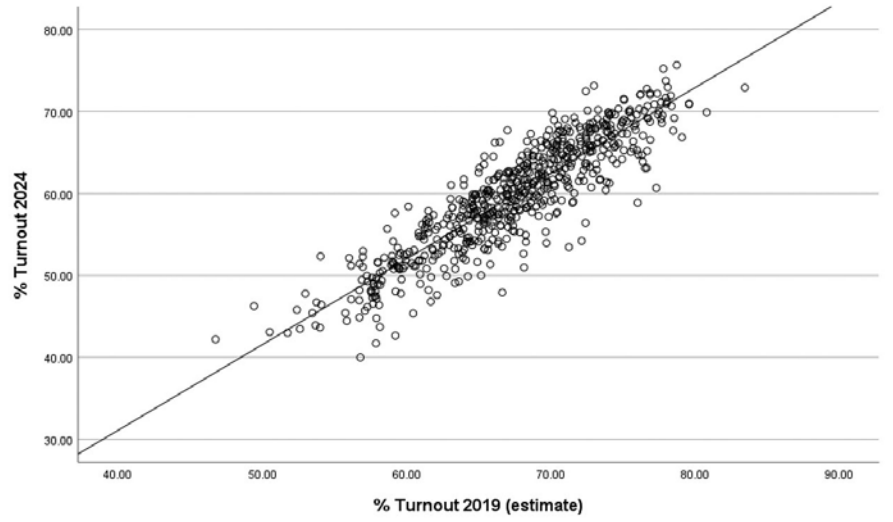

Figure 2: Constituency turnout in 2019 and 2024 compared

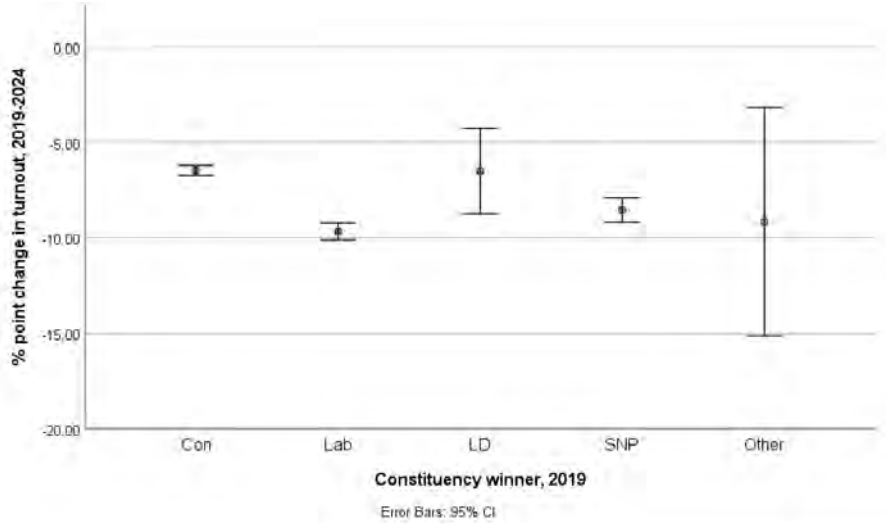

Figure 3: Percentage point change in constituency turnout, 2019-2024, by constituency winner 2019

Cartographic perspectives of the 2024 General Election

Prof Benjamin Hennig

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The 2019 General Election saw Boris Johnson's Conservative Party achieve a sweeping victory in Labour heartlands. However, subsequent political upheavals led to three different Conservative Prime Ministers within the same parliamentary period. Despite this, the political map of the UK remained largely unchanged as this all happened within one parliamentary period. When Rishi Sunak, the most recent Conservative Prime Minister, called for a general election, it marked a significant moment to reassess the UK's political geography. Influenced by years of Conservative infighting, the electorate responded with a landslide victory for the Labour Party under Keir Starmer's leadership that led to a visible change of the political landscapes.

This cartographic analysis uses three primary types of visualisations to assess these changes: geographic views, constituency views, and population views. Each offers distinct insights for a comprehensive understanding of the election results and their geographic distributions.

The geographic maps present data based on actual locations, illustrating where parties have won and the geographical distribution of political support. They highlight regional voting trends and the impact of geographical factors on election outcomes. These maps are intuitive as they correspond to real-world locations, making them easy to understand for most readers through familiar regional boundaries. They relate election results to physical geography, aiding in comprehending how local issues influence voting behaviour. Geographic views quickly communicate areas of strong support or opposition.

British audiences are almost equally used to a second type of election maps which are labelled constituency maps here. They are widely used in the broadcast media during election night and are also prominently featured in print. These maps (also known as cartograms) display each constituency as a uniform unit - here a hexagon - avoiding spatial distortions from varying constituency sizes. They emphasise the distribution of votes and party support without the visual bias of large, sparsely populated areas. These maps reflect the equal weight of each vote, crucial for understanding the true distribution of political support. By equalising the area of each constituency, these maps make it easier to identify patterns and compare different regions and how this relates to the actual share of seats in Westminster.

The fairest representation of election results, however, are shown in the third type of maps included in this analysis. This 'Population views' is another form of a cartogram, here scaling geographic areas to reflect their actual population size, emphasising regions with more voters and reducing the appearance of rural areas. They highlight the significance of urban areas where a large proportion of the population resides and votes. These cartograms show the actual impact of votes, clarifying how densely populated areas influence election outcomes. They balance the visual impact of large, sparsely populated areas and small, densely populated ones, offering a more accurate representation of voting power.

This analysis includes a series of maps that go beyond simply depicting the winning party in each constituency, including the second placed candidates in each constituency, the Labour and Conservative vote share as well as those of the remaining parties combined, and the overall turnout.

While the first-past-the-post system often produces clear results, Labour's historic 412-seat majority with only 33.7% of the vote share was remarkable even in this context. Even during Tony Blair's 1997 victory the election maps did not reveal such a geographic spread of seats as shown in these maps. But the geographic patterns also reveal more complex trends of voting behaviour. Examining the performance of second-place candidates provides valuable insights, as many constituencies were won by narrow margins, highlighting how minor vote differences can significantly impact the overall outcome. The rise of smaller parties is particularly noteworthy, with 42.5% of votes cast going to parties other than Labour or Conservative. Additionally, the election saw a historically low turnout of just 60 %, over 7% down to the 2019 election and the lowest in over two decades, indicating voter disillusionment with politics in many parts of the country. In wide parts less than half the electorate decided to go to the polls in the first place.

The 2024 General Election has significantly reshaped the UK's political landscape. The geographic patterns revealed in these maps show that while Labour achieved a landslide victory, Keir Starmer's parliamentary majority remains fragile. The trends that emerge in these maps are unlikely to remain stable until the next election. The rise of the smaller parties demonstrates that they, too, can achieve success within the British electoral system, raising questions about the dominance of the major parties in future elections.

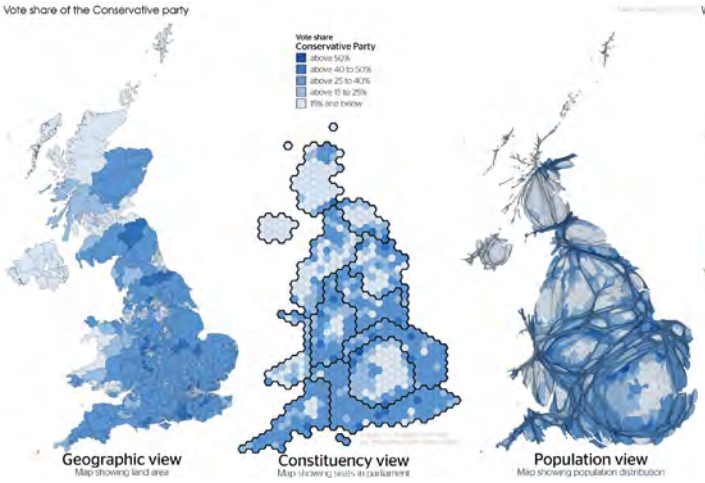

Figure 1: Vote share of the Conservative party

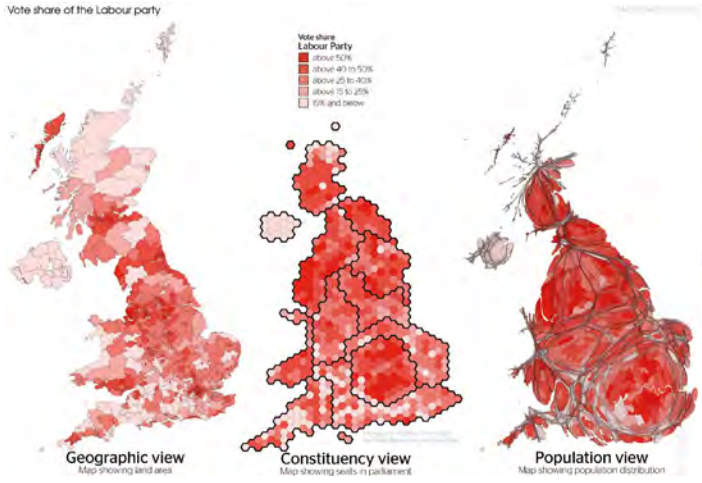

Figure 2: Vote share of the Labour party

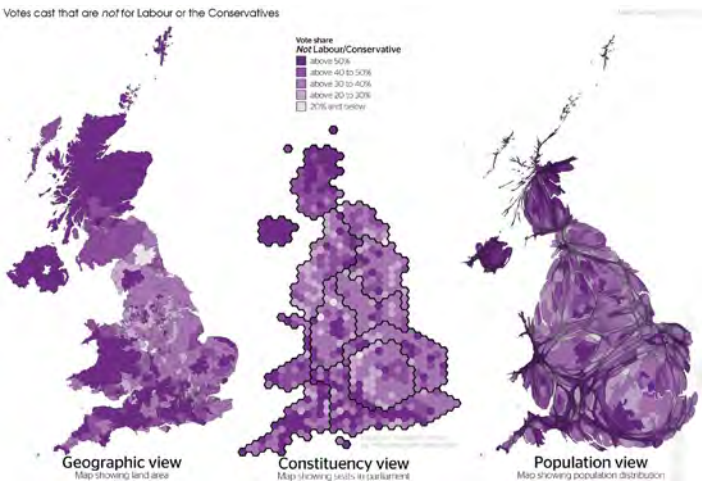

Figure 3: Votes cast that are not for Labour or the Coservatives

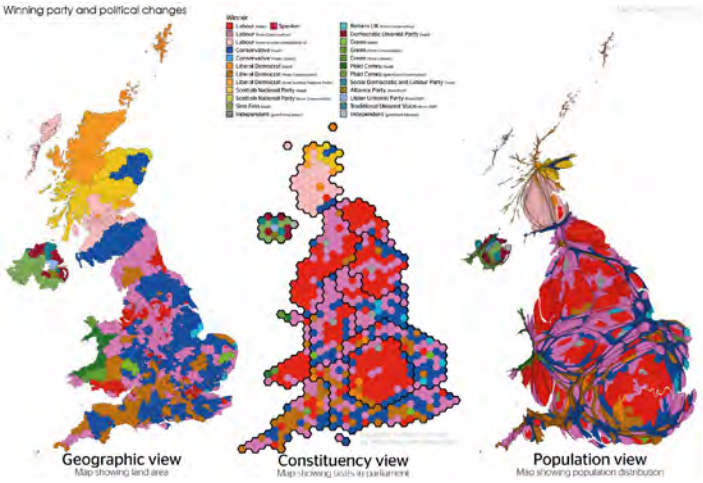

Figure 4: Winning party and political changes

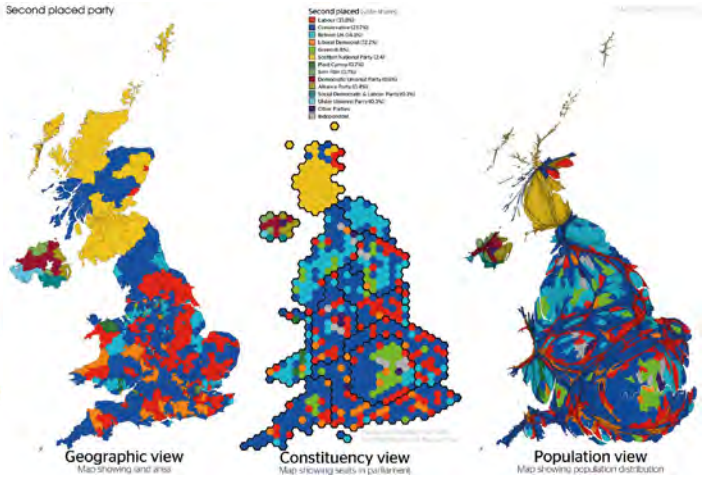

Figure 5: Second placed party

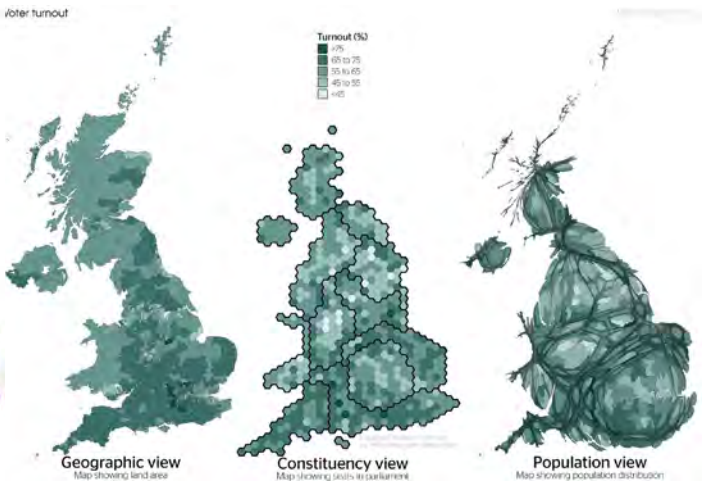

Figure 6: Voter turnout

Gender and vote choice: early reflections

Dr Ceri Fowler

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Whilst being late to exhibit a "modern gender gap", whereby women are more likely to vote for left-wing parties and men more likely to vote for right-wing parties, the UK did see this pattern in both 2017 and 2019. In both cases, gender gaps in party support were both larger in younger age groups and driven by gender differences in attitudes towards major issues at the election. In 2017, this was still austerity, but by 2019, gender differences in attitudes towards the EU were driving the gender gap.

We cannot know for certain yet whether there was a modern gender gap in the 2024 General Election, what the age by gender pattern of vote choice was, and why men and women voted differently if they did so. For that, we will need to wait for the post-election British Election Study. However, we can look to clues from polling and which issues were salient at the election, as well as pre-election data, to understand where gender gaps in party support might emerge and why. I focus on the GB-wide parties.

Starting with the election winners, Labour, the campaign polling did show a small (4-5 percentage points) gender gap on average, although there was considerable variation from pollster to pollster. The few polls taken since the election also present a mixed result. Focaldata have women's support for Labour at 37% and men's at 33%, which would be similar to that seen during the campaign, but Ashcroft has both men and women at 34% support for Labour. It seems likely that if there was an overall gender gap in Labour support at this election, it was small.

In some ways this is a surprise, given that Labour emphasised public services during the campaign. Women have historically prioritised these issues. This may be because women's support has gone to other progressive, left-wing parties – especially younger women.

There is evidence of this both in pre- and post-election polls. Whilst many pollsters do not release gender-by-age breakdowns, we do have them from just prior to polling day from Norstat, whose polling was close to the election result, and from Focaldata post-election. Norstat found that support for the Green party was 3 percentage points higher among women aged 18-34 than men; Focaldata similarly found that support for the Green party was 4 percentage points higher among women aged 18-34 than men.

Whilst we cannot yet know why this is the case, it may be that Labour's failure to call quickly for a ceasefire in Gaza or perceived lack of support for Trans rights has resulted in some strongly progressive women transferring their support to the Greens. We also know that women are more worried about climate change than men, which may well explain why women are supporting the Greens.

However, examining the gender by age breakdowns from these polls also show higher support for Labour from younger women than younger men – by 4 percentage points in the Focaldata poll and 8 in Norstat. Whilst the Green party may have received support from some younger women who have previously supported Labour, the evidence we have so far does not suggest Labour support among young women has collapsed entirely.

The Liberal Democrats also put public services at the centre of their policy offer, especially health and social care. However, there is little evidence of a gender gap in Liberal Democrat support in the sources mentioned above, either overall or among specific age groups.

We also do not see a gender gap in support for the Conservatives in either the pre- or post-election polling we have so far, although Focaldata do show lower support for the Conservatives among young men than young women. Where there is a significant – and much-reported - gender gap is between men's and women's support for Reform, especially but not exclusively among younger voters. Across pre-election polling and in the post-election sources we have, women show around 5 percentage points lower support for Reform than men.

This is unsurprising given that women previously showed lower support for UKIP, the previous party of Reform's leader, Nigel Farage, and as Reform have done little to appeal directly to women. It has also been suggested that young men in particular have been drawn to Reform through social media, but we should be cautious as we have little evidence to prove this to date.

How should we summarise gender and vote choice in 2024? Whilst we should be cautious without data with a larger sample size to examine sub-groups, we can be relatively confident that women, especially younger women, were more supportive of left-wing parties and men more supportive of right-wing parties. Thus, whilst the Conservative-Labour gender gap at this election may be smaller, the gender gap in left-right support overall seems likely to have persisted. Why remains an open question until the data comes in, albeit that, as previous elections, policy divides are a likely driver of gender gaps.

Changing patterns amongst Muslim voters: the Labour Party, Gaza and voter volatility

The number of Muslims voting for the Labour Party dropped significantly in the 2024 General Election. From Birmingham to Bradford, London to Leicester, the party lost seats and saw majorities fall dramatically. Once safe constituencies became marginals.

Labour, nevertheless, won by a landslide. The party now holds 411 seats in the House of Commons, more than doubling the 202 seats they had won at the last election in 2019. Still, one of the key sub-plots of the election has been the relationship between the Labour Party and once loyal British Muslim voters.

There are currently 3.9 million Muslims in the UK, according to the 2021 census making up 6.5% of the population, 1.2 million more than in 2011 census.

A growing population, its electoral significance is amplified because Muslims are likely to live in concentrated urban areas, which in the UK's first-past-the-post system means that in core constituencies they can impact who wins.

Traditionally Muslim communities have supported the Labour Party. They have viewed the party as being sympathetic to the rights of ethnic minorities and the working class, groups that most Muslims, though not all, fall into.

Whilst not all Muslims vote Labour and not all Muslim parliamentarians are affiliated with the Labour Party, it is still nevertheless the case that most Muslims see the Labour Party as their natural home.

At the local council level there are, according to Labour Muslim Network, over 500 Muslim Councillors across the UK and over 75% them are members of the Labour Party. In the 2019 General Election, over 80% of Muslims voted for the Labour Party.

Signs that the special relationship between Labour and Muslim voters was under strain emerged earlier in the year at the May 2024 local council, mayoral and police and crime commissioner elections across England and Wales.

Here the Labour Party support was down by eight points on the previous year in wards with Muslim populations of over 10%. Crucially, Labour lost control of Oldham council and lost their deputy leader in Manchester.

If Labour had hoped this was a local level protest vote which would not be replicated in the General Election, then it was a serious miscalculation. Local election losses were in fact amplified at the General Election where Labour lost 5 previously safe seats to independent candidates standing on a pro-Gaza platform in Leicester South, Dewsbury and Batley, Blackburn, Islington North, and Birmingham Perry Bar.

In other safe constituencies, the swing away from Labour was substantial and MPs were returned with dramatic declines in their majorities, including Wes Streeting, who won in Ilford North by just over 500 votes. The new Justice Secretary, Shabana Mahmood saw her share of the vote in Birmingham Ladywood decline by 40%.

In constituencies with the highest number of voters identifying as Muslim, Labour's share of the vote fell sharpest. In the 21 seats where more than 30% of the population is Muslim, Labour's share dropped by 29 percentage points from an average 65% in 2019 to 36% in 2024.

The relationship between Muslim voters and the Labour Party has been tested before on foreign policy during the 2003 War in Iraq. In a parliamentary by-election held in 2003, in northwest London (Brent East) the Liberal Democrats overturned a Labour parliamentary majority of 13,000 votes.

At the time, the Muslim population of Brent – over 12% of the Borough – voted against Labour because of military intervention in Iraq. The by-election represented a milestone; it was the first time that British Muslims had used a bloc vote at parliamentary level. This was repeated nine months later, when Muslims helped to overturn a 12,000 majority in a by-election in Leicester South, handing the constituency once again to the Liberal Democrats.

Exactly two decades later and, following a different Middle Eastern conflict, the constituency provided one of the shocks of election night when Jon Ashworth, a high-profile member of Labour's shadow cabinet lost to the Independent pro-Gaza candidate Shockat Adam.

In the 2003 local elections too, the Labour Party suffered big electoral losses across the country and in places like Birmingham with a sizable Muslim demographic, the party lost control over the local authority due, in part, to a 'Baghdad backlash'.

The extent of the backlash was reflected in the success of the Respect Party in the 2005. Respect: The Unity coalition was created in January 2004 out of the momentum of the anti-war movement. Though now disbanded, in its heyday, Respect had an MP and several local councillors.

By 2019, most Muslims had returned to the Labour Party. Now, the relationship is strained once more. In research interviews and focus groups I have conducted with Muslim voters across the UK, many are disillusioned with the Labour Party over its handling of the crisis in Gaza.

Whilst older Muslim voter are more likely to stick with the party they have always voted for, younger Muslims are much more electorally mobile, using the ballot box to reward and punish MPs and political parties based on their policies rather than voting out of party or identity loyalty. This trend of voter volatility is reflected beyond young Muslim voters and evidenced by the turn in fortunes of smaller political parties.

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Religion and voting behaviour in the 2024 General Election

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Aside from a renewed interest in Labour Party support among Muslim and Jewish voters in recent elections, religion is deemed largely irrelevant for explaining vote choice in British general elections. Rather, social class, age and education alongside national identity and social values largely explain voting and electoral outcomes. Our research has shown, however, that the ignorance of religion is misguided. Even in the era of increasing secularisation, 61 % of Britons hold religious beliefs and/or participate in religious services and/or identify with a religious – predominantly Christian – community. Historical preferences of Christian denominations for particular political parties continue to be transmitted across generations within religious communities, and religious identities and values continue to underpin social values and public opinion on salient policy issues, including Euroscepticism and national identity.

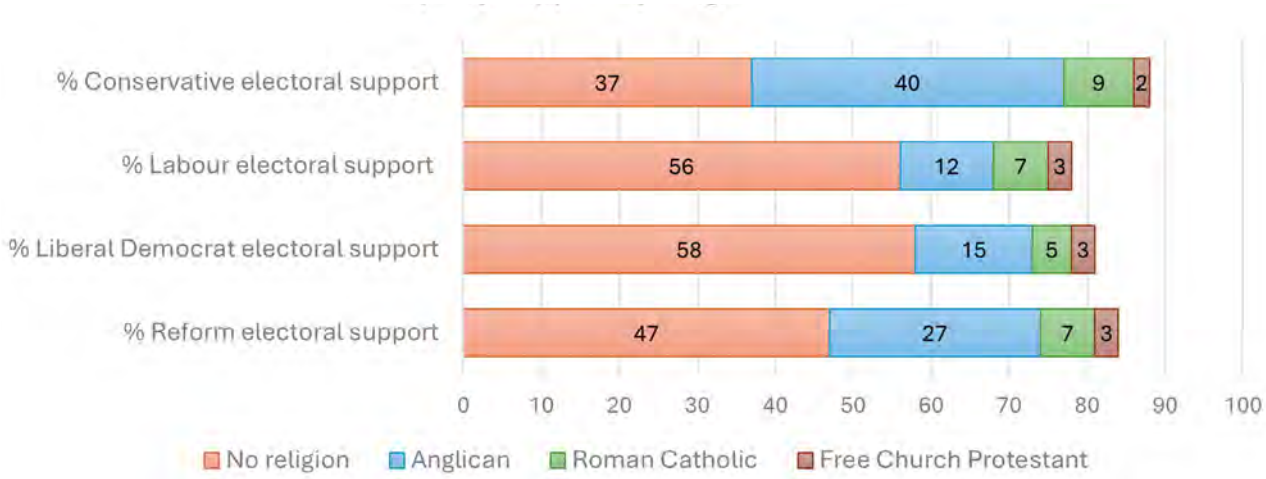
The 2024 General Election is no exception: there were clear patterns of party support by religion. Using a survey fielded by YouGov on 5-8 July, we can see that Labour's and especially the Liberal Democrats' electoral support is unsurprisingly strong among the religiously unaffiliated voters, who amount to 56% and 58% of their supporters in this election. By contrast, Anglicans remain core Conservative supporters, with 40% of the Conservative electoral support coming from this denomination. While Reform voters tend to be non-religious, they have some success with Anglicans too.

Historically, the Conservative Party has dominated the 'Anglican vote', and since the 1980s has seen its support among Anglicans increase relative to its support in the wider electorate. This trend continued in the 2024 election: despite its dramatic loss of support across the country, the Tories continued to enjoy strong support from its traditional religious base, with 45% of Anglicans voting Conservative on 4 July. Labour, meanwhile, has increasingly become detached from its own traditional religious base, largely made up of Roman Catholics. Since the 1980s, Catholic support for Labour has eroded and shifted towards the Conservatives: this trend also continued in the 2024 election, with 32% of Catholics backing Labour.

The erosion of Labour's Roman Catholic vote and consolidation of the Conservative support among Anglicans since the 1980s is illustrated in the figure below. It shows the difference in support for the largest parties in Britain between the Anglicans and Catholics, and the wider electorate. In 2024, for example, the Conservative's support among Anglicans was 21 points higher than its support in the electorate as a whole, while its support among Catholics was 5 points higher – a new high for both groups and showing that the consolidation of Britain's Christian vote behind the Conservatives is continuing despite the party's disastrous election performance. By contrast, the 13 percentage point gap between Roman Catholics and all voters in their support for Labour evidence in 1983 has steadily dropped down to zero in 2024. In other words, Labour have lost any advantage among Roman Catholics – the second largest religious denomination in Britain amounting to 8% of the population, while the Conservatives – contrary to country-wide trends – managed to significantly increase theirs among Anglicans who constitute almost a quarter of the population.

These findings align with our analyses of Understanding Society data that are available from the authors upon request. They show that religious identification has strong, statistically significant effects on voting preferences. Anglicans are consistently drawn to the Conservative Party, while Roman Catholic – once a powerhouse for the Labour Party – remain moderately supportive of it even now. These effects hold even when accounting for previous partisan attachments, interest in politics, ethnicity, English national identity, age, sex, education, social class, marital status, region of residence, and financial circumstances. Not only is religion an important determinant of vote choice in its own right, but it is a highly stable one: between the 2010 and 2019 elections, for example, the Conservative's support among Anglicans was highly stable: almost nine in ten did not waver in their preference for the part; in contrast, almost one in five of the religiously unaffiliated changed who they voted for at least once between those four elections.

Taken together these analyses show that religious identification remains an important predictor of voting and continued to shape how people voted in the 2024 election. Religion can be an anchor against wider changes that push voters away from their traditional party, and cushioning the blow of dramatic election defeats, as happened to the Conservatives with their Anglican support base in this election. Religion can be a driver of political realignment, as religiously held identities and values push people away from their traditional party – as happened to Labour among some of its Muslim voters in this campaign with dramatic results, and as can be seen in the steady shift of Catholic support away from Labour and towards the Conservatives.



Note: Smaller, including non-Christian denominations, excluded because of small sample sizes. Electoral support by party does not add up to 100% because of these exclusions and because of removing 'don't knows'.

Source: YouGov, fieldwork: 5-8 July 2024, n=2,182 British adults.

Figure 1: Share of party support by religious denomination

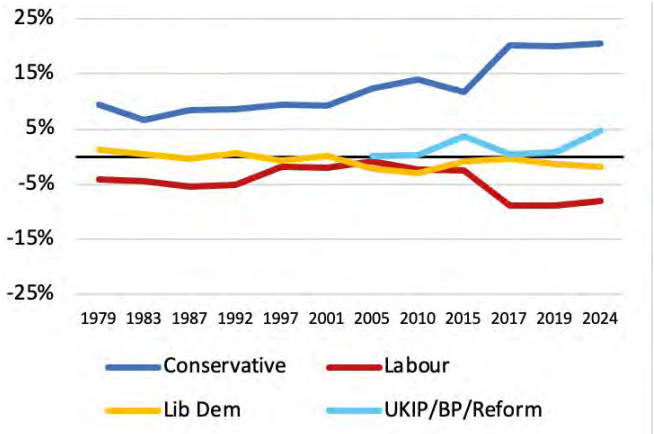


Figure 2: Anglican vote share vs all voters

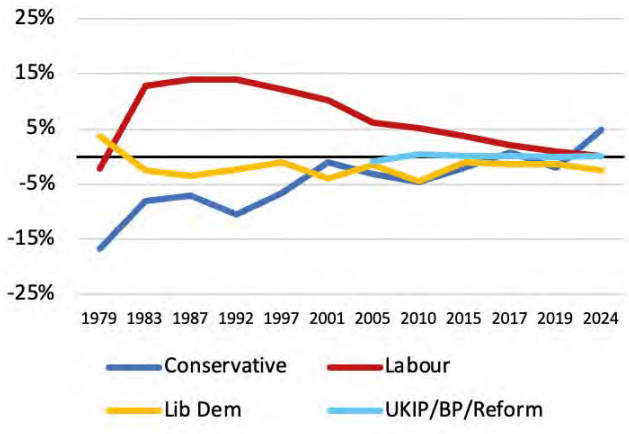


Figure 3: Roman Catholic vote share vs all voters

Source: British Elections Study, 1979-2024.

Failure to connect: the Conservative Party and young voters

Dr Stephanie Luke

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People aged 32 or younger have lived under a Conservative government their entire adult lives. This General Election has shown that there continues to be one group of voters that political parties struggle to engage with – young voters. While we should acknowledge the issues with treating young voters, typically under 35s, as a homogenous group, they are less likely to vote Conservative than older voters and less likely to vote in general. Data from the Lord Ashcroft Poll of those who had already voted offers a clear indication of the generational divide. As Figure 1 shows 14% of 18-24 and 10% of 25–34-year-olds voted for the Conservative Party, contrast that with 27% of 55-64 year olds and 38% of people aged 65 and over.

This trend began to appear prior to this election. Sloam, Eshan and Henn have shown that in response to the dramatic surge of Labour support among younger voters in the 2017 general election, the Conservative Party needed to "try harder to develop a package of policies that can appeal to young people". In this election, the Conservative Party have tried to appeal to young voters, from 100,000 more apprenticeships a year to scrapping 'rip-off degrees', as part of a larger push to improve education and employment opportunities for young people. The Conservative Party also joined TikTok – a platform used particularly by those aged 18-34 – but in their first post they announced that 18-year olds would be required to take part in national service. The Party insisted that this policy was designed to appeal to young voters, but the polls suggested actually it was more popular with their core voters – older age groups.

The Conservative Party have notably struggled to engage young voters, but in the lead up to this election, the polls had continuously predicted that the Conservatives would be behind Labour, in some cases by over 20 points. This election was therefore not about the Conservative Party seeking to gain seats, but about protecting the ones they currently hold. Nearly 9 in 10 (88%) of Sunak's 51 Constituency visits were to seats his party was defending. Therefore, it was evident from the beginning of this campaign that the Conservative Party had a 'core voter strategy', which meant that their main focus was on ensuring that their core supporters – older people – went out and voted for them. This focus on older voters is a strategy aimed at damage limitation. This largely meant that young voters were not targeted to any great extent.

Although the issues that matter to young voters are not wholly different to the older voters that the Conservative Party were targeting. Ipsos polling indicated that both younger and older voters believed that the most important issues facing Britain included both the NHS and the economy. While the Conservative Party addressed these issues, they did so by announcing policies for older people such as pledging to increase the income pensioners can receive before they are taxed.

The core voter strategy was intended to reverse their dire poll ratings, but this strategy focused on older voters, the people that are already most likely to vote for him. While the 'core voter' strategy was intended to shore up past voter support, it did not help them to avoid an historic defeat, left with only 121 seats. This left many Conservatives, many of whom had lost their seats, pondering on what changes needed to be made.

The 'core voter' strategy has come under scrutiny with former Conservative MP Miriam Cates suggesting that if the Conservative Party is to have a future, "it must become a party for all ages". Former Conservative minister Damian Green also reiterated that the Conservative Party needs to start listening to the priorities of young people, suggesting that in recent years the party had shied away from decisions which would help young people in case it would annoy older voters.

However, this acknowledgement that the Conservative Party needs to engage young voters is something that they have recognised previously within their own ranks. Sir Robert Buckland (now former MP for Swindon South) warned in 2023 that "if the Conservative Party is not alive to the demographic time bomb that is about to blow up in our face we will be out of Government for a generation".

While the Conservative Party may be reflecting on their historically bad result, appealing to young voters is a solution that has been suggested before. However, while older people may make up a high proportion of the electorate and are more likely to vote, the Conservative Party cannot rely on older voters to vote for them. Therefore, reiterating Sloam, Eshan and Hann, the Conservative Party needs to produce policies that can appeal to young people. Broadening out their appeal could help to prevent such a dire collapse in electoral support.

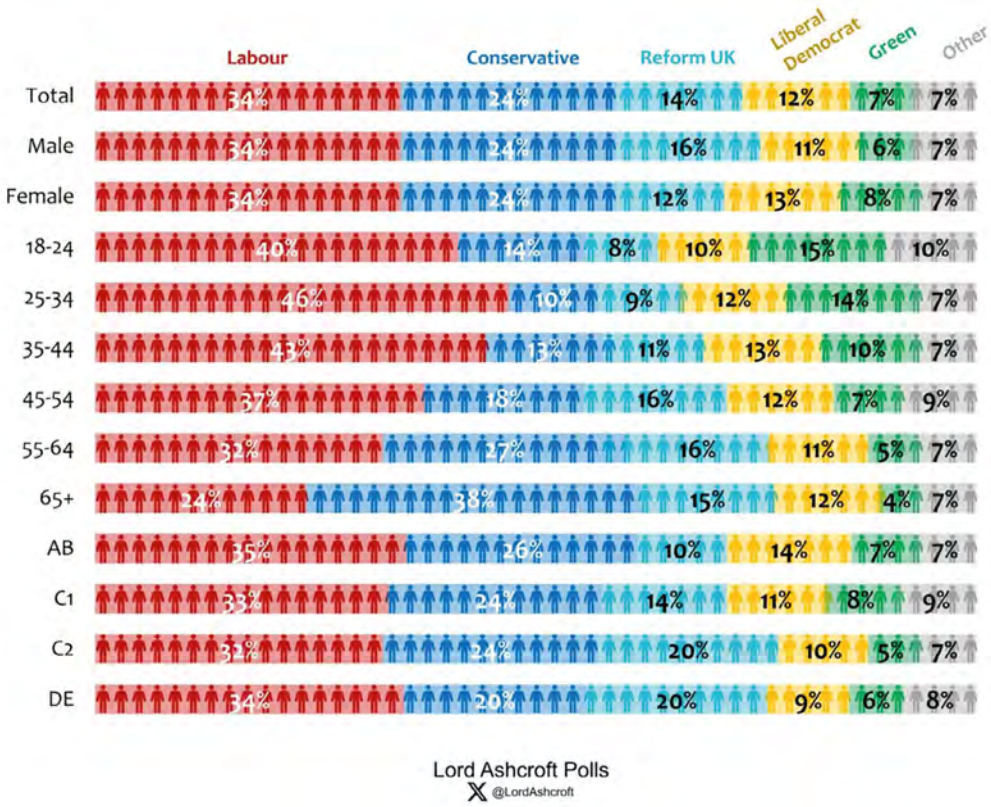

Figure 1: How Britons voted

Youthquake for the progressive left: making sense of the collapse of youth support for the Conservatives

Prof James Sloam

Professor of Politics at Royal Holloway, University of London. His research focuses youth civic and political engagement in the UK, Europe and the US (Springer 2019), and the real and potential impact of youth voice on public policy (UN 2023; Policy and Politics 2024).

Prof Matt Henn

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The 2024 UK General Election marked an historic defeat for the Conservative Party, which was driven by supercharged support amongst younger generations of voters for progressive left parties (Labour, Liberal Democrats, Greens, SNP and Plaid). The Conservatives scored only an estimated 8% amongst young adults (18-24 year-olds) and 13% for 25-49s, compared to 46% of those aged 70-plus (Figure 1).

In our previous report for this election series and in our 2019 *Youthquake* book, we observed that in recent elections, age has become a key dividing line, with young people tending to vote for centre-left and social liberal parties - significantly more so than their older contemporaries. Whilst this trend is true for most established democracies, we revealed this was particularly pronounced in Britain, with the country's youth voting for Labour at more than double the rate of the wider electorate at #GE2017 and #GE2019. This shift is historically unprecedented.

We also identified the importance of *intra*generational trends – within-youth differences based on gender, ethnicity, social class, and education. For example, young women and students have now become much more likely to vote for *progressive* causes and parties than young males and non-students.

Youthquake for the progressive left in 2024

Figure 1 reveals that 79% of 18-24s supported progressive left parties at #GE2024, including 41% lining-up behind Labour. By comparison, only 17% of young people voted Conservative (8%) or Reform (9%). The 2024 pattern for the 25-49 year-old group was surprisingly similar. Labour secured 45%, with 73% for all progressive parties; the combined Conservative/ Reform vote (22%) was only marginally higher than for 18-24s. The levels of support for these two right-wing parties were significantly higher amongst 50-69s (47%) and 70-plus (61%).

The 2024 *intra*generational rates of youth support for the progressive parties produced some equally striking results. Young women and young men aged 18-24 supported Labour in similar proportions (42%:40%). However, the *total* support for the progressive left parties amongst young women (84%) was noticeably higher than for young men (72%). Similarly, 82% of students supported these parties.

Serving young people - the absence of youth issues

There was also a dramatic drift of young people away from the two larger parties between #GE2019 and #GE2024. Firstly, the Conservative's 2019 youth support of 20% dropped to 8% in 2024 in a low turnout election (we estimate that less than half of registered 18-24s voted). Whilst Labour's youth support remained strong in 2024, it contracted by 15 points from 56% in 2019. Indeed the combined youth Labour-Conservative support fell overall from over three-quarters (76%) in 2019 to under a half (49%) in 2024.

During the course of the 2024 campaign period, there was also a noticeable "spreading-out" of Labour's youth vote (particularly amongst women) away from Starmer's centrist and cautious party positioning. YouGov pre-election campaign polls traced this movement, with Labour's 57% of youth support at the start of the campaign, falling 16 points by polling day.

This drop in Labour's support corresponds with their repeated election campaign pronouncements to commit to working within the Conservative's spending constraints and their relative silence on youth issues. It reflects a relative failure to effectively address young people's issues – including mental health, housing, university tuition fees, and environmental matters. Under former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn in #GE2017 and #GE2019, there was a deliberate effort to court the youth vote and appeal to youth issues, but such efforts to mobilise young people were largely absent from Keir Starmer's much more centrist agenda in #GE2024.

Examination of Labour's #GE2024 election manifesto reveals that it offered several policy commitments that combined, might improve young people's economic and social well-being and appeal somewhat to their youth-specific priorities. For instance, it pledged to set-up a publicly-owned Great British Energy and create 650,000 'green' jobs - which arguably would have resonated with many young people's aspirations concerning the climate crisis. It also outlined a youth guarantee of access to training, apprenticeships and employment support, *Young Futures* hubs, and votes for 16- and 17-year-olds in general elections.

However, these youth-friendly promises were given little prominence during the pre-election period. Instead, 'mainstream' issues as taxation, immigration, and the NHS largely dominated the pre-election discourse. This lack of focus on youth policy areas was even noted by Alistair Campbell, former Director of Communications to Tony Blair, who commented on the need for the party to show young people what they are going to deliver for them.

Concluding observations

It is perhaps not surprising that in the context of Labour's relative lack of commitment to specifically youth-oriented policies, alongside muted youth engagement, communication and mobilisation strategies, the verdict of many young people at #GE2024 was of some disappointment, many abstaining from voting or switching to other progressive left parties. Youth support for Labour at the start of the campaign proved to be very shallow – *a mile wide but an inch deep*. Although Labour secured a stunning electoral landslide, it cannot rely on this group remaining loyal without meaningful commitments to youth priorities in government. Otherwise, young people may become even more disillusioned with electoral politics, leading to lower turnout and an increase in alternative forms of political activism, as well as the potential for them to be drawn towards populist parties and causes.

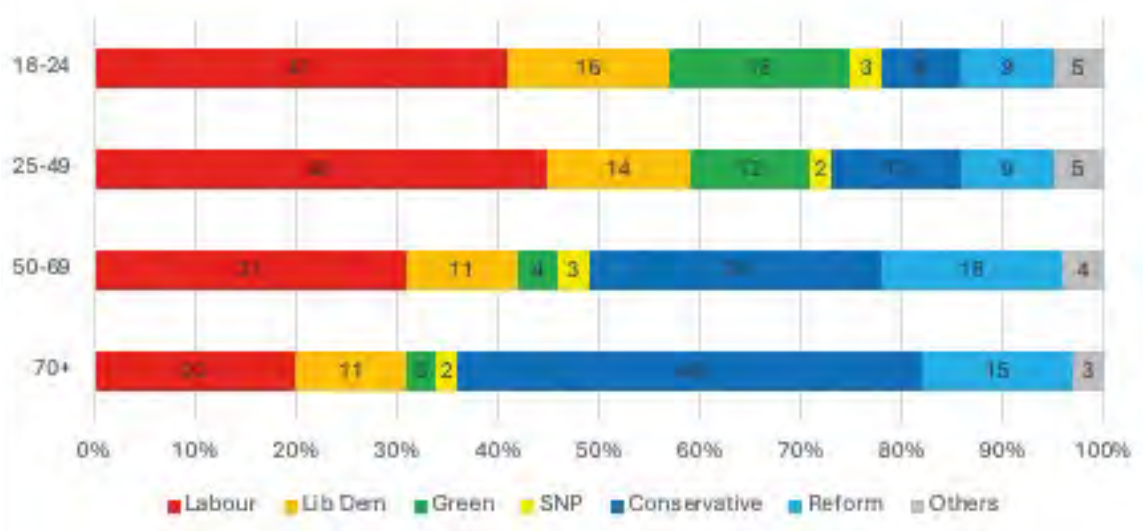

Figure 1: Voting Intention by Age (YouGov: 8 July 2024, sample size 42, 119

Values in the valence election

Prof Paula Surridge

Professor of Political Sociology at the University of Bristol and Deputy Director at UK in a Changing Europe. She has been studying the British Electorate for thirty years, beginning with the 1992 Scottish Election Study and with a focus on social and political values.

In 2019 the Conservative party led by Boris Johnson united a coalition of voters around the slogan 'Get Brexit done', it was the third election in four years to be fought on the battleground of Brexit and to split the electorate along the underlying values and identity divides that Brexit had brought to the fore.

The 2024 Election could not be more different. This was an election first and foremost driven by a verdict on the performance of the Conservative government. Competence, leadership, and delivery are the key elements of 'valence' politics. These political battles are fought not over what the outcomes should be – everyone wants to see lower inflation and shorter waiting lists - but rather who is best placed to deliver them. The Conservatives were failing on all of them.

As the public went to the polls, the government was seen by more than two-thirds of voters as incompetent and over the course of the 18 months since his election as party leader, Rishi Sunak's personal ratings had also been eroded. This was a government that more than four-fifths of the popular were dissatisfied with and that two-thirds said did not deserve to be re-elected.

It is then, no surprise that the party lost almost twenty percentage points from its 2019 vote share. What is more difficult to explain in terms of valence politics alone is where those voters went. What voters want and who they think are best placed to deliver it depend not only on evaluations of parties but also on the priorities of the electorate. Or to put it another way, competence evaluations may have broken the Conservative coalition apart, but the value positions of the electorate influence the size and shape of the resulting pieces.

The Conservatives lost votes (and seats) in four directions. The traditional 'swing' vote that went to the Labour party. Voters in seats in the South of England that went to the Liberal Democrats. The larger but less electorally successful group that went to Reform UK and a much smaller but nonetheless important group that voted for the Green party.

Using data from just before the campaign from the British Election study internet panel we can look at the priorities different groups of voters had prior to the agenda setting of the campaign itself. Those moving from the Conservatives to Labour and the Liberal Democrats are quite similar, both groups say the economy is the most important issue facing the country, and in both groups, immigration is a much lower priority. In comparison among those moving to Reform UK, immigration is the most important issue of a substantial majority, with only a small group placing the economy first. Finally, those moving from Conservative to the Green party are much more likely than other groups to say the environment is the most important issue though even among this group the economy is a slightly higher priority.

This makes for a set of difficult challenges for the Conservatives in the coming parliament. While the party must rebuild its reputation for economic competence to again be seen as a viable party of government, this is difficult in opposition for as long as the Labour government retains the trust of the public on economic issues.

But this alone may not be enough to rebuild a winning coalition while voters are also fragmenting along other lines. If the Labour government is judged to have handled immigration well this might dampen the salience for the next election, but if it is judged to have handled it poorly that could add fuel to the Reform UK campaign rather than return voters to the Conservatives.

Chasing the Reform UK vote on issues such as immigration and net zero, does nothing to reconnect with voters lost to the Liberal Democrats and the Greens, in fact it could push them further away. Pursuing the 'low taxation' voter may be equally problematic. Those who have moved from the Conservatives to Labour and the Liberal Democrats are to the left economically than those who stayed with the Conservatives, and to the left of the Conservative MPs at Westminster.

The Conservative party lost heavily because it was extremely unpopular, seen as incompetent and could not please any of the parts of the voter coalition it had assembled in 2019. To win again it will need to build a new coalition of voters, but the fragments of the old coalition don't easily fit back together.

It may be that the fragmented electorate is here to stay, posing new challenges at each election for any party seeking to find a winning hand, but for all parties the key is understanding the voter groups as they exist in the electorate rather than chasing mirages of the electorate they would prefer.


POLLING
STATION

Tactical voting: why is it such a big part of British elections?

Thomas Lockwood

PhD student at York St John University specialising in modern UK elections, party systems, and democratic theory, involving both quantitative research and qualitative depth-interviews with voters. My other research projects have made an original contribution to the field by assessing volatility at UK General Elections, challenging mainstream assumptions which purport electoral change to be linear and gradual.

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Throughout the election campaign, there were discussions concerning tactical voting and its prevalence in this election. According to polling, 19% of voters intended to vote negatively to keep another party out, rather than voting their desired party in, on the same par as 2017. These voters, if following through with this intention on polling day, opted for a "compromise" candidate – someone whose politics they may not share but is better placed to defeat their least preferred candidate.

The influx of tactical voting websites, campaign groups, and their social media presence, has made this more of a possibility. Ahead of the vote, one centre-left campaign group created a voting hitlist of 451 constituencies where the Conservatives can be voted out. The aim was to encourage voters to cast their ballot in a way that delivers the heaviest possible election defeat to the Conservatives.

Tactical voting is predominantly discussed on the left of British politics and in 2024, aimed squarely at removing the Conservative government from power. However, we should be cautious as to the national effects of such voting, not least given tactical voting has not prevented the Conservatives winning the last four General Elections.

Tactical voting also makes assumptions about the Conservative Party vote; largely that it remains sufficient to challenge either the Labour, Lib Dems, Greens or any other candidate in the majority of constituencies. A sharp fall in Conservative vote share (from 42.6% to 23.7%) demonstrates that in many areas this simply wasn't the case.

The effects of tactical voting were therefore confined to a relatively small number of constituencies – in fact an even smaller number that was being predicted at the start of the campaign. The outcomes of high-profile names or constituencies (such as South West Norfolk, North East Somerset or North West Cambridgeshire) may have been influenced by tactical voting, but the majority of seats are unlikely to have been.

Tactical voting works when voters are divided into broad coalitions. Here voters who support a (self-defined) 'left wing' or progressive party may be expected to lend their vote to a party that shares similar values and policies in exchange for removing an undesirable incumbent/opponent. Interestingly, a pre-election study found that Labour and Liberal Democrat voters share a great deal between them vis-a-vis beliefs and outlooks. This should therefore be fertile ground for tactical voting between the parties.

Instead, the Labour and Liberal Democrat vote shares both increased, albeit marginally, by just 1.6% and 0.6% respectively. Figure 1 illustrates how we can reduce the vote in England to two broad coalitions (nationalism makes it difficult to reduce voting in Scotland and Wales in a similar vein), with the Labour, Lib Dems and Green party representing a left or left of center bloc and the Conservatives and Reform/Brexit party representing a right or right of center bloc.

This suggests that rather than sharing votes between these parties, people switching from the right leaning to left leaning parties was the primary factor behind the change in government.

Importantly, however, we do not know for definite the scale of tactical voting in this election. People aren't asked their reasons for voting on polling day, or even if they voted for the party that most aligned with their values. These are personal decisions. Voters are also of course free to change their minds between opinion poll field work (which asks if there was an election tomorrow which party would you vote for) and putting their ballot in the official ballot box/returning a postal vote.

Nonetheless, drawing upon previous studies of recent election cycles, the number of people indicating a willingness to engage in tactical voting decreased (see above), and given the nature of the FPTP electoral system, it is unlikely that tactical voting significantly impacted the overall election results. Tactical voting was only slightly more prevalent in 2019 than in this or other previous elections. In 2019, neither the Unite to Remain pact nor the Brexit Party's withdrawal of candidates significantly affected the results.

Though this isn't to deny that people may have voted tactically – in essence we can't know this unless large scale qualitative analysis occurs. It simply means that such voting had little impact on the election outcome, which was skewed by the 'winner takes all' nature of the FPTP electoral system. This is because FPTP ultimately rewards parties that gain a sizable minority of votes and punishes those unable to gain 25% of the vote share.

Left of Centre 2019 (%)	Left of Centre 2024 (%)	Difference	Right of Centre 2019 (%)	Right of Centre 2024 (%)	Difference
Labour - 34	Labour - 34.4		Cons – 47.2	Cons – 25.9	
LD – 12.4	LD – 13.2		Brexit - 2	Reform – 15.3	
Green - 3	Green – 7.3				
Total – 49.4	Total - 54.9	+ 5.5	Total – 49.2	Total - 41.2	- 8.0

Figure 1: vote share for left and right of centre parties, 2019 and 2024 compared

3

The Nations and regions

Have voters fallen out of love with the SNP?

The SNP was expected to lose seats in the General Election. The result, though, was worse than pre-election polls predicted and worse than the party leadership feared. The SNP returned only nine of Scotland's 57 MPs, a dramatic collapse from the 48 elected in 2019, and the party's percentage of the vote declined from 45% to 30%. Labour won 37 seats on 35% of the vote. To an extent, the election reversed the events of 2015 when the SNP jumped from six to 56 MPs, an electoral shock which itself stemmed from the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence. Compared to the heady days of electoral success a decade earlier, 2024 was a meltdown. Ian Blackford, the party's former Westminster leader, remarked: "To some extent people have fallen out of love with us and we must ask why". So how can this result be explained?

John Swinney returned as SNP leader weeks before the election was called at a time when an aroma of scandal and decline surrounded the party. SNP membership had fallen, which the party attempted to mask. The police investigation into SNP finances and fundraising culminated in Peter Murrell, husband of Nicola Sturgeon and former party chief executive, being charged with embezzlement of SNP funds. Humza Yousaf's short period as leader ended with the clumsy collapse of a governing arrangement with the Scottish Greens. We know from academic research that governing competence was crucial in the party's early success but this standing had become damaged.

The SNP campaign promoted Swinney as a likeable politician who combined pro-business and social justice themes and who could 'steady the ship': 29 seats became an informal target. The SNP was in a poor financial position to fight this campaign, with the drying up of big donations and reduced income from party members. A party battle bus appeared only a week before the poll. The party has a reputation for effectively combining 'digital and doorstep' campaigning but it was reported that a cash-strapped SNP was spending considerably less on online advertising than its rivals.

There was a sense that the SNP was fighting different campaigns within Scotland, attempting to protect its presence in the Central Belt of Scotland, largely Labour-held areas before 2015, but in competition with the Conservatives in the North-East and Borders. This led to some contradictions in messaging. The party advocated investment in a green economy but was acutely aware that the traditional energy sector was heavily embedded in the North-East of Scotland, and its position on new oil and gas licenses came across as equivocal.

The party had agreed that independence would be 'page one, line one' of a general election manifesto, and that if the SNP won a majority of Scottish seats, it would 'immediately start negotiations with the UK government'. That the SNP would have the leverage to make this happen on the back of declining support was never plausible, but the sheer scale of SNP losses made the strategy completely irrelevant. Debate now exists on whether the party should have placed more emphasis on independence in the campaign, or indeed less. On this question, the party seems unsure.

In 2024, former SNP voters were driven to vote for Labour to ensure change at Westminster. The electoral map of Scotland altered dramatically, with SNP Central Belt representation completely swept away by Labour. The SNP lost all seats in Glasgow and Edinburgh, including high-profile and hard-working MPs Alison Thewliss in Glasgow and Tommy Sheppard in Edinburgh. The party's MPs are now all North of a Central Belt red stripe, a combination of rural and 'urban' representation (two seats in Aberdeen and one in Dundee, cities that lean different ways on independence). One source of SNP cheer was defeating the leader of the Scottish Conservatives, Douglas Ross, in Aberdeenshire North and Moray East.

Explaining the SNP's trials involves understanding a decline in the electorate's faith in the party. The SNP once had a reputation for unity, competence and good leadership, but no longer. Another factor is that some independence supporters are prepared to vote Labour. For some time, polling has indicated that SNP popularity has been trailing support for independence. The 2024 Election provides further evidence. The 2014 referendum shifted attitudes to independence, with voters who hold a view still split roughly 50:50. Key questions are whether the SNP can win back the lost independence supporters in the 2016 Scottish Parliament election, and whether attitudes towards independence will begin to change.

The SNP loses its position as the second largest opposition group at Westminster and associated parliamentary benefits. The party's financial problems are compounded by a reduction in Short Money and financial contributions from MPs. The election might also represent the unwinding of SNP electoral support. Voters perceive a democratic problem when parties are in power for a very long time. Nearly two decades as a party of government in Scotland is a very long time. The SNP enjoyed something akin to electoral dominance, but it was bound to falter eventually.

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The spectre of Sturgeon still looms large in gendered coverage in Scotland

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This election saw an historic milestone for women in politics, not just in the UK, but in Scotland, with the biggest representation of women MPs in history: a record breaking 40.6% (a jump from the previous record of 34.2% in 2019). In Scotland's case, it didn't quite meet the UK's benchmark overall, but there was still a positive shift with 20 women elected, making it 35.1% of the total 57 seats, despite the fact that in Scotland, fewer women candidates were put forward than in 2019. These figures compare favourably to the 18 elected in 2019 (30.5%), and 19 sitting (32.2%) by 2023. As Fowler and Hanretty remind us, the last time there was a large swing from Conservative to Labour in 1997, this also brought a substantial rise in women's descriptive representation. Though widely celebrated at the time, the moniker 'Blair's Babes' was quickly bestowed upon the women by the UK press, speaking to the complexity and often pejorative gendered reporting women have experienced at the hands of the British media. This time around, however, an increased representation of women was met with much less fanfare in the mainstream news coverage, including Scotland. Gender and politics organisations and experts, such as Professor Rainbow Murray, rightly celebrated this gain with a pinch of salt: the election was a "good day for women's representation in politics" but "not entirely rosy", reiterating that an overall shift in figures was only part of the story.

Examination of the diversity of the women elected presents a more nuanced – and less positive – picture as there were no women of colour elected in Scotland (and just one man of colour). This provides some context for the findings of preliminary research conducted by the University of Strathclyde which explores the representation of women of colour in Scottish election coverage. Undertaken on behalf of Pass the Mic, an organisation dedicated to championing women of colour in Scottish media, initial research sees women of colour appear in a meagre 1.5% of the election coverage in the four weeks leading to election day. This includes candidates, commentators and the wider public who appear in election stories in the Scottish press and TV channels. This ongoing work shows that women of colour are not only under-represented in UK politics in Scotland descriptively, but also in the wider Scottish public sphere. This is reflected in the lower proportion of women we found in the Scottish election coverage overall (23.9%), echoing similar trends found in UK-wide analyses.

When women did appear in the coverage, the story often centred on their gender (and in the few instances of women of colour MPs, their race), for example, The Herald's profile of Scottish Greens candidate Iris Duane, who would have been the first trans woman of colour MP. Commentary otherwise focused on the lack of women, both in the leadership debates where, notably, Scotland's only female leader Lorna Slater was excluded from the STV line-up, or as candidates, noted by the Ferret Scotland. The resignation of Nicola Sturgeon helped occasion the shift away from the praise-worthy 'female face' of Scottish leadership for the previous decade. The first debate drew comments on social media that it gave off "manel [man-only panel] vibes" alongside the Scotsman's Susan Dalgety deeming it a "man-fest" saying the election campaign in Scotland "ha[d] placed women back lurking in the political equivalent of the kitchen". This follows on the increasing focus on leadership in news coverage at the expense of parties and candidates, made all the more perverse by the fact that most Scottish leaders participating (apart from Douglas Ross) were not even standing in the election, a point made by Higgins and Dinger in this volume.

Most of the gendered media coverage in Scotland focused on Sturgeon – still as a key figure in the campaign, despite no longer being First Minister – or else discussion related to the sensitive topic of trans rights. Sturgeon's role in the cataclysmic setback that the SNP incurred (which lost a "damaging" 38 seats) has since been a point of contention across the media in Scotland, particularly after her role as a pundit on ITV's live election night coverage. This has included focus on her role in the misuse of party funds and even more so on her and the party's stance related to the Gender Recognition Reform Bill. These localised debates took centre stage, crowding out space for coverage on candidates and meaningful information on a wider range of gendered policies and concerns for voters. In doing so, arguably, this gives a false sense that gendered issues are sufficiently represented in the Scottish public sphere, while perpetuating narratives affixed to female politicians that they nurse a political fixation on issues around gender. Although there has been a positive shift in the representation of women in Parliament, this hasn't been reflected in the proportion of media coverage of women, with the Scottish media distracted from its own issues with diversity. It has an ongoing responsibility to reflect on its practices to better represent the communities it serves.

The personalisation of Scottish politics in a UK General Election

Labour could not have been less dependent in the vote in Scotland than in this election. Polls suggested well in advance of the vote that Keir Starmer's procession to Downing Street would take place with or without Scottish assistance. While Labour leaflets persisted in the 'make sure we get the Tories out' line, most political arguments against voting for the SNP focused on removing Scottish independence from the political agenda, engaging "Scotland's real priorities" (as the Conservative campaign literature had it). Allied to this, much of the recent intrigue of the Scottish political scene has been around the decline of the SNP, on their second First Minister in 15 months since Nicola Sturgeon resigned in 2023 and mired in allegations of internal financial impropriety. What jeopardy there was in this election was on the extent and portrayal of the SNP's fall from dominance.

How did this play out in media coverage? We saw an argument over policy and potential government replaced by a contest of Scottish party fortunes. In this, the parties were routinely manifest in the figures of their leaders. In terms that have dominated research in political communications, the coverage of the General Election in Scotland exemplified the personalisation of politics, with a glimpse of the tactical choices and irrationalities this entails.

Across the UK, rise in personalisation was at its most apparent in the televised leaders' debates; a US innovation that has become an expected part of UK general elections. Those politicians invited to appear in the debates sit within a hierarchy of individual political prestige. The most elevated gathered for the BBC and Sky leaders' debates, limited to the only feasible candidates for Prime Minister: UK Conservative leader Rishi Sunak and his Labour counterpart Keir Starmer. A parallel debate between Holyrood-based Scottish leaders was hosted by BBC Scotland, including Scottish First Minister John Swinney, Scottish Labour leader Anas Sarwar, Scottish Liberal Democrat leader Alex Cole-Hamilton, Scottish Green leader Lorna Slater and Scottish Conservative leader Douglas Ross. Swinney also joined UK PM hopefuls Sunak and Starmer, along with UK Liberal Democrat leader Ed Davey, on a BBC Question Time special. Revealingly, all of these Scottish leaders are based at Holyrood and, with the exception of Ross, were non-participants in the election.

Hosting the less exalted were the BBC Seven Leader and the ITV Multi-Party debates. These included the Deputy leaders of the UK parties, the leaders of the more marginal Green and Reform party, along with Plaid Cymru. Representing the SNP in these two debates was Westminster leader and General Election candidate Stephen Flynn.

The greater stress on Holyrood-based Scottish leaders with no formal involvement in the election continued in the Scottish press. A larger and on-going content analysis undertaken at the University of Strathclyde showed that in the four weeks leading up to the election Scotland's best-selling newspaper, the *Scottish Sun*, quoted Holyrood leaders Sarwar and Cole-Hamilton in more articles than PM-in-waiting Keir Starmer or Ed Davey. The only Scottish party leader to stand as a candidate in the election, the Conservatives' Douglas Ross, appeared in more election stories than then-UK PM Sunak. However, the starkest difference in the *Sun*'s coverage is between SNP Holyrood leader John Swinney and 'SNP Commons leader' the aforementioned Stephen Flynn, where non-candidate Swinney appears in more than fifty articles to Westminster-bound Flynn's five. Factors in this may include broadcast and print media's hostility to the SNP and independence in general: Flynn is the more accomplished media performer than Swinney, which, through a combination of party communications strategy and a preference to cast the SNP in a weaker light, adds a partisan dimension to the choice of leaders to bring to dominance. Flynn, as a member of a prickly small-party opposition (along with the Reform party and Plaid Cymru) was perceived to have done well in the debates and garnered notable support among an – interestingly – British rather than purely Scottish audience.

In common with recent general elections, much of the stake in Scotland has been the diminishing prospect of a further independence referendum. Constituency and Commons reputations pale alongside a party's constitutional position. In practical terms, Sarwar, Slater, Swinney and Cole-Hamilton are also local and available to talk, and Ross's candidature at the expense of a sickly colleague gilded his profile with a gloss of villainy. Within the Scottish media, the debate remained with the locally recognisable cast at Holyrood, where the news value of "proximity" favours a Scotland-based politician. In addition, this proximity adds to and plays into a contemporary preoccupation with authenticity in mediated communication. In a context in which information is superfluous and has nonetheless been declared "relative" and "fake", authenticity and personalisation seem to gain more traction politically. Yet, it is inescapable that the cost of this exercise in personalisation is that the main focus is on Scottish leaders that are not candidates in the election, with no accountability to a Westminster ballot. In this case, personalisation assuredly dilutes and adds confusion to the mediation of the democratic process.

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Competence, change and continuity: a tale of two nations

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In this election much of what we had come to expect in Scottish politics has changed, while Welsh politics was at first glance characterised by continuity. The SNP's dominance in Scotland appears to have been shattered, having had their worst election result since 2010, losing 39 seats while retaining only 9 MPs. Plaid, on the surface of it, had a steady election matching their 2019 performance by winning 4 seats. Welsh Labour also seemingly continued their hegemony in Wales, gaining 6 seats to win 27/32 Welsh seats. However, in Wales the number of seats won by Plaid and Labour only tell part of the story. Labour's vote share actually fell by 3.9% and Plaid's increased by 4.9% to 14.8%, the highest the party has ever achieved at a General Election.

A key aspect of how both the SNP and Welsh Labour have been able to dominate Scottish and Welsh politics since 2011 is their exploitation of vertical competency assessments. The multileveled structure of devolution, alongside the Conservatives having held office at Westminster since 2010, has allowed the SNP and Welsh Labour to define politics as the devolved administrations vs Westminster, portraying the Conservative government as anglo-centric and in no way concerned with the welfare of working class people in Scotland and Wales. As Chris Hanlon former SNP policy convenor described this strategy: "There's an old Garfield cartoon where he says if you want to look thin, stand next to a hippopotamus and certainly, if you want to be viewed as a credible party of government, stand next to the Conservative government". This strategy has served both the SNP and Welsh Labour well to date, as both the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey and The Welsh Election Study found voters since 2010 have been consistently more likely to credit the devolved administrations for improvements in the economy, while more likely to blame Westminster Conservatives for the economy weakening. However, such a strategy cannot preserve an image of competence if a party becomes the victim of their own internal divides and scandals, as we saw to varying extents in the SNP and Welsh Labour leading up to the general election.

In this election the swing of around 20% from the SNP to Labour in central belt constituencies suggests that the SNP's internal political controversies have badly damaged the party. The SNP's woes started when they lost their talismanic leader, Nicola Sturgeon, in 2023 due to a multitude of factors involving financial scandals, divisions in the party over gender reform and the strategy to achieve independence. Her successor Humza Yousaf, suffered a disastrous and short tenure. Yousaf's end came with his ill-advised and rash move to end the SNP's power-sharing agreement with their sole allies, the Scottish Greens. These factors, combined with a soured relationship with the Scottish Greens, left a difficult context for Yousaf's successor to inherit. John Swinney stood as the only candidate to replace him, pledging to unify the party. Equally, any hopes of a gentle honeymoon period for Swinney quickly vanished when Rishi Sunak called a snap election just one month after his appointment as leader.

Plaid likewise have undergone a change of leadership in recent years. Rhun ap Iorwerth became leader in June 2023, after Adam Price resigned due to an an internal report which found a culture of misogyny and bullying in the party. However, unlike the SNP, internal party controversies appear to not have impacted the party's image so badly. Plaid's priority now is presenting concrete workable economic policies such as windfall taxes and £4 billion in HS2 compensation to Wales. Evidence of independence being set aside was apparent in their 2024 manifesto, where independence does not feature until page 42. The change from Price's fixed timeframe of a referendum on independence within 5 years, to Iorwerth's focus on winning over voters on 'bread and butter' issues is a stark change from an idealistic strategy to a more pragmatic one that has evidently paid off in this election. Plaid were also aided by both the perceived incompetency of the Conservative party at Westminster (COVID & Liz Truss's budget) and also Welsh Labour at the Senedd (the scandal surrounding Vaughan Gething's 'dodgy donations'). Labour and Conservative voters swung to Plaid in all 4 seats they won.

While the SNP and Welsh Labour's recent internal troubles may have caused them both to lose voters (albeit to different extents) perhaps the more worrying development arising from this election for both parties is that, with the end of a Conservative Westminster government, the exploitation of vertical competency assessments are jeopardised. The SNP will no longer be able to paint a Labour Westminster government as the 'nasty party' as effectively due to being closer to them on the left-right spectrum. The strategy will be entirely redundant for the Welsh Labour government, in being unable to attack their colleagues at Westminster. In Wales this presents a huge opportunity for Plaid to become the new primary beneficiaries of such attacks on Westminster and, with the electoral wipe-out of the Conservatives in Wales, potentially even the party best placed to end Labour's hegemony in Welsh elections.

Election success, but problems remain for Labour in Wales

The Labour Party was rightly delighted by the General Election Results, ending fourteen years of Conservative government in a landslide victory. In Wales, the party extended its over one-hundred years of dominance, winning twenty-seven out of thirty-two seats and seeing Wales become a Tory-free nation.

However, when we dig deeper into the results the situation for Labour in Wales looks potentially less favourable than it does on first viewing. While Labour's vote share rose by 1.6% across the UK, it experienced a decline of 3.9% in Wales. Considered in the context of Labour's victory across the UK, the results in Wales should cause concern.

As the party reflects on the results in Wales, it is likely to turn its attention to Cardiff Bay. As the election campaign was getting underway, the Welsh Labour first minister, Vaughan Gething, lost a confidence vote in the Senedd. This was the culmination of months of controversy over a £200,000 donation Gething received from a company whose owner had been convicted of dumping waste on the Gwent Levels. Gething and his allies have insisted that the vote was a Tory gimmick organised as part of their election tactics. The vote was non-binding, and Gething has been adamant that he will not resign, bolstered perhaps by receiving the support of Keir Starmer. Even still, Gething is unpopular amongst the Welsh public.

This is a crisis not seen in Welsh Labour for quite some time. The Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci distinguished between crises that give rise to "political criticism of a minor, day-to-day character" and those that lead to "socio-historical criticism" beyond the political world.

While a crisis centred on the first minister might appear to fall into the first category, it could yet prove symptomatic of something deeper at play.

Labour has risen to dominance in Wales by successfully articulating the interests of several different groups at once. The party has positioned itself as the defender of working-class interests, often by using radical language and reminding voters of its strong links to Labour traditions – particularly Aneurin Bevan, who led the creation of the NHS.

It also positions itself as the party of Wales, appealing to voters in terms of both identity and class. Former first minister Mark Drakeford once declared that "social solidarity is part of what it means to be Labour, and what it means to be Welsh".

Yet, sustained single party dominance has negative consequences. As noted by the political scientist TJ Pempel, the dominant party can shape the nation and political landscape in its own image, but a failure to adapt can sow the seeds for its own destruction.

Welsh historian Gwyn Alf Williams complained in the 1980s that Labour dominance in Wales had hardened into an oligarchy "characterised by accommodation snug within the system". Williams argued that, with its politicians "dependent on the support and manipulation of powerful trade unions", the party was falling into corruption and nepotism.

Gething did not break any rules in accepting the campaign donation. But a link with such a businessperson, as well as the controversial union machinations that took place during the leadership contest that delivered Gething to power, suggests a party detached from the electoral base that sustains it. Added to changing demographics, significant poverty and struggling public services, the recent drop in support for Labour in Wales and the unpopularity of Gething himself might suggest that what appears to be a specific crisis about a single politician and his campaign donations, could lead to a longer-term weakening of the party's electoral base.

Welsh Labour politicians have consistently argued that having two Labour governments, one in Westminster and the other in the Senedd, will allow the Welsh government to achieve its ambitions.

But even here there is the risk of potential tension. Starmer has been clear that a Labour government will not be able to turn on the spending taps. Welsh Labour might claim that having a Labour government in both Cardiff and Westminster will be beneficial, but if the money doesn't come, where then does the blame lie for poor government performance?

If Welsh Labour is seen as not defending Wales' interests, will voters look for alternatives? Will Plaid Cymru capitalise on its best ever result and successfully capture voters from Welsh Labour's voting coalition?

The extent to which this decline in support is a blip or a long-term trend remains to be seen, but the SNP's fate in Scotland shows that a once dominant party can collapse fairly rapidly. Even before the SNP, Scottish Labour's own history – from dominance to defeat – is indicative of how longer-term success can be eroded.

It is unwise to write off Labour in Wales. However, with the controversies surrounding Gething not going away, now focusing on the sacking of Hannah Blythyn from the Welsh Government, the 2026 Senedd election could prove to be a seismic event in Welsh politics. If Gething and Welsh Labour are unable to inspire confidence, what is currently only an immediate crisis could spiral into far-reaching consequences for Labour in Wales.

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Four ways in which Northern Ireland's own seismic results will affect the new Parliament

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The 2024 General Election has produced an 'earthquake' in Northern Ireland just as seismic as in the rest of the United Kingdom. There are four ways in which these results will have an impact – sooner or later – on the new UK Parliament and Government.

First, expect a new swagger from Sinn Féin. They are now the Northern Ireland (NI) party with the largest number of MPs. 2019 was the first time nationalist MPs from NI outnumbered unionist ones, with the two from the SDLP and seven from Sinn Féin versus the eight of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). Both nationalist parties held onto their seats this time but the DUP's loss of three seats means that it is now very much second place.

This trend has been evident in the last two elections in Northern Ireland, i.e. Sinn Féin holding ground as the DUP imploded, and so becoming the largest party by default. This General Election completes the hat trick: Sinn Féin holds more seats than the DUP in local councils, the NI Assembly and now the House of Commons. Senior figures in the party were quick to claim this as further evidence of a trend towards "constitutional change on the island". Although Sinn Féin has an abstentionist policy towards Westminster, they make the most of being there. In the fallout from the SNP's disastrous performance, Sinn Féin will be keen to remind the movers and shakers in SW1 that the break-up of the UK is a nearing possibility.

Determined to counter any such narratives will be a new NI MP on the green benches from the polar opposite perspective. Jim Allister of the Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV) is a forceful enough character in his own right to make an impact on Westminster. Allister is the new MP for North Antrim, having managed to convince enough voters there that Ian Paisley Jr was, believe it or not, not sufficiently unionist.

Having been the TUV's only MLA in the NI Assembly since he founded the party, as a breakaway from the DUP, in 2007, Allister is recognised across the spectrum as a wily parliamentarian and an indomitable orator. He is expected to sit away from his fellow MPs from NI – none of whom regard him warmly – alongside Reform UK, with whom his party formed an alliance this year. Nigel Farage's endorsement of Ian Paisley – Allister's rival – caused temporary awkwardness but is unlikely to prevent the two from joining forces on their common concerns: the Union, immigration and Brexit.

In fact, thirdly, the UK-EU relationship will continue to be a priority issue for all MPs from NI. We know from our polling in Queen's University Belfast that even strong unionists (with the exception of TUV supporters) want that relationship to be a closer one if it diminishes the significance of the Windsor Framework, i.e. Northern Ireland's unique post-Brexit arrangements. If the new Government decide to move in that direction, they will find support from 17 of NI's MPs.

Intensity to the issue will be added by the fact that the implementation of the Windsor Framework is due to reach another milestone come the Autumn and the EU will be watching closely to see that this happens. It also remains key to the future shape of UK immigration policy, thanks to ramifications of the Windsor Framework and 1998 Good Friday/Belfast Agreement. Westminster will be reminded of this by NI MPs, from opposing positions. Northern Ireland will thus remain at the crux of some of the most politically-sensitive and complex issues facing the new Government.

Finally, despite the fillip to hardline nationalism and hardline unionism in these results, what is really striking is the diversity that now exists among the NI cohort. In the snap election of 2017, only one seat was returned that wasn't held by the DUP or Sinn Féin. This time we have representation from no fewer than six parties plus an Independent. This reflects in part the tussle within unionism, which is clearly no longer content to be represented by one dominant party. The DUP's response to its losses has been primarily to criticise other unionist parties for 'splitting the unionist vote'. Some Irish republicans have made similar criticisms of the SDLP for winning votes from nationalists who might otherwise have voted Sinn Féin, and thus outstripped the DUP.

Yet surely the message delivered by the NI electorate on 4th July is that two-bloc politics are inadequate. There are any number of reasons why voters chose not to support either of the largest parties, but the outcome brings new variety in the representation from NI – and new freshness too. Of those who take their seats in the Commons, only seven are returning MPs.

Each one of Northern Ireland's 18 representatives will be conscious of the opportunity brought by this earthquake election and keen to play their part in exploiting it. Whether they do so in collaboration or in competition depends very much on how the new Government approaches the Union itself and its relationship with its neighbours.

Bringing People together or pulling them apart? What Facebook ads say about the NI campaign

While some commentators predicted that 2024 would be the first 'TikTok election', Facebook and Instagram were key battlegrounds for the main political parties. An estimated £4.2 million was spent on Meta election ads in the first month of the UK General Election campaign; Labour's adverts tended to focus on their plans for government while the Conservatives sought to convince voters not to give Keir Starmer a large majority and made disputed claims about his plans to increase taxes. Facebook, in particular, was viewed as a vital platform to reach voters aged 25-49 years old. This was especially true in Northern Ireland, where the platform is frequently ranked as the fourth most popular source of news among adults.

While elections in the divided society have historically been characterised as de facto sectarian headcounts, the 2024 General Election presented significant challenges to political unionism. There was much contention, on and offline, about the 'Irish Sea Border' created by the UK's departure from the EU, amid some clamour among nationalists and republicans for a referendum on Irish unity. The future of the power-sharing Executive was again called into question by the resignation of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) leader Jeffrey Donaldson after he was charged with historic sex offences. His successor Gavin Robinson faced the prospect of losing ground to the moderate Alliance Party in key constituencies such as East Belfast and Lagan Valley. Meanwhile, Sinn Féin, the largest nationalist party, were poised to become the largest Northern Irish party despite their policy of not taking their seats in Westminster.

So, what do online election ads tell us about the election campaign in Northern Ireland? Data from the Meta Ad library provides some insight into the digital strategies of the main parties. First, Sinn Féin had the highest number of likes for their party page and were amongst the highest spenders on ads. In terms of individual candidates, the Social Democratic and Labour Party leader Colum Eastwood recorded the highest ad spend, followed by Sinn Féin's John Finucane and Chris Hazzard. Pro-union parties were also investing in their respective digital campaigns, albeit not to the same degree as their nationalist counterparts. The hardline Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV), who accused the DUP of overselling the deal to restore power-sharing in February 2024, promoted candidates such as Ron McDowell in the Strangford constituency. It should also be noted that the Alliance Party paid £19.4K for ads between 30th May and 28th June, placing it just behind Sinn Féin in terms of its spending total.

Second, there was a noticeable difference in the rhetoric used by unionist and nationalist parties. The DUP's North Belfast candidate Phillip Brett was depicted as a "new voice from a new generation" in an ad implicitly criticising John Finucane for not taking his seat at Westminster. The largest unionist party urged voters to send Brett alongside a 'strong team of pro-union MPs' to represent Northern Ireland in the UK Parliament. The TUV ads emphasised the "trust and honesty" of its candidates whilst accusing the DUP of misleading unionists over the Windsor Framework. Such negative campaigning was in sharp contrast to the more hopeful visions of the future offered by other candidates. The word 'change' was used by Alliance, SDLP and Sinn Féin candidates who emphasised their progressive credentials and how they would represent both communities. The ad for Pat Cullen, Sinn Féin's candidate in Fermanagh and South Tyrone, pledged to "build a better future for everyone" and urged citizens to make their vote count. A similar theme emerged from Alliance leader Naomi Long's ad, which encouraged voters to "help lead that change". In this respect, the former members of the 2019 'Remain Alliance' appeared to be drawing a contrast between their vision of a more inclusive society and the negative messaging of the unionist parties who had supported Brexit.

Whether these ads actually changed hearts and minds during the election campaign remains to be seen. Researchers have already cast doubt on whether unsolicited political messages on social media are any different than flyers posted through letterboxes. There have also been studies suggesting that they have limited effect on turnout. Moreover, as I argued previously, issues such as the crisis in Northern Ireland's public services and perceptions of the 'Irish Sea Border' are more likely to have influenced the voting behaviour of those entering polling stations on 4 July. Nevertheless, analysis of the Meta Ad library shows that the main political parties in the region see value in using platforms like Facebook and Instagram to target key demographics during elections. Perhaps next time we will see Northern Ireland's first 'TikTok election'.

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A new dawn for levelling up?

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The pledge to "level up the country" featured strongly in the 2019 general election campaign. Together with the promise to "get Brexit done", it allowed Boris Johnson to make significant inroads in traditional "red" constituencies in the North and the Midlands, and win the contest. Five years later, many things have changed – but not in the right direction. Several ministers committed to deliver change and address socio-economic divides under the banner of levelling up. A White Paper was heralded as the key to economic renewal through devolution. A plethora of new funding were created to reach the same goal. Yet, none of these have worked. Regional inequalities not only have continued to persist, but they have widened. For the most part, as some warned from the start, levelling up has remained an empty slogan.

The campaign narrative of the 2024 general election shifted considerably. While the Conservatives fortunes unravelled at the seams, Labour presented itself as the party of change, able to deliver what the Tories repeatedly promised, but never achieved: growth and prosperity for all people and places. In presenting their own version of levelling up, though, Labour were far more cautious: their manifesto pledges focussed on change and growth, with little explicit focus on the issue of regional inequalities. Electoral strategy probably played a role in this: the architects of Labour's campaign knew that, to return to power, the party had to win support across the country, and not just in its traditional strongholds – often in left-behind places – that had turned blue in 2019. As the election results have shown, this strategy worked at the ballot box. Yet, to hold on to this victory, Keir Starmer's government will have to move quickly and deliver substantial results on the ground: a goal replete with opportunities as well as challenges.

On a policy level, the Labour manifesto's ambition to rebalance the economy and achieve growth across the country pointed to the need to embed a place-based approach in their strategy. Starmer's new government seems to have started on the right foot on this. Meeting with the leaders of the devolved nations and England's 12 metro-mayors in the first days in office sent a strong signal – showing that the new PM and his team want to move fast in developing stronger territorial relations across the country, sticking to their commitment to deepen and widen existing forms of devolution. Announcements regarding the development of Local Growth Plans as pillars of a new Industrial Strategy, as well as the creation of a Council of the Nations and the Regions also suggests the government is keen to put spades in the ground from the start on its commitment to deepen and widen devolution, while improving collaboration and dialogue with all the devolved institutions. The devil, as ever, will be in the details. For example, to be able to deliver change in their communities and shift the dial from the competitive approach developed by the previous government, England's metro-mayors will need longer-term funding, with greater flexibility on how these are spent. Beyond a good first meeting in Downing Street, whether and how this will happen remains unclear. Finally, while warm words have been spent to highlight the importance of reviving local government across the country, finding a clear reform strategy that is able to resurrect the sector – and the key services it provides – after a damning decade of austerity that has left it on its knees will require a clear plan and an amount of funding that won't be readily available.

On a political level, the "nation-wide" strategy deployed in the campaign means the new government's parliamentary majority rest on a territorially widespread and very diverse and volatile set of seats – spanning economically moderate and socially conservative constituencies snatched from the Tories, progressive urban areas as well as places with high levels of deprivation. Furthermore, while the First Past the Post electoral system helped Labour win back support in its traditional heartlands in the North that supported Brexit and swung to the Conservatives in 2019, the fact that Reform got second in many of these places is a stark reminder that the "revenge of the places that don't matter" is far from being over. Addressing all these issues, while keeping together a coalition of such intense and conflicting worldviews, needs and expectations, will be no mean feat.

The emergence of such a fragmented, politically disillusioned and volatile political landscape is, in large part, the result of the previous government's failure to level up the country. One of Labour's key challenges to hold on to power will be to address the persistent inequalities that cut across the UK, and the resentment towards politics that comes with them – delivering a process of real change, tangible for all the constituencies that supported them. Acting swiftly, putting into practice a place-based approach to economic and social policy with devolution at its heart, will be key to achieving this. But can Starmer's government really embrace the changes needed?

Who defines Britain? National identity at the heart of the 2024 UK General Election

Earlier this year, *the Guardian* reported concerns raised by Labour Party members about campaign materials produced by its headquarters for local party use. These materials prominently featured images of the Union Jack flag at the expense of traditional Labour graphics, such as the red rose logo. What might have seemed like harmless aesthetic promotional decision, instead reflected a significant cultural shift for the Labour Party, and can tell us a lot about the state of British identity politics today.

There is historical context to Labour's traditional relationship with national symbols. The reservations that some on the Left hold with the historic use of the Union Jack as a campaigning tool by far-right parties is still palpable, as is the discomfort due to the association of the Union Jack as a symbol for colonial oppression and imperial ventures. Traditionally, the Union Jack has been the domain of the Conservative Party. But Labour officials defended the use of the Union Jack in a leaked strategy document, justifying the renewed emphasis on British values and alignment with the flag, claiming it was to target disillusioned voters. Newly elected Labour Members of Parliament such as Mike Tapp have since argued that the Union Jack has been 'hijacked' for right-wing purposes and that narratives of exclusionary and divisive agendas must be rejected. Such sentiments echo the articulation of a modernised Britishness under Tony Blair's New Labour in the Cool Britannia era.

There is some credence to Tapp's statements; it is widely acknowledged amongst social psychologists and political scientists that the nation lies at the foundation of solidarity, representing one of the strongest motives behind a large majority of political mobilisation and action. The essence of the nation is largely a psychological bond between communities of people characterised by common elements. These common elements can be a complex construct made up of several interrelated layers consisting of the ethnic, cultural, territorial, the historical and the psychological. They work to create a cohesive whole, facilitated by shared group histories, cultural or political traditions, myths, and beliefs which psychologically bind them together in what Benedict Anderson famously described as an "imagined community". It is these elements that allow national identity, unity, and pride to become such persistent and powerful forces in modern day politics, and gives impetus to other aspects of political life, from influential movements and ideologies to compliance in paying tax.

However, national unity in Britain has faced significant challenges over the last decade and has been tested by issues such as UK devolution, increasing globalisation, Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic. In the background of culture wars, national identity has become increasingly contentious, fuelling a rise in identity politics. Right-wing political parties have leveraged identity politics, exploiting identity conflicts as a mobilising factor by pitting groups against each other based on social and cultural values, such as national identity and immigration, rather than instrumentalising traditional economic redistribution divides.

As Sobolewska and Ford have argued in their work, these conflicts revolve around identity because they fundamentally address the 'us' versus 'them' dichotomy. They focus on differing perceptions of 'us', various fears and prejudices about perceived threatening outgroups ('them'), and polarised debates about social changes that redefine who 'we' are and how this should evolve.

But this extends beyond Britishness, despite the changing political geography of the UK through devolution for Scotland and Wales, The Labour Party has been reluctant to adopt England's St George's flag in their party branding and visual communications, despite incorporating both Scottish and Welsh flags. Academic commentators have pointed out this was also evident during Keir Starmer's entrance to Downing Street, which saw some carefully selected flags of Scotland and Wales present in the crowds; however, with no St George's flag to be seen. This has been met with backlash from right-wing media pundits claiming that England was 'snubbed'. Englishness as a political force is one not to be underestimated, as Henderson and Wyn-Jones have shown, English nationalism has the power to further destabilise British politics, as English resentments grow at an asymmetric devolution settlement they deem unfair. This sentiment of English national democracy, social conservatism, and hostility to immigration is a worldview which is shown to be popular by the Reform party's significant vote share, and should not be ignored.

It is now up to the Labour Party, in power, to expand on what Britishness, and Englishness, is today. There has been a clear attempt made under Starmer's Labour to redefine Britain, or at least, show that the party is willing to engage in Britishness. What comes out of this analysis is a clear continuity in the appeal to identity. Ultimately, the effort to reclaim the identity of a unified Britain needs to go beyond aesthetic decisions. In appealing to disillusioned groups, attention must be paid to the wider stories of loss and class de-composition in the background of long-lasting neoliberal agendas, asymmetrical devolution, and heightening economic crises, which illuminate understandings of collective identities, cohesiveness, and national solidarity in the UK.

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Parties and the campaign

A changed but over-staged Labour Party and the political marketing weaknesses behind Starmer's win

Everyone who understands political marketing properly knows that the campaign is the least important. Instead it's the years running up to the election when parties need to do their market research and create a product that responds to voter wants, ensure it is achievable, and wrap a positive brand around that forges a close connection between leader and the voters.

There's no doubt that Labour understood most of this in 2024. Just as Tony Blair created New Labour in 1997, Keir Starmer created Changed Labour. They offered 5 missions, which broadly responded to voters top concerns. Just before the campaign started, they identified 6 First Steps for Change: deliver economic stability, cut NHS waiting times, set up Great British Energy, crack down on antisocial behaviour, recruit 6500 new teachers and added one on immigration - 'launch a new Border Security Command' - to respond to voters' rising concern. They refused to be drawn on promising the earth, with Starmer noting he was not going to offer any gimmicks. They repeated that they were a Changed Labour Party.

But what was not good political marketing was Starmer's inability to communicate what he would do in government. He would repeatedly highlight what the Conservatives did wrong instead of outlining Labour's plans. Even in the campaign, when journalists – and voters in TV audiences – asked him directly to say what he would do, he would default to attacking the Tories. Failing to say what Labour would do in government seemed at best inauthentic and at worst as if he might be hiding something.

Additionally, Starmer's brand had none of the stardust of the Blair era. He was over-staged, and had a dry and unemotional way of speaking. His likeability was low – YouGov polling showed that as of June 2024, just 31% thought he was likeable, only 5% higher than Sunak. Worse still, 44% disliked him. Higher ratings than Sunak, but not very high for an incoming Prime Minister.

Whilst there is no doubt voters were completely dissatisfied with the Conservatives for failed delivery and incompetence, Labour's failure to focus on their own political product created increasing voter frustration. Turnout in the election was lower than normal, reflecting the lack of satisfaction with either major party. Any swing in the vote to Labour was more in Scotland than the rest of the UK, and arguably reflected dissatisfaction with the devolved SNP government rather than positive support for Scottish Labour.

Does this matter? Changed Labour has after all got the keys to Number 10 and Starmer is now Prime Minister.

Well it does, because the election result does not mean there is strong support for their specific policies because the Labour campaign failed to talk about them, and votes mostly reflect dissatisfaction with the Conservatives and SNP. Additionally, Starmer's lack of popularity levels most new leaders have means he has no support to draw on when his proposals meet blockages in parliament and public consultation, as they inevitably will. Labour also failed to create quick wins they can deliver quickly to build up voter trust. Whilst the First steps sound nice they lack specifics, are vague, and will take time to achieve. They were also barely mentioned in the election campaign, so it is doubtful voters are even that aware of them.

There is one possible hope. That Starmer's quiet and serious nature suits being Prime Minister more than opposition, and will, over time, develop a positive brand relationship with voters who come to desire more substance than style from their politicians. In the first weeks of being in power, new brand narratives hung around a government of service and national renewal were repeated by the Prime Minister and his ministers. This may position Starmer's Changed Labour Party as a Committed Government, working slowly and surely, to improve life in Britain.

But voters still want delivery, and not just policies or promises but specifically outcomes that positively impact their lives. They still want houses to live in, a health service to make them well when they get ill, and money to buy food at the supermarket. Recent overseas Labour leaders such as Jacinda Ardern in New Zealand who had much more positive brands to begin with, suffered massive drops in popularity after winning landslides as they failed to build the houses they promised. And the default position of what the Tories did wrong is only going to work for a short time – if at all.

Never mind Changed Labour, in government it will be Challenged Labour. In opposition, the core political marketing task is to design a political product that responds to voters' needs. But in government the core task is to deliver that political product and actually improve people's lives. That isn't something that can be staged. It just has to be done.

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To leaflet or not to leaflet? The question of election leafleting in Sunderland Central

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Leaflets are easily available and widely accessible, yet their centrality to the election process is often overlooked.

Sunderland returns two members of parliament. The current seats were formed by the 2010 reorganisation of parliamentary constituencies. The city has returned only Labour MPs since 1964. Sunderland is regularly first to complete its general election count after the polls close. It was also the first to declare its EU referendum result, and although the 'leave' majority was by no means the largest in the UK, rapid reporting gave Sunderland prominence, helping it to earning it the media accolade of 'Brexit City'.

In 2024, a new Labour candidate for Sunderland Central was announced following the retirement of Julie Elliott, who had held the seat since 2010. Lewis Atkinson had been a local activist but was not widely known outside the constituency party. How has Atkinson been 'marketed' and how have the other parties faced the challenge of leafleting in the face of almost certain defeat?

Only Labour sent out leaflets that profiled the candidate. In the neighbouring constituency of Houghton and Sunderland South, the incumbent candidate was well-known and constituents received a 'letter' from Sir Keir Starmer with a generic message of support for the candidate.

Probably designed to introduce Atkinson to the wider populus, the trifold Sunderland Central leaflet also contained a 'letter', but this was from Atkinson, using a font resembling handwriting to imply authenticity and sincerity. The text begins with a statement of love for the city and its people, followed by a declaration of humility – "it is the honour of my life to be the Labour candidate". Collective pronouns produce a sense of community: "this government has failed us"; "we need change". A shift to exclusive pronouns relates to the party: "we have a plan". The text finishes with direct address to the reader: "I am asking you to vote Labour".

There is then testimony from a minor celebrity who lives in the constituency – a well-known former local newspaper journalist. Finally, the third fold offers main Labour policies: one relating to the NHS gives Atkinson the opportunity to reference his credentials ("I worked in the local NHS for 19 years"); then a more generic list of optimistic policies.

The leaflet is illustrated with photos of Atkinson in clearly-identifiable Sunderland Central locations, ensuring his identity is linked with that of the constituency, framed in the party colour, with the Union Jack cutting across the leaflet corners.

The only other party to distribute a leaflet in Sunderland Central was Reform. This was highly generic, with a white box at the top containing the candidate's name: Chris Enyon. The leaflet was dominated on one side with photos of party leader Nigel Farage and party chair, Richard Tice, both looking optimistically upwards towards the candidate's name, with Tice appearing to point towards it. There was no further information about the candidate or the constituency, but highlighted polices relating to immigration. This leaflet is dominantly blue with a feint Union Jack emblem across the whole page, showing a clear link with Conservative semiotic properties.

For more tailored material about the Reform candidate, voters need to consult the party's website. Like Atkinson, Enyon emphasises his local links, but also writes "I am not a career politician parachuted into Sunderland". The other four candidates are Sunderland residents, so where is this implied contrast directed? Is it meant to sow seeds of doubt as to their local credentials? Like Atkinson, there is a collective cause in the use of pronouns: "Sunderland's best days could well be ahead of us if we are willing to push". The links with Reform's policies are personalised to Sunderland – tax thresholds are lifted for "Sunderland workers"; creating jobs "in Sunderland". The mantra of "zero immigration" that appears on the generic Reform leaflet is repeated, referring to "our borders", but then a shift to the exclusive pronoun in "our fully costed plan".

Thus Reform and Labour used the same strategies to create a sense of community through collective pronouns, local messages, Union flags, but Reform also shows a clear link with the Conservatives through the use of colour.

The curious fact of there being only two party leaflets distributed across both constituencies might indicate that the other parties were relying on online representation. The web profile of the Conservative Westminster candidate for Sunderland Central, Gregory Peacock, has not been updated since 2021 and shows him only in his current role, ending with local knowledge that "will make me a strong and competent councillor".

The two main parties – Labour and Conservatives – are taking very different approaches, with Labour keen to champion a new candidate in Sunderland Central, but less enthusiastic about promoting the well-known incumbent in Houghton and Sunderland South. The Conservatives, on the other hand, are hardly bothering to contest the seat, with a candidate who appears in name only. The gap in this election would seem to be filled by Reform, perhaps opportunistically harking back to the 'Brexit City' accolade.

Beyond 'my dad was a toolmaker': what it's really like to be working class in parliament

Most people following British politics would probably know by now that Keir Starmer's father was a toolmaker. He has talked many times about his working-class background and the way it informs his politics. Politicians from the other side of the political spectrum have also ramped up the rhetoric around their "blue collar" credentials. Rishi Sunak clearly recognised the need to make his own attempt when asked in a TV interview if he's ever had to "go without" anything and responded that he didn't have Sky TV as a child. Starmer's own version of this story is that his family's phone was cut off in his youth.

It's easy to see why the two party leaders are engaging in this hardship competition. The political alienation of working-class voters over recent decades stems at least in part from a lack of representation. There are a decreasing number of working-class politicians they can relate to in parliament and it makes sense for politicians to fill this void however they can, including by highlighting the "working-class" elements of their biography at every opportunity.

At the same time, there is growing evidence that the class background of political elites does inform their outlook. In recent research, my colleagues and I interviewed 24 politicians who served as MPs at various points during the past 50 years. Bar one, they were no longer active politicians, so they had limited, if any, incentive to mobilise their class backgrounds for electoral purposes.

We found that their class origin – defined as the type of household they grew up in and what jobs their parents did – significantly shaped their political outlook. This was more important in influencing their politics than other factors in their life, such as the job they had done before entering parliament or the education they had received. The influence of class origins seemed particularly salient in the case of former Labour MPs. As one of them put it:

My grandfather joined the Labour Party at its creation in about 1900, a trade unionist. He started work in a pit at the age of 10. And I never forget that…when I looked at developing countries, you could see children like my grandfather.

Even those from working-class backgrounds who ended up serving as Conservative MPs presented themselves as more sympathetic to working-class interests than party colleagues from more privileged backgrounds. As recalled by one of them:

Mrs. Thatcher had married a multimillionaire oil family chap, so she'd had nannies and all that…my mother used to go to work at 5:30 in the morning, as a cleaner, so she could be back home before we got up for breakfast. I think if you're from a very wealthy, privileged background, and you entered parliament because your family's been there for generations too and all the rest of it, there's no way you can see things in the same light.

In other words, class origin seems to have affected where these politicians placed themselves on the ideological spectrum of their party.

Feeling working class, voting working class?

Things get more complicated when it comes to actual decision making in parliament, however. While some of our interviewees recalled episodes when they defied the party whip to follow their political convictions because they believed it necessary to represent the interests of working-class voters, often, the former would override the latter.

For example, a former Labour MP justified his vote against austerity measures in one instance based on his rootedness in the working-class constituency he was representing at the time:

These weren't just people that you happened to represent, these were your friends and your neighbours that you were living alongside who were experiencing this. And they knew that I was one of them … you had people from Eton, from Oxbridge, who really just didn't care.

It mattered, though, that his party opposed that measure. When Labour decided to abstain on another austerity measure, the same MP complied with the party whip to vote in the other direction. Doing otherwise, he argued, would have meant being a "virtue-signalling rebel".

The path from attitudes to action may sometimes also be thwarted by certain personal characteristics that are significantly shaped by class, such as a person's level of self-confidence. That appears to be particularly the case with MPs from working-class origins, who may fear jeopardising their upward social mobility. As one of our interviewees said:

You are always more risk-averse, I think, coming from not having wealth ... I needed my job to pay the mortgage. I didn't have money to buy special advisers and support … You can't afford to be a swashbuckling cavalier.

Class origins may be decisive in shaping ideological outlook but not necessarily behaviour once elected, when the party line becomes a factor.

This all suggests that someone like Starmer is in the best possible position to enable politicians to truly represent working-class people. As leader and prime minister, he shapes his party's line on most issues. He is able to ensure that his MPs don't have to choose between party and ideology.

The signs so far, however, are not good. Starmer has already dropped several pro-working-class pledges while invoking his working-class background in public speeches. It may be that dropping those pledges are a pragmatic choice to win over more moderate voters. However, it may also be that it is reflective of his real politics, and that the regular references to his working-class roots amount to little more than an attempt to boost his political legitimacy.

Indeed, "performing ordinariness", is now a common feature of contemporary British elites, as we've seen in this election. Whether it translates into actions that benefit working-class people is a different matter.

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The unforced errors of foolish men: gender, race and the calculus of harm

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The day after the general election was called, I began to make a few notes on my phone as I listened to, and watched, the news but nearly a week in, I was feeling a bit glum because I'd barely scribbled fifty words. But then *Dianegate* exploded onto the news agenda and I knew I'd found 'the one' or indeed 'the two', as it turned out. The political treatment of Diane Abbott and Fazia Shaheen manifested a casual if perhaps unintentional (a generous interpretation) gendered racism which masqueraded as an ethics of propriety which mostly went unchallenged by the mainstream media.

It started with an article published as an 'exclusive' on the front page of *The Times* on Tuesday 28th May, where those notoriously slippery 'Labour sources' said that Abbott was going to be barred from standing as a Labour candidate. Much was made (then and indeed in subsequent news items) of the fact that Abbott was Britain's first black woman MP with a 37-year record of serving her constituency of Hackney North and Stoke Newington. Her fall from grace was clearly news to Abbott who took to X the following day, writing that while she was obviously happy to have the whip restored, she was also, and showing considerable restraint in the circumstances, "dismayed" to hear reports that she had been barred from standing. On the same day, Fazia Shaheen, who had been selected to stand as Labour's candidate for Chingford and Woodford Green two years earlier, had received an email from the Party saying that she had been de-selected and she then appeared on *Newsnight* that evening to tell her story.

What I found rather perplexing was that almost all news stories focused on their shared political leaning, suggesting that this was the reason for their dismissal, that they were casualties of 'the purge of the Left'. To be sure, Shaheen did mention being a socialist (as a 'bad' thing) several times in her *Newsnight* interview but she also talked about her experiences of Islamophobia both within and outside of the Party. Although Abbott resisted making a similar point about racism, she has received more hate-fuelled abuse than any other politician, ever, most recently from billionaire Tory donor Frank Hester with his vile remarks. He subsequently apologised, albeit saying that his comments did not relate to her race or gender. Er, what???? Notwithstanding that news stories which lead with clickbait headlines and interviews which can be clipped into micro-content for the socials are the mode du jour, this lack of journalistic nuance is a worry.

Framing the Abbott-Shaheen debacle as merely a clash of political ideology meant that day after day, Starmer had to talk about the primacy of the NEC to approve candidates – it's nothing to do with me, guv – while so many other points which are important individually but even more so collectively, were mostly ignored. One is that Abbott and Shaheen are both women. Two is that they are both women of colour. Three is that they were both accused of a form of reverse racism - in both cases by expressing or liking sentiments construed as antisemitic – while no acknowledgement was given of their own embodied experiences of actual racism. Four is that unnamed sources (young white men?) briefed against them, leaking their scoops to the media before telling candidates themselves. Five is that their very embodiment of intersectionality, that is, their race, sex and class position (class here standing as a proxy for political leaning) was entirely missing from news narratives.

As could be expected, supporters of both Abbott and Shaheen were quick to organise, Abbott speaking her truth to power at a rally on 30th May and Shaheen doing the same the day after. Unsurprisingly, prominent women of colour on both sides of the political spectrum wasted no time in using their media platforms to articulate their disgust. Baroness (Sayeeda) Warsi used her column in *inews* to say that "Diane's treatment at the hands of some in the Labour Party has been difficult to watch" (29th May). Appearing on *Sunday with Laura Kuenssberg* on 2nd June, Baroness (Shami) Chakrabarti described a "…. sordid week of unauthorised anonymous briefings by overgrown schoolboys in suits with their feet under the table…"

On 31st May, Sir Keir was finally bounced, not least by Angela Rayner's very public endorsement, into saying that "trailblazer" Abbott could stand for Labour. Meanwhile, Shaheen was formally replaced as PPC by Shama Tatler: call me an old cynic and absolutely no disrespect to Tatler, but replacing one Asian woman with another seemed more than a little calculated. On 5th June, Shaheen resigned from the Labour Party and launched her campaign to stand as an independent. On 6 July, Abbott was returned as an MP but Shaheen was not although she gave Iain Duncan-Smith and Tatler a good run for their money. While it most definitely was not the *Sun* wot won (and/ or lost it) for them, again, most news outlets did very little to help either of them. Plus ça change, sad emoji face.

Election 2024 and rise of Reform UK: the beginning of the end of the Conservatives?

In 2024, the Conservative Party, the UK's most historically successful political party, experienced its greatest loss of seats in a general election for about 200 years. Quite a contrast to the party's large parliamentary majority in 2019. The 2024 Election saw a total Tory wipeout in Wales and massive losses in England, amid sharp increases in vote share for Reform UK. Under the leadership of Nigel Farage, Reform UK is a populist-right movement that evolved from the single-issue Brexit Party.

On Times Radio, former Conservative MP Nigel Evans described Reform UK as the "silent snipers". So, what does the rise of Reform mean for the future and survival of the Conservatives? What are the main factors contributing to Conservative decline?

This succinct analysis focuses on change within the party, since 2010, across three key factors: the efficacy of party organisation; leadership; and campaigns. It argues that, despite the 2019 election result, Tory decline is embedded in over a decade of questionable choices, approaches and actions that culminate in a potentially existential electoral decline. The decline is evident in the 2024 result and rise of Reform UK through a significant swing vote to Reform from the Conservatives, leading to Reform UK winning five parliamentary seats and finishing ahead of the Tories in many other constituencies.

When compared to the general elections of 2010, 2015, 2017 and 2024, the 2019 General Election was an outlier election in that the country seemingly voted for the central Conservative campaign issue to "Get Brexit Done". With that aim in mind, the then Brexit (now Reform) Party did not stand candidates against the Conservatives. After Brexit was "done" in 2020, the Conservatives, under Boris Johnson, became plagued by ethical scandals during and beyond the Covid period. Johnson's demise as leader was followed by Liz Truss's short leadership of the party, which became famous for crashing the UK economy. Within weeks, the Conservatives' reputation for fiscal responsibility and being the natural party of government was largely consigned to history. According to Farage, consistent post-Brexit Tory failure triggered the evolution of Reform UK.

After years of internal Brexit machinations; claims of Covid corruption; a cost of living crisis; and the party's approach to small boat channel crossings, Rishi Sunak inherited a damaged, divided and toxic party brand, plagued by significant failures in leadership since David Cameron's 2016 EU referendum gamble. In 2010, party organisation, under Cameron, was enhanced by an influx of new members, many of whom were under the age of 30. These young Conservatives injected energy into the party organisation and campaigns and brought a new fluid digital component to the grassroots campaign. In 2015, the party made its first steps in disenfranchising many younger supporters through centralising and controlling its digital campaigns. From 2012, there was a shift towards a similar centralised approach to eroding the autonomy of local Conservative associations, whose members were framed as "swivel eyed loons". This contempt for ordinary party members, younger people (university students in particular) and a ruthless top-down reorganisation of many Conservative associations continued to be a damaging if latent characteristic of party organisation in the run-up to 2024.

By the 2017 election, the party under Theresa May, had significantly disenfranchised its younger contingent and was dwarfed by Labour's online campaign activity. Despite May's lacklustre campaign and noticeable decline in Tory support, the Conservatives limped on with a reduced majority. May's inability to secure a Brexit deal with the EU, and maintain party discipline, triggered one of the most disunited periods in party postwar history; and, importantly, Farage's launch of the Brexit (now Reform) Party. The five Conservative premiers from 2010 to 2024 made a series of questionable choices and actions, from initiating a divisive EU referendum to proroguing Parliament and holding Downing Street parties during Covid lockdowns; and from crashing the economy to leaving D-Day celebrations early during an election. Combined it shows 14 years of Conservative instability and questionable leadership.

The damage to parliamentary politics because of Brexit was eclipsed by the enormity of Covid. Yet, the damage to the Conservatives in the form of increasing factionalisation was simmering under the surface of a persistently divided party, which, following the EU referendum, plagued all Conservative premiers, including Sunak. While Sunak's 2024 campaign is a textbook example of how not to fight an election, an improved Tory campaign is unlikely to have made much difference. The result, especially considering the decline in Labour vote share, and low national turnout, signals less a Labour win and rather more to voter repulsion at the Conservatives.

The real electoral success story is the expansion of the smaller parties. Reform's spread of vote poses a tangible threat to the existence of the Conservative Party in 2029. The last 14 years of Conservative government has been characterised by a consistent thread of arrogance, imperiousness, contempt and incompetence, which has now been humbled by the threat of electoral wipeout into the future. The Tories would do well to reflect on the above; shift back to the centre ground; adopt a more sober approach to party discipline; and engage its historic pragmatism to unify around the leader and overhaul the party away from disunity and factionalism.

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The weakening of the Blue Wall

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In the run-up to the 2024 general election, several demographic, economic and political trends had suggested that many erstwhile safe Conservative seats in southern England, including some previously safe seats in south-coast 'retirement towns', were under threat from the resurgent Liberal Democrats, while others were at risk from a Labour Party which had moved towards the ideological centre under Sir Keir Starmer's leadership, and which was therefore viewed as 'safe' enough for some disillusioned 'moderate' Conservative voters to support.

One relatively recent trend which threatened to erode the Conservatives' hitherto hegemony in the South of England was a steady influx of younger voters, partly due to the post-Covid shift to working-from-home, and partly due to unaffordable house prices in some previously popular cities. With younger, often professional or 'creative', workers increasingly working 'remotely', sundry satellite or seaside towns have witnessed a shift in their age profile, coupled with more 'progressive' or socially liberal values. This population shift has been compounded by the increasing unaffordability of housing in previously popular and vibrant cities like London, and Brighton. For example, the escalating cost of accommodation in bohemian Brighton has prompted some younger professionals to move along the Sussex coast, either east to Bexhill and Hastings, or west to Shoreham and Worthing, where relatively cheaper accommodation has facilitated a process of gentrification, and *inter alia* a cultural renewal and vibrancy in previously sedate retirement towns.

To compound these recent demographic trends, a further major challenge to the Conservatives in the 2024 general election was the increased prevalence and sophistication of tactical voting, with two particular developments acquiring importance. First, it is reported that sundry digital and social media campaigns like Swap My Vote encouraged tactical voting and informal 'vote-swapping', these often using graphics to illustrate which party was most likely to defeat the incumbent Conservative MP in specific marginal constituencies.

Second, there were reportedly numerous informal – never officially admitted – electoral pacts between the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats in key marginal constituencies, entailing a tacit agreement to cooperate by *not* actively campaigning against each other in a constituency where only one of them has a realistic chance of ousting the Conservatives.

Ultimately, both Labour and the Liberal Democrats won dozens of Conservative seats in southern England, reducing much of the Blue Wall to a pile of rubble. Some of these gains are highlighted in Table 1.

Some of these results are remarkable, such as Labour's victories in Worthing East & Shoreham, and Worthing West, both of which had historically been rock-solid Conservative seats with a large elderly population, but which have recently witnessed an influx of younger professionals and 'creatives' who have been priced-out of nearby Brighton, or/and are working from home, and therefore do not need live in or very near London. A similar demographic shift also partly accounts for Labour's remarkable victory in towns like Weston-Super-Mare.

However, the natural jubilation of Labour and the Liberal Democrats at their considerable electoral successes in southern England needed to be tempered by two caveats. First, in some of the above seats, victory was achieved with only a small increase in votes compared to 2019. Indeed, in a few seats, the victorious Labour or Liberal Democrat candidate actually polled fewer votes than in 2019, but still won because the Conservative vote fell even more. Such are the vagaries of the First Past the Post electoral system.

The second important caveat is that both Labour and the Liberal Democrats benefitted from the defection of many Conservative voters to Reform UK. For example, in Eastleigh, the Liberal Democrats beat the Conservatives by just 1,500 votes, but the Reform UK challenger polled just over 6,000 votes. In other words, if – and it is obviously pure speculation – Reform UK had not contested this seat, and most of their votes had instead been cast for the Conservative candidate, the latter would probably have won this seat.

The Blue Wall in southern England has indeed crumbled, with the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats making unprecedented gains, and in some instances winning erstwhile Conservative seats for the first time. Obviously, several factors contributed to this transformation, such as simple disillusion or disgust with the Conservatives, the renewal of the Labour Party under Sir Keir Starmer, and changing demographics in some constituencies, as an influx of younger professionals and 'creatives, often working-from-home and thus enjoying more flexibility in where they live, has rendered some former Conservative-voting towns more 'progressive' or 'liberal', both culturally and politically. However, the intervention of Reform UK also played a significant, and unforeseen, role, in weakening the Conservatives' former hegemony in much of Southern England.

Labour gains	**Liberal Democrat gains**
Aldershot	Cambridgeshire South
Banbury	Cheltenham
Basingstoke	Chesham and Amersham
Camborne and Redruth	Chichester
Cambridgeshire North West	Chippenham
Cornwall South East	Devon South
Dorset South	Didcot & Wantage
Dover & Deal	Eastbourne
Folkestone and Hythe	Eastleigh
Gloucester	Ely and Cambridgeshire East
Hampshire North East	Epsom and Ewell
Hastings and Rye	Frome and Somerset East
Hemel Hempstead	North East Hampshire
Hertfordshire Noth East	Glastonbury & Somerton
Hitchin	Guildford
Isle of Wight West	Henley & Thame
Milton Keynes Central	Honiton & Sidmouth
Milton Keynes North	Horsham
Portsmouth North	Lewes
Reading West & Mid-Berkshire	Maidenhead
Rochester and Strood	Melksham and Devizes
Somerset North	Mid Sussex
Somerset North East & Hanham	Newbury
Southampton Itchen	Newton Abbot
St Austell & Newquay	South Cotswolds
Stevenage	St Ives
Stroud	St Neots & Mid-Cambridgeshire
Swindon North	Stratford-on-Avon
Swindon South	Taunton & Wellington
Truro & Falmouth	Tiverton & Minehead
Welwyn Hatfield	Torbay
Weston-Super-Mare	Tunbridge Wells
Worcester	Wells & Mendip Hills
Worthing East & Shoreham	Winchester
Worthing West	Woking
Wycombe	Yeovil

Source: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election/2024/uk/constituencies

Table 1: Examples of Labour and Liberal Democrats gains from the Conservatives in southern England

The Conservative party, 1832-2024: an obituary

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The Conservative Party, which was finally pronounced dead from multiple unnatural causes on July 5 2024, was born in 1832. It was the product of an alliance between the Tory party (established in the 1680s) and members of the rival Whig party. Both wanted to defend the existing political and social order against the advocates of radical reform.

Strange as it might now appear, the party was once very popular and respected, even by its opponents. Educated at Eton and Oxford, it established a reputation for governing competence which allowed it to bounce back from serious setbacks, notably the landslide Labour victory of 1945.

However, success came at a cost. From an early age, the party had to accommodate the kind of changes which it had been set up to resist. Initially determined to preserve the social and political influence of the aristocracy, in its declining years it pretended to despise 'posh boys' and to love working people in the north of England which it had never visited. Having long subsisted on dubious financial contributions, at the very end it was rumoured to be eking out a living by betting on the date of its own demise.

The Conservative Party could not prevent the introduction of universal suffrage, which its original leaders had denounced as a recipe for national disaster. Logically, the arrival of democracy in the years after the First World War, and the spread of the franchise beyond the most wealthy citizens, should have brought the party's life to a natural end. It owed its survival, as the main electoral opponent of the Labour Party, chiefly to an ill-timed and long-lasting feud between the Liberal leaders H.H. Asquith and David Lloyd George.

Under Stanley Baldwin and former Liberal Winston Churchill, the Conservative party developed an appeal to the public that was later seen in the tradition of "one nation conservatism". This centrist approach served the party well until 1975, when Margaret Thatcher was elected as its leader.

Thatcher argued that the party's tendency to compromise was a vice rather than a virtue. She believed her opponents within the party were little better than socialists. She presented "Thatcherite" views as true conservatism, although her divisive economic approach was inspired by the doctrinaire writings of 19th century liberals.

For the unifying "one nation" platform, Thatcher substituted a pugilistic brand of nationalism which she came to personify after the 1982 Falklands conflict. The electoral formula worked, after a fashion, until Thatcher's deposition in 1990.

The end of the cold war debunked the notion that the Conservatives had restored Britain's former global status. Unwilling to acknowledge their country's subservience to the United States, the party's dominant nationalist faction could now only rage against reality by identifying the European Union, and post-war immigration, as the twin culprits for the depletion of British political influence and cultural uniformity.

Thatcher's successor John Major, was the luckless legatee of her unsustainable contradictions – and a ready scapegoat for the numerous sleazy episodes which had taken place under her watch. Festering internal divisions forced Major and future leaders to prioritise the party's survival over the national interest. Like a punch-drunk boxer, the Conservative party dragged itself from the canvas after its pummelling in the 1997 General Election, but with eyes which were not so much glazed as swivelling with frustrated ideological fervour.

In January 2013, David Cameron, who had sought in vain to revive the one nation approach, felt compelled to promise an in-out referendum on EU membership. Far from reducing the party's temperature, this gesture only aggravated the underlying malaise.

A lengthy illness

The Conservative party has presented a sorry spectacle to sympathetic observers in its undignified post-Brexit dying days. It became prone to hallucinations, first believing that Boris Johnson could be a successful prime minister then replacing him with Liz Truss. Choosing a Thatcher-impersonator as leader could only seem rational to a party which had dwindled into a Thatcher tribute band.

In 2019, the party had been kept alive by Labour's generous decision to give itself a leader who was almost equally improbable. After the Johnson and Truss interlude, however, most Britons decided that it was time to put the Conservative Party out of its misery. Even as a vehicle for right-wing populism it left something to be desired in comparison with the real bad boys of Brexit.

The Conservative Party will lie in state in Westminster Hall, close to the place where its recent leaders have lied so brazenly on its behalf. The funeral cortege will pass through the scenes of the party's greatest days – the Carlton Club, Tamworth, Grantham, and Barnard Castle, where its remains will be interred after readings from the book of St Margaret: "Where there is discord, may we make things a lot worse;" "U-turn if you want to: the party's not returning."

No flowers, please: donations should be sent to Nigel Farage, c/o Reform UK inc.

Bouncing back: the Liberal Democrat campaign

The 2024 general election represented a remarkable comeback for the Liberal Democrats. Less than a decade on from the coalition and the 2015 election debacle, Sir Ed Davey's party reclaimed third-party status in the House of Commons with 72 seats – the largest Liberal or Liberal Democrat total since the 1920s. The party's success in ousting Conservative MPs across large swathes of southern England vindicated Davey's exuberant but highly disciplined approach to campaigning.

In planning their 2024 campaign, the Liberal Democrats had four major advantages over 2017 and 2019. Firstly, the 2019 election had created a well-defined electoral battleground, with the party in second place (on the revised boundaries) in 98 seats – 85 of which were held by the Conservatives. Secondly, Sir Keir Starmer's election as Labour leader – and Labour's subsequent policy shifts – made floating voters in these seats less concerned by the prospect of a Labour government. Thirdly, by-elections and local elections showed that Labour and Liberal Democrat supporters were increasingly willing to vote tactically to defeat Tory incumbents. Finally, a succession of strong local election performances helped the Liberal Democrats to rebuild their councillor base, including in Leave-voting West Country seats where Conservative MPs had won large majorities in 2019.

From the Chesham and Amersham by-election in June 2021 onwards, it was clear that winning over former Conservative voters in so-called "Blue Wall" seats would be the main focus of Davey's leadership. As with Starmer's efforts to reposition Labour, this involved an element of 'ideological quietism' – including a retreat from Jo Swinson's anti-Brexit stance – which created some frustration among party activists. Membership fell from a peak of 126,000 at the end of 2019 to less than 74,000 at the end of 2021, and dissent broke out into the open in November 2023 when 30 senior Liberal Democrats called for the party to set out more "distinctive positions" – including rejoining the EU single market – in a letter to the Guardian. Conference delegates also defied the leadership's efforts to drop a commitment to a national housebuilding target, reflecting a tension between the views of party activists and the perceived electoral needs of rural candidates. With Tory seats to be won, however, these divisions were largely smoothed over by the time the campaign began.

The manifesto centred on a £9.8bn plan to invest in the National Health Service and social care, with efforts to tackle sewage dumping a major subsidiary theme. Increased spending would be paid for by a miscellany of tax rises on wealthy investors and big firms, some of which drew criticism from the Institute for Fiscal Studies and other experts. Though Davey was prepared to defend these tax rises, he largely shied away from populist rhetoric and focussed instead on making the case for investment in public services. Likewise, although the manifesto outflanked Labour on issues such as welfare policy (where the Liberal Democrats promised to scrap the benefit cap and the two-child limit), direct attacks on Labour were kept to a minimum.

Media coverage of the campaign was dominated by Davey's stunts – falling off a paddleboard on Windermere, bungee-jumping in Eastbourne, and demolishing a row of blue dominoes in Taunton. Davey claimed that his antics were designed to draw attention to serious policy points, such as sewage problems and mental health funding, as well as providing 'good visuals' that would help the party gain news coverage. Though the novelty was beginning to wear thin by the end of the campaign, the stunts succeeded in raising Davey's profile without exposing him to the sharp personal and policy-based attacks which Tim Farron and Jo Swinson had faced. Davey's willingness to talk about his personal experiences as a carer also provided the basis for an emotionally resonant party election broadcast on 5th June, which dovetailed neatly with the party's focus on health and social care. This allowed candidates to fight a vigorous "ground war" in Conservative-held target seats without having to deal with nationally-generated controversies.

As the Conservative campaign faltered, the Liberal Democrat strategy turned out to be remarkably effective. Under Paddy Ashdown and Charles Kennedy, seat gains had been built on "incremental targeting"; this time, the Liberal Democrats swept across southern England picking up clusters of seats – 6 gains in Surrey, 5 in Sussex, 4 in Oxfordshire, and 11 across Devon and Somerset – often with comfortable majorities. Alongside its gains from the Tories in England, the party also took 4 seats from the SNP in Scotland. All in all, 46% of the Liberal Democrat vote came in the 72 seats the party won – a testimony to both campaign efficiency and tactical voting. If leaning into a "cosmopolitan" and pro-European identity between 2016 and 2019 helped the Liberal Democrats survive and develop new areas of strength in south-east England, Davey's decision to lean back out of these cultural divides seems to have paid off by delivering a larger parliamentary recovery than most thought possible. The Liberal Democrats have some hard thinking to do about policy and strategy in the new Parliament. Nevertheless, the 2024 result shows how a well-calibrated third-party campaign can help candidates to make hay while the sun shines.

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The Greens: riding two horses

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After winning 15% of the vote (but no MEPs) in the 1989 European Parliament election, it took slow, hard graft during the 1990s and 2000s for the Greens (three independent parties: of England and Wales, Scotland and of Northern Ireland) to achieve some regular success in British elections. This was enabled by a targeted local campaigning strategy, the political space which opened up for the Greens as a progressive alternative to the incumbent Labour governments, and new opportunities to take part in elections using proportional representation (European Parliament and devolved bodies).

2015 saw the 'Green Surge' in membership and votes. The Liberal Democrats had governed with the Conservatives, and Labour neglected to provide unambiguous opposition to Conservative policies on austerity and immigration, allowing the Greens to act as an attractive vessel to progressive voters. The election of Jeremy Corbyn as Labour leader crowded out the political space that the Greens had become used to occupying. At the 2017 General Election the profile of Green voters consequently became more demographically and ideologically heterogenous - overall they were more right wing than in 2015.

In recent years, the Greens' have recorded unprecedented performances in council elections. At the 2019 English local elections 265 Green Party of England and Wales (GPEW) councillors were elected (194 gains) and, after repeated successes, by May 2024 the Greens had around 850 councillors across Great Britain. Importantly, these local advances occurred in different types of places, including rural areas which had traditionally voted Conservative.

These developments are important to understand the party's approach to the 2024 General Election. The GPEW selected four target seats: two urban seats where they were principally competing with Labour (Bristol Central and Brighton Pavilion), and two rural seats where they were principally competing with the Conservatives (Waveney Valley and North Herefordshire).

The Greens thus had something of a Janus-faced campaign, targeting two different sources of voter discontent. Firstly, growing left-wing disenchantment with Keir Starmer's leadership of Labour and, in particular, the prominence of the Gaza issue from October 2023 onwards (which helped their campaigns in Bristol Central and Brighton Pavilion). Secondly, the disillusionment among former Conservative voters in rural areas. In Waveney Valley and North Herefordshire, the Green campaigns emphasised similar issues to those pushed by Liberal Democrats at this election in Conservative-held seats including the NHS, standards in public life and sewage discharges into water.

On a national level, the GPEW's campaign was spear-headed by their co-leaders, Carla Denyer and Adrian Ramsay, who took part in the TV debates and set-piece interviews. In their manifesto and national campaigning the GPEW had some clear dividing lines with most other parties, including much greater ambition on climate change and other environmental issues, and plans to use significant tax increases to massively boost spending on public services.

This was an exceptionally successful election for the Greens. There were 629 Green candidates across the UK - the highest ever. The Greens received 1,943,265 votes across the UK, representing 6.7% of the national vote share. This surpassed their previous best result of 1,157,613 votes and 3.8% of the national vote share in 2015.

The stand out success was the election of four GPEW MPs. Not only did Siân Berry hold Brighton Pavilion, but the Greens won Bristol Central, North Herefordshire and Waveney Valley, in each case overturning huge notional majorities to secure comfortable victories. The GPEW have thus not only successfully navigated Caroline Lucas' departure, but quadrupled their representation at Westminster through a remarkably successful targeting operation. Across the UK the Greens were calculated to have lost around 250 deposits, the most of any party. However, given the number of candidates standing this still meant that they saved over 350 deposits, massively bettering their previous best result of 131 deposits saved in 2015. Although the Green Party Northern Ireland have historically achieved representation at Stormont and the Scottish Greens continue to have MSPs in Holyrood, like previous general elections the GPEW were much more successful than their counterparts in the rest of the UK. However, both parties' vote shares increased, particularly in Scotland. Preliminary results suggested that the Greens got 10% or higher in vote share in approximately 100 seats, and came second in 40 (almost half of those were in London).

But, this election was paradoxical: the environment is the one issue which the UK public clearly trusts the Greens on over other parties and it was notable for its absence from the campaign, nonetheless they performed incredibly well in this election. In an election where party support fragmented, the Greens were well-placed to tap into two distinct but powerful sources of discontent. Success brings its own challenges, however. They will need to decide if it is sustainable to continue their dual approach to political strategy over the long term. They will also need to reconcile their chosen political strategy with their ideological traditions, while presenting a coherent national message which is not simply a combination of localised political concerns.

Party organisations and the campaign

Parties and members can be troublesome for political leaders, but effective management of organisations and activists was crucial to electoral fortunes as the 2024 Election demonstrates.

Conservative members have little institutional power but are crucial to party fortunes. They influence policy chiefly through electing leaders. Leaders have significant discretion, but failure can be ruthlessly punished. Without membership support, they can struggle. Rishi Sunak, who helped topple membership favourite Boris Johnson and was installed without a vote after Liz Truss's resignation, never quite won them over, contributing to his inability to distance himself from Johnson. Apparently surprising his own MPs and activists in calling the election did not help. With many MPs retiring and more than 150 candidates still to be selected, local parties felt unprepared and angered by the imposition of candidates, including Party Chair Richard Holden in Basildon and Billericay (who was almost defeated). Mobilisation was challenging already: declining membership, the loss of swathes of councillors, and low morale hit the party's ground operation. Sunak's D-Day departure, and gambling scandals did not improve things.

A leader-centred model gives flexibility to respond to circumstances but can create further problems. Policies like National Service took activists and candidates by surprise. The late entry of Nigel Farage upended party communication strategy: proposals like 'triple-lock plus' and the Rwanda scheme gradually gave way to a defensive and negative approach.

An authoritative Labour leader can also be very powerful, but Labour's emphasis on rules and procedures means controlling or navigating party machinery and stakeholders, seeking agreement or acquiescence. The manifesto is the result of a process of deliberative forums, annual conference and the 'Clause V' meeting of party stakeholders. Agreement is not always easy: Unite, a major affiliated union and donor declined to actively endorse Labour's programme.

The election announcement triggered Labour's National Executive powers to impose and exclude candidates where not yet selected. This is advantageous for leaders, installing key allies and weeding out problematic candidates (as in Aberdeenshire), but risks undermining morale and angering activists on whom campaigns rely. Two excluded candidates, Fazia Shaheen in Chingford and former leader Jeremy Corbyn in Islington, caused splits locally, and led to defeats. Leaders perhaps calculated the trouble was worthwhile, reinforcing Keir Starmer's distance from his predecessor. The apparent attempt to exclude Diane Abbott, however, threatened to derail Labour's campaign, until the leadership backed-off. Otherwise, Labour's disciplined communications during the campaign followed the Napoleonic maxim not to interrupt the enemy whilst he is making a mistake. Before the campaign, however, the party's initial response to the war in Gaza galvanised left-wing opposition from departing 'Corbynites' and amongst Muslim supporters, leading to striking defeats, including Jonathan Ashworth, and some close calls.

Labour's main challenge was directing and managing activist resources effectively. It did so ruthlessly, upsetting activists and neglecting support elsewhere. De-prioritised local campaigns were blocked from accessing systems, and shifted to target seats. Resources were diverted from Conservative-held Liberal Democrat targets (effectively giving the latter a clear run) and deployed deeper into Conservative territory. The results demonstrate the strategy's effectiveness but also its risk. Parties need to balance gaining new ground with keeping current supporters on board.

The Liberal Democrats demonstrated how a well-organised smaller party, with a focused ground operation and an attention-grabbing national campaign can succeed. Its strong activist base and careful targeting meant a vote share similar to 2019 translated into a sixfold increase in seats. Leaders may now need to turn to wider party management: success means greater scrutiny and the party's lively democratic culture means that leaders don't always get their way: divisions over Europe and housing, for example, may become exposed.

Green Party success is similarly owed to professionalisation: careful targeting brought gains in Bristol, Herefordshire and Norfolk. This professionalisation means the party's more consensual organisational traditions are being slowly reformed: until 2008, it rejected conventional leadership. It supported a 'progressive alliance', standing down for other parties in some seats. No longer: local parties have had candidates imposed on them under new leadership powers (which may have helped Jeremy Hunt's narrow victory). This direction may continue with higher profile and greater scrutiny: its member-led policy process, for example, whilst more democratic, can lead to awkward questions, like those about its 'natural childbirth' policy. It could expose divisions over trans issues and between its urban left-wing and more rural conservative elements.

Reform UK ought to have fewer problems of this nature, since it has no members or organisation in any meaningful sense. This gives leaders a great deal of freedom: enabling Farage's dramatic assumption of the leadership, and his changing party policy on refugees apparently mid-interview. The downside was exposed by the party's incapacity to vet candidates, leading to suspensions and defections with the blame, rather unconvincingly, placed on a software provider. Lack of organised ground operation may have contributed to Reform's inefficient vote distribution: despite winning half a million more votes than the Liberal Democrats, they won only five seats. Farage may need to make good his pledge to 'professionalise' and 'democratise'. No members can be just as troublesome as many.

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Local campaign messaging at the 2024 General Election

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The 2024 General Election redrew the map of British politics. The Labour Party won a landslide, turning vast parts of the electoral map from blue to red. Here, we use data from the OpenElections Project to explore the messaging used in local campaigns that delivered this result. Our preliminary analysis of more than 1,200 election leaflets distributed in 295 constituencies across England, Scotland, and Wales includes leaflets from all the mainstream parties. Leaflets provide a great source of heterogeneity in campaigns across constituencies, both in form – some leaflets are postcards, while others are essentially short magazines – and substance, and remain the most common way that voters engage with parties and their candidates during election campaigns. As a result, they offer a unique window into the kinds of local campaign messages that voters received in the run-up to the 2024 General Election.

As a part of our preliminary analysis, we looked at whether the following issue areas featured in a leaflet: the economy, education, the environment, Europe/Brexit, governance, health, immigration, and social welfare. Across all leaflets, health (81 %), the economy (80 %), and the environment (54 %) were the most common issues (Table 1). However, these figures disguise some interesting variation in the focus of the campaigns across parties. For example, Reform Party and Scottish National Party leaflets were much more likely to talk about Europe/Brexit – 72 % for both – than those of the other parties, while almost all Reform Party leaflets also discussed immigration (97 %), and most Scottish National Party leaflets talked about governance (78 %), in stark contrast to those of the other parties. It is also interesting that social welfare featured more heavily in Scottish National Party leaflets (61 %) and Conservative Party leaflets (42 %) than it did for the other parties.

Election leaflets do not only talk about the positions of the candidate and their party. In addition, they frequently feature messages about one's local or national opponent(s). Political scientists generally define these as 'negative' messages. The OpenElections Project identifies a leaflet as containing negative messaging if it includes at least one reference to an opposing party, leader, or candidate. Previous research suggests that criticising one's opponent is quite common in Britain, and 2024 was no exception. Across all leaflets, 68 % of them included at least one negative message. While the level of negativity is lower than in previous general elections, we see again that there is considerable variation across parties. Interestingly, leaflets from Reform Party were, by far, the least likely to discuss opponents, while Liberal Democrats leaflets were most likely to use negative messaging (Figure 1).

Finally, we explore how common it is for campaign communications to discuss the tactical situation. These are messages that draw voters' attention to the electoral context – e.g., 'Labour can't win here'. They are similar to negative messages in that they mention opposing parties by name and are intended to undermine an opponent's position, but they differ in that they draw voters' attention to weaknesses in their opponent's support (or traditional vote share) to dissuade voters from wasting their ballot on a party that has no chance of winning locally, rather than focusing on the weaknesses of the opponent themselves. There has been much talk recently about the perceived rise in tactical voting. This is supported by our evidence (Figure 2). Across all leaflets, 38 % of them included a tactical message, which is significantly higher than in the last four general elections that the OpenElections Project covers. This is likely due to a) the growing prominence of tactical voting websites like www.tacticalvote.co.uk, which make voting assessments easier, b) the increased prominence of MRP (Multilevel Regression and Post-stratification) modelling by major polling firms such as YouGov and Survation, which provide constituency-level estimates of party support, and c) the collapse of Conservative Party support in many constituencies. With respect to the latter, significant losses in recent local elections, for example, frequently acted as the basis for tactical messages about the viable alternatives in previously-held Conservative seats.

Local campaigns continue to play an important role in British general election campaigns and data from the OpenElections Project provides an interesting insight into what parties talk about locally, as well as how they do so.

Table 1. 2024 OpenElections issues mentions, by party (%)

Issue Area	All	CON	GRN	LAB	LD	REF	SNP
Economy	80	88	50	82	76	94	78
Education	36	55	15	60	14	13	33
Environment	54	54	78	39	78	16	33
Europe/Brexit	13	4	2	2	7	72	72
Governance	10	13	7	5	10	9	78
Health	81	68	77	86	88	87	78
Immigration	29	32	8	37	1	97	0
Social Welfare	16	42	9	8	8	4	61

Table 1: 2024 OpenElections issues mentions, by party (%)

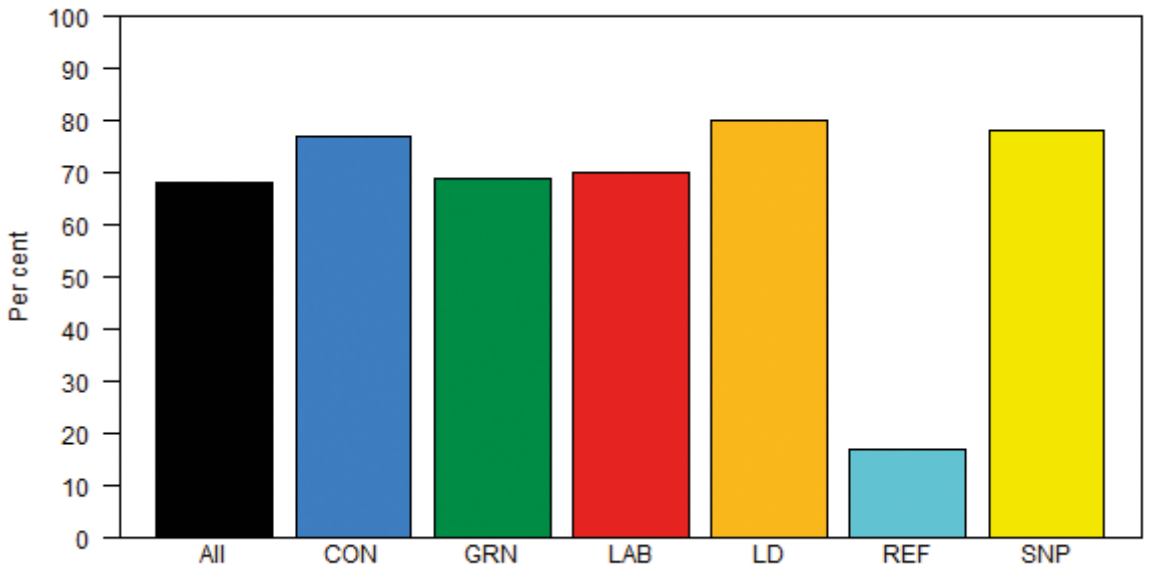

Figure 1: OpenElections leaflets including a negative message

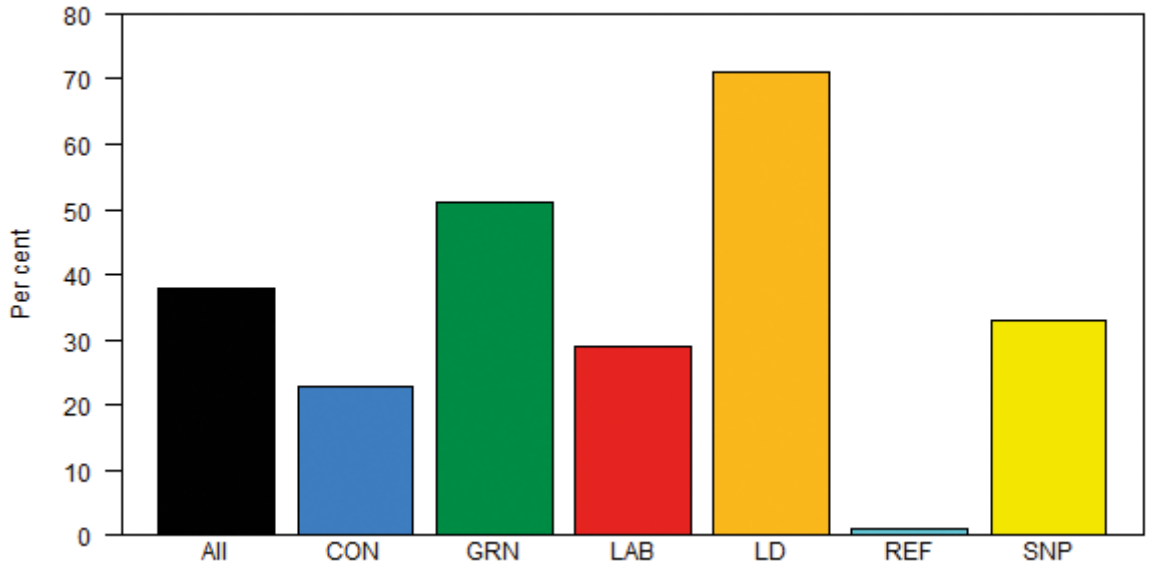

Figure 2.: OpenElections leaflets including a tactical message

The value of getting personal: reflecting upon the role of personal branding in the General Election

Dr Jenny Lloyd

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One of the most interesting aspects of the 2024 UK General Election was the use (or lack of use) of personal branding by UK political parties. Political branding has long been recognised as useful heuristic device employed by voters to distinguish between political parties and facilitate decision-making. Branding at the level of the individual, known as personal branding, can be particularly powerful in elections as it not only generates attention but has the potential to convey values and attributes that not only reflect those of the individual politician but those of the wider political party.

The most obvious example of personal brand building was undertaken by Ed Davey, leader of the Liberal Democrat Party. Over the course of the election campaign, he engaged in a series of 'stunts' which included falling off a paddle board, sliding down a water slide and bungee-jumping; all to raise awareness and draw attention to Liberal Democrat policies. Although slapstick, this approach generated significant success. According to YouGov, Davey's personal approval ratings doubled from 15% to 30% over the course of the election campaign and the party was seen to be fighting a positive campaign.

The Reform Party also pivoted toward a stronger personal branding strategy midway through the election campaign when party leader Richard Tice struggled to gain recognition amongst the voting public. Two weeks into the six week campaign, a favourability poll undertaken by YouGov indicated that Tice was unknown by 66% of the electorate and seen unfavourably by only 24%. He was replaced by prominent political campaigner Nigel Farage, someone who had long cultivated a strong personal brand, and who was listed by the New Statesman as being one of the most influential people on the right wing of British politics.

This change in leadership effectively reversed the Reform Party's lack of leader recognition and, with it, generated a surge in popularity. On 13th June it was reported in *The Times* newspaper that, for the first time, the Reform Party had overtaken the Conservative Party in the polls and a poll by YouGov indicated that Nigel Farage was known by 92% of the electorate.

Of the remaining parties, neither the Labour, Conservative nor the Green Party pursued strong personal branding strategies in support of their leaders. This is somewhat surprising in the case of the Conservative Party, given how effective Boris Johnson's strong personal brand had been in engaging voters in 2019. However, a series of 'gaffs' and apparent examples of poor judgement by Sunak left him open to ridicule and cast doubt over the judgement of his management team. It is probable that, in avoiding the adoption of a personal brand development strategy, Conservative campaign managers were seeking to minimise risk.

Minimisation of risk also appears to have been at the root of the limited attempts at personal brand building around Labour Party Leader Keir Starmer. However, given how toxic ex-Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn's personal brand had proved for the party in recent years, party management were naturally guarded. Adopting what was often referred to in the media as a 'Ming Vase Strategy', the relatively limited focus on Starmer's personal brand was part of a more cautious approach to campaigning with the aim of maintaining their lead in the polls.

In the case of both Conservative and Labour leadership, the result of their low-risk strategy was that approval ratings remained little changed by the end of the campaign. Whilst this was positive for the Labour Party who were enjoying a strong lead in the polls, it did little to boost the ailing fortunes of the Conservative Party.

For the Green Party, their two-leader strategy was problematic for personal brand building as media focus was necessarily divided between leaders over the course of the campaign. As a result, co-leaders Carla Denyer and Adrian Ramsay both suffered from very low levels of personal brand awareness with polls just before the election suggesting that they were still unknown to three quarters of the UK electorate.

When reflecting upon the value of building the personal brands of political leaders, it is clear political leaders in possession of strong personal brands can command a disproportionate amount of media attention. As such, it can be a useful tool for smaller political parties who might otherwise struggle to gain media attention. However, political leaders' personal brands are not without their jeopardy. In an election campaign, every action is held up for scrutiny and personal errors of judgement not only reflect badly on the individual leader but more widely upon the image of the political party they lead.

Which constituencies were visited by each party leader and what this told us about their campaigns

The summer election of 2024 was bookended by two rainy days. Rishi Sunak, who had been Prime Minister for 18 months and leader of the Conservative party in government for 14 years, made the wet announcement outside Number 10 on the 22nd May. Six weeks later, the drizzle returned as his party suffered their greatest ever electoral defeat. The sky cleared just in time for Sir Keir Starmer to walk into Downing Street on his first day as Prime Minister, heading the new Labour government. The changing weather was a perfect allegory for the scale of change this election brought and what it meant for the two parties.

In between those two days was a mostly sunny campaign period. The two leaders whose parties exchanged power fought mirrored campaigns, with one striking similarity. Neither Sunak nor Starmer made campaign visits to crowds of people, signalling a more controlled and media conscious campaign style that learnt from previous missteps beyond their control. Nobody wanted a repeat of incidents that change the narrative of a campaign, and in particular its media coverage, such as leaving a mic on catching a phrase like 'bigoted woman' or eating a bacon sandwich and being caught in an unflattering photograph.

Until the 1990s, campaigns for government were fought in front of the masses, on top of soap boxes and with megaphones, but modern campaigns do not want that unpredictability. They did not want the distrust and contempt felt for politics to smear their campaign by hecklers or protesters. In the final televised BBC debate, shouts from protesters could be heard outside and it would have been a very different campaign if those voices had regularly stopped the leaders from delivering their messages. That delivery is done indirectly now, through the media, and not straight to individuals – they leave that to their local campaigners who don't have a media crew following them. Of course, this avoidance of crowds doesn't eliminate all gaffes, as the Conservatives found when Rishi Sunak visited the Titanic Quarter and again when he left D-Day commemorations early. Sir Keir Starmer did manage to avoid such blunders though.

Mr Sunak had the most to lose, defending the broad coalition of voters that won Boris Johnson 365 seats in 2019. His constituency visits demonstrated the recognition that many of them were vulnerable. He visited the most constituencies on the campaign trail compared to other leaders, and had to fight against three main challengers: Reform in high Brexit voting seats, the Liberal Democrats in the South West and South East, and Labour almost everywhere else. His campaign stops included seats that should have been extremely safe, such as Cornwall South East in the first week where the Conservatives had a 38.7% majority, and Amber Valley the week before polling day where his party had a 37% majority. Both were lost to Labour. Devon North, which he visited in week four of the campaign, had a 26.7% Tory majority but now has a Liberal Democrat MP. Sunak didn't visit any of the seats that Reform ended up gaining from them. Campaigns are usually fought in predominantly marginal seats, but the trend of these deep defensive visits showed that the Conservatives were expecting the overwhelming defeat they ultimately suffered.

For Labour and the Liberal Democrats, their leaders' campaign visits signalled the growing confidence that they would win. Whilst they stopped by seats where they needed big swings throughout – such as Davey visiting Chichester in week one where they overturned a 38.5% Tory majority on polling day, and Starmer's very first stop in Gillingham & Rainham where his party toppled a 32.9% Conservative majority on election night – overall the two main challenger parties began in more marginal seats and ended in more ambitious targets. This included places they've never won before, such as Wimbledon for the Lib Dems and Hertford & Stortford for Labour.

The smaller parties also fought qualitatively different campaigns in their styles. Sir Ed Davey became known for his stunts, such as riding rollercoasters and bungee jumping, which featured in most of his campaign visits. He was happy to be seen with crowds of people or in busy places. Nigel Farage as leader of Reform actively sought out crowds, starting with 800 people in what's now his constituency of Clacton, then attracting 1500 people in UKIP's old headquarters town of Newton Abbot, and moving on to several thousand at a rally in Birmingham. He did have distrustful members of the public throw things at him, but this did not deter him in the same way it did main party leaders. The Green co-leaders, and both Scottish and Welsh leaders, were also not exclusively seen in controlled environments.

Ultimately the campaign visits informed us of two main insights. First, there is a difference between campaigns for government and campaigns for gaining vote share without seeking power: the main party leaders were controlled and indirect; the smaller party leaders communicated directly to the electorate. Second, they told us about the parties' expectations for the results. A Conservative wipeout, and widespread opposition party success. They were correct.

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The culture wars and the 2024 General Election campaign

Prof John Steel

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Since the 2019 General Election the culture wars have loomed large over the political landscape in the UK. Whether in relation to the fractious rows concerning trans rights and biological sex, or the various panics concerning free speech and so-called 'cancel culture', the culture wars and their various skirmishes have never been far from the headlines. To this observer, the expectation was that this would be intensified during the six weeks of election campaigning, yet this was not the case. The culture wars have not dominated the airwaves, barring a few early forays by the Conservatives and Reform UK, with the latter's campaign profile raised significantly by Nigel Farage's U-turn on his decision not to stand as a candidate early in the campaign. This intensified the Conservative's focus on small boat crossings and its Rwanda policy, with Reform UK indicating that Britain needed to give up its commitment to the European Convention on Human Rights, in order to "secure Britain's borders".

The few examples of culture war clashes that did surface tended to be drowned out by the key messages from the main parties. For the Conservatives, these centred around the promise of more tax cuts and the existential threat to Britain's national security and economy if Labour gained power. While from Labour it was its 'change' narrative that dominated their rather timid and somewhat cautious campaign. The Liberal Democrat's campaign also sought to stress that Britain needed a change but placed a key emphasis on social policy and social care.

Where the culture wars did make an appearance (see Jen Birks in this volume) they tended to be refracted through the larger election narratives from the main political parties. It would be wrong to see all political debates through the culture war prism, but a few exceptions did emerge. For example, Rishi Sunak's highly controversial announcement to bring back national service for 18 year olds to 'restore' a sense of national civic patriotism in the nation's youth. Such a move of course indirectly spoke to the notion, prominent in the Conservative supporting press as well as the party, that Britain's youngsters were too soft and needed toughening up, and that the nation was in need of a return to "create a sense of purpose" and "boost the national spirit".

Early in the election campaign there were also plans announced by the Conservatives to cull so-called 'Mikey Mouse' university degree courses – courses that according to the Tories and its supporters in the right leaning press, 'rip-off young people' and do not offer value for money. Instead the Conservatives would use funds saved from scrapping courses (and presumably jobs) to fund more skills based apprenticeships. Courses aligned to the arts, cultural industries and humanities, despite evidence to the contrary were, as they often are, targeted as not delivering value for money for young people and also allegedly pander to the 'woke agenda'. Labour too became embroiled in culture war collateral when JK Rowling attacked their apparent prevarication over trans rights and safe spaces for women.

A recent study by More in Common suggested that voters prioritise policy during elections and that the public can see through the inauthentic nature of culture war debates, despite the rancorous noise from sections of the press. It is clear that during this election campaign key issues such as the cost of living crisis, the future of the NHS, high costs of mortgage borrowing, the climate crisis and the ongoing conflicts in Gazza and Ukraine, have dominated the political agenda for the public. These issues will be key challenges for the new Labour government for some time to come.

So what now for the culture wars? As a 2021 Kings College study into UK culture wars suggests, cultural conflict is a feature of contemporary democracy, particularly across generations. Yet as the report indicates, there are strategies available through which to 'cool' the temperature and political leaders have a key role to play in facilitating this. It would be unsurprising if a humiliated Conservative party, alongside an emboldened Reform UK, continue to fan the flames of the culture wars across this Parliament. As the More in Common report notes, culture wars are incredibly divisive. People "want difficult issues to be discussed in a way that points to solutions and genuinely informs the public". The Conservative's should take note and learn lessons as they take stock and choose how they rebuild. For Labour, they will have to hit the ground running and deliver on its promises if it wants to turn down the heat on the culture wars going forward. Starmer's first speech as Prime Minister made a promising start when he promised that his government would serve for everyone and build bridges across this seemingly divided nation. The future of the culture wars may depend on whether his party can deliver on this promise.

"Rishi's D-Day Disaster": authority, leadership and British military commemoration

D-Day holds great historical significance in western Europe. On 22nd May, Conservative Prime Minister Rishi Sunak called the election for early July, knowing that D-Day commemoration events, marking the 80th anniversary, were taking place on 6th June. While Sunak attended some of the events briefly, during the international ceremony (attended by world leaders including Emmanuel Macron and Joe Biden) Sunak appeared to go missing, replaced by his Foreign Secretary David Cameron. Meanwhile, Labour leader Keir Starmer was present for many of the events. It later emerged that Sunak had returned to the UK to participate in a pre-recorded television interview.

The result was outrage and bafflement from the British press, but what significance does this hold? Laura Shepherd has argued that, in contexts of war and the military, leadership becomes a key focus. Specifically, those in charge often come to be portrayed as "figures of authority," with a stoical form of masculinity seen to best embody leadership. This is mirrored by press coverage of the controversy over D-Day, where four elements stand out for both Sunak and Starmer as "figures of authority," or not: decision-making, patriotism, duty, and global relationships.

Firstly, Sunak's judgement is directly called into question. Military leaders were in "disbelief" about his choice, while coverage abounds of Sunak and his cabinet members calling it a "mistake." Whilst Sunak had been absent, Starmer was himself present at many D-Day events, with press coverage not only discussing his presence but dedicating space to his words: "'For me there was only one choice, which was to be there,' Sir Keir said." He is shown to be a politician who makes good decisions, on this issue at least. Ultimately, this is arguably a representation of the respective politicians' ability to make decisions in leading the country. With the Prime Minister holding key decision-making power over the armed forces, poor choices in the D-Day context would have looked especially negative.

Joseph Haigh argues that commemoration events for the World Wars are an important element of British national identity specifically. As a *Daily Mail* article tells us, "D-Day is engraved on our national DNA," suggesting that Sunak is unpatriotic in leaving early. Perhaps predictably, some of the coverage quoted Reform Party leader Nigel Farage, "I think the one thing people have always associated the Conservative Party with is being basically patriotic. It is led by a man who very clearly isn't." Representations of patriotism often implied whiteness in various ways, though this is typically indirect within media reporting. One Telegraph article, that puts this more obviously, quotes a reader: "The historian David Starkey was criticised for saying Sunak wasn't 'grounded in our culture' but this proves he was correct. How could anyone vote Tory after this?" Stating that Sunak is divorced from "our culture" controversially questions his Britishness and positions him as unqualified to lead.

Duty – or lack thereof – is key within this reporting. As coverage of D-Day events continued, it emerged that the Conservative party had actually chosen the date and time of the ITV interview. Sunak has previously been accused of vanity, an implicit charge often levelled at female politicians through a focus on their clothing. The interview added fuel to the argument that Sunak cared more about a television appearance than honouring WW2 veterans at what might be their last event. In a context of broader themes of military self-sacrifice, this revelation was damaging. Even the right-wing press covered Labour's assertions that this was an abandonment of duty, with one headline stating "Labour accuses Sunak of 'dereliction of duty' after he left D-Day service early for TV interview." In taking Sunak to task, Labour is represented as understanding what duty means.

With Sunak missing, Starmer was photographed warmly smiling and shaking hands with the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky. The result was an image of Starmer as someone who is globally connected and fosters international relationships, including with those who understand the pains of war personally. Whilst the leaders of key global powers took their place, in Sunak's absence Britain was not represented at the very highest level. For a country that still considers itself to be a great power, this was perhaps seen as a misstep.

What kind of impact might this coverage have had at the polls? We cannot be certain, but it likely proved damaging in the eyes of the Conservatives' traditional voters. One *Telegraph* headline asked: "How could anyone vote Tory after this?" With a poll of 35,000 people in the same article finding that 81% of people believed Sunak was wrong to leave early. This matters because ever more people are reading their news online, so a large number of people will have read these stories. Indeed, a YouGov news tracker found that more people had seen news about Sunak's D-Day absence than they had coverage of the European Football Championship. Overall, even in the right-wing press, coverage presented Sunak poorly and Starmer well, in an area of importance for right-leaning voters. As a result, this is likely to have further damaged the Conservative party at a time when they were already losing support.

Dr Natalie Jester

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Party election broadcasts: the quest for authenticity

Dr Vincent Campbell

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Party Election Broadcasts have been sliding into ever greater obscurity in recent elections, and perhaps a stark indication of this in 2024 was the first of the Reform Party PEBs on 13th June that was simply a black screen with the words 'Britain is Broken. Britain Needs Reform.' for four minutes of screen time. This election has been continually compared to the last Labour landslide of 1997, and one connection back to that election of nearly three decades ago, that might explain their increasingly marginal role, is how the Party Election Broadcast system has barely changed since that time. This is astonishing to think, given the dramatic changes in the media environment since the days of Tony Blair. PEBs in 2024 were just one format within multiple forms of video content made for ever more platforms (TikTok, X/Twitter, YouTube etc.), and it was clear that party time, effort and money was being directed at these newer platforms- not least because of their lack of regulation compared to conventional broadcast media. No limits on number, time, or spend (other than within overall spending), compared to the measly offer of free airtime, albeit just one 5 minute broadcast for a party with at least 150 candidates (although this time George Galloway's Worker's Party got a PEB, though it was really a vehicle for him). The main two parties get an extravagant four 5 minute slots each, spread across the terrestrial broadcasters (and Sky News). The regulatory disparity for online and broadcast party election content must surely be reviewed and addressed at some point in the future.

However, the typically shorter formats of social media video, tend against the potential for policy depth, or depth in terms of boosting party leader's images in the way that PEBs still may potentially do. Some of the televised debates unquestionably garnered larger audiences: the first ITV debate featuring Starmer and Sunak on 4th June was the most-watched television programme of the first week of the campaign with 5.37 million viewers (all figures from BARB) for instance. Yet the potential for serendipitous reach with television audiences staying tuned after the early evening news programmes on the BBC and ITV remains a valuable potential audience in the 2-4 million range. Indeed, in the third week of the campaign, PEBs sandwiched between later than usual scheduled early evening news and live Euros 2024 games saw first, the Conservatives on 18th June (with 2.5 million viewers), and then Labour on 19th June (with 2.7 million viewers) break into the top 50 most viewed television programmes that week. For the Conservatives, the decision to use what was essentially an edited press conference from junior minister Laura Trott, might be one of the mistakes they look at when reviewing the campaign, though it was suggested it was because they were short of money. For Labour, on the other hand, as befitted the running social media joke that Keir Starmer had some kind of genie granting him every campaign wish, their PEB on the 19th was focused on Starmer, in conversation with former England and Manchester United footballer Gary Neville, as they walked through the idyllic green landscape of the Lake District.

Only one Conservative broadcast, 'A Secure Future', used film of incumbent Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, but not his voice (reminiscent of the absence of Gordon Brown from Labour PEBs in 2010). For the smaller parties, PEBs remain an opportunity to give their leaders wider exposure, and to try and generate the kinds of political authenticity that some politicians can have, like Boris Johnson in the 2019 campaign, but others struggle to convey. Not surprisingly, they took their opportunities. Alongside Galloway for his party, John Swinney led the SNP's broadcast, as did the co-leaders of the Green Party in their PEB. Reform's second PEB was Farage sitting on a bench in a field with a dog, putting the world to rights in his trademark style. Whilst many of these were also platformed on Party social media accounts, only the Liberal Democrats produced a PEB to seemingly get any cut-through and meaningful discussion, in their broadcast on 5th June. Entitled 'Ed's Story', his emotional recounting of losing parents at a young age, and the challenges of being a parent to a disabled child generated some, albeit fleeting, resonance and commentary. Alongside the wider strategy of him engaging in activities like paddle-boarding, arguably Davey's efforts in that elusive quest for authenticity was the most successful of all the party leaders, at least in terms of the increasingly focused use of PEBs amidst the multimedia hybrid election campaigns of the current era. Whether or not, amidst the burgeoning issue agenda the new government faces, there will come a time when the regulation of election content on screen and the PEB system, necessary as it seems, will be meaningfully changed remains unclear.

Reform Party, June 13th 2024

Liberal Democrats, June 5th, 2024

Labour, June 19th 2024. Source

Worker's Party, June 17th 2024

Reform Party, June 20th 2024

5

Policy and strategy

It's the cost-of-living-crisis, stupid!

It wasn't the campaign gaffes, the Covid parties or the cruel incompetence of the Tories that did for them. It was the economy or, more precisely, the cost-of-living crisis.

No doubt, as the Conservative Party looks to appoint its sixth leader in eight years, there will be widespread condemnation of Rishi Sunak's early election gamble and gaffe-ridden campaign. However, campaigns and manifestos had little to do with the end result (Reform did play a key part though). The voting public had been waiting impatiently to eject the government since the Autumn of 2022. After one Downing Street party too many for Boris Johnson, and a trip down the blue pill rabbit hole for Liz Truss, the public had had enough. It was then that the poll gap between Labour and Conservative really opened up, averaging some 20% from that point until close to the election.

It would be nice to think that the voting public had finally seen through the narcissism, self-interest, cruelty and sheer incompetence of 14 years of Tory rule. Brexit, Covid cockups, Windrush, Grenfell, the collapsing NHS and utilities infrastructure … the list is a long one. But, in my mind, the key issue was the economy or rather, as I explain below, the cost-of-living crisis.

On the one hand, this was a consequence of the wider damage caused by post-Covid market breakdowns, rampant inflation, raised interest rates and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Economies everywhere have suffered, and incumbent governments have paid the electoral price. On the other hand, Britain has suffered economically more than many and that's on the Conservatives. Between the UK-specific impact of the great financial crisis (2007-08), years of austerity, and then an imposed hard Brexit, the UK economy was left badly floundering even before Covid.

Let's be clear, when I say 'economy', I don't mean the economy talked about by Party leaders, CEOs and the commentariat. That abstract economy creates narratives based on metrics like GDP growth, stock market figures, inward investment trends, employment rates, and other data used by political and financial elites. There have been many times in the last 14 years when Conservative Chancellors, from George Osborne to Jeremy Hunt, have hailed the positive trends in such data. Each was happy to signal that the economy was going in the right direction and Britain would soon be Great again.

But for most working- and middle-class voters, 'the economy' has little to do with such metrics and everything to do with whether they feel financially better off or not now. Thus, they are concerned with whether their incomes are rising faster than their bills and whether they can secure, reasonably paid long-term employment. Can they afford adequate housing, to heat those homes, feed their families, pay for daily and one-off expenditures and, hopefully, the odd treat? And, on those counts, a growing number in the UK have been answering 'no'. The negative trends, from rising house/rental prices and personal debt to in-work poverty levels, were all discernible prior to Brexit and Covid. They continued apace after these events.

They then became starkly visible after Covid, hit by a combination of soaring inflation, rising interest rates and the deluded economic policies of Liz Truss and Kwasi Kwarteng. By 2022, 22% of the population were officially in poverty, with 3.8 million people experiencing some form of destitution that year; double the figures of 2017. Food bank use doubled between 2018/19 and 2023/4 to more than 3 million people. Many middle-class people were not so badly affected but have still struggled. It was at this point the Tories lost their reputation for economic competence and voters turned towards Labour.

In this respect, 2024 mirrored 1997 and not just because Labour was following the Blair-Mandelson electoral playbook. As in 1997, after a similar period of economic turmoil, Labour similarly became more trusted on the economy than the Tories. The majority gained was equally impressive.

But there, unfortunately, the parallels end. For a start, the scale of Conservative decline covers over the fact that there was little great enthusiasm for Starmer's centre-right Labour Party. The Labour landslide was achieved with just 33.7% of the vote and on a 60% turnout. No large post-war majority has been gained with such a low proportion of eligible voters (20%). Second, Reeves and Starmer have tightly hemmed themselves in, sticking to the same economic orthodoxy of recent decades and promising no great changes in taxation or expenditure. Third, public sector net debt as a percentage of GDP is roughly three times what it was in 1997. So much of what propelled the economy previously – the financial sector, a booming housing market, PFI (Private Finance Initiatives), the EU Single Market, Quantitative Easing – is either exhausted, nullified or discredited.

All of which suggests there will be little change to the economic prospects of many voters come the next election … and another likely lurch towards the populist far right beckons. Forget 'the economy' beloved of elite technocrats, policymakers and big CEOs. It was, is and will be for years to come, all about the cost-of-living crisis.

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The last pre-war vote? Defence and foreign policy in the 2024 Election

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In his 26th May speech announcing the date of the 2024 UK general election, Rishi Sunak invoked the Second World War – Britain's perennial preoccupation – before warning the electorate that "the world is more dangerous than it has been since the end of the Cold War". Six weeks later in his own 5th July speech upon entering Downing Street, Keir Starmer repeated his predecessor's message, encouraging the nation to "[face] down, as we have so often in our past, the challenges of an insecure world". These invocations bookended a campaign characterised by the usual gaffes and squabbles over normal electoral issues – the economy, NHS, immigration – but also highlighted a realm which traditionally does not factor. War.

2024 has been the first general election since Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the Israel-Hamas conflict. Britain's role in overseas wars is not new, but this campaign saw defence and foreign policy play a far greater role even than the impact of the Iraq War in the 2005 election, the influence of three terrorist attacks on UK soil in the 2017 campaign, or the role of Jeremy Corbyn's questionable stance on national security in 2019. Every election happens with a war going on somewhere. But few have been held in an atmosphere of deepening anxiety and defensive impotence, with over half the population fearing Britain is unprepared for a coming world war.

Defence appeared throughout the campaign, as the Conservatives' main attack line and a poorly-planned nostalgia for national service. But while Second World War sentimentality was visible in the campaign and played a significant role in Brexit, it is not always the preserve of nationalists. Arguably, the collective memory of the war has played a decisive role in building British solidarity with Ukraine and pushing public trust on defence and foreign affairs away from the Tories. With the exception of fringe extremists on the right and left, support for Ukraine has been consistently high among the British public – an emotion which fed into the result. Keir Starmer's industrious rebranding of Labour as patriotic and the party of defence (including nuclear weapons), in contrast to his predecessor, certainly contributed to Labour's landslide. Meanwhile the Conservatives certainly suffered from widespread perceptions of their general inability to govern, with a consistent national narrative that the Tories could no longer be trusted with defence and security in an age of instability – contributing to their failure. A potential explanation for their surprising performance in the end is Nigel Farage's public support for the Kremlin and fringe Reform candidates' views on which side – and which leader – Britain should have supported in the Second World War. As Mr Sunak could have told Mr Farage after D-Day, disparaging the sacrosanct status of the War in British memory is not a wise strategy. But this has not been the only foreign affairs impact.

The ongoing Israel-Hamas conflict not only influenced voters but resulted in real electoral shifts. The 2024 Rochdale by-election saw the Workers Party – a Frankenstein's monster of Stalinism and Little England nostalgia – enter Parliament on the single issue of Gaza. This was repeated on July 4th through single-issue independent MPs and candidates, some only a few hundred votes behind Labour cabinet members; viscerally abusive constituency campaigning; and a deeply polarised electorate on the UK's legacy and leverage in the Middle East. This leaves Starmer facing a daunting challenge. By 2029, single-issue candidates might find a less receptive audience. But powerful emotions have been released, and as demonstrated by Brexit – the foreign policy issue nobody dared speak of this year – once the genie of pent-up public emotion has been let out of the bottle, it won't go back in. Defence and foreign policy are back as election winners or losers. By 2029 Ukraine will either be in desperate need of Western reconstruction money at a time of domestic economic woes, or still fighting an existential, expensive war. British foreign policy will simultaneously need to balance competing focuses on authoritarian regimes, a feared 2027 Chinese invasion of Taiwan; strengthening UK relations with NATO, the EU, AUKUS, and the new European Political Community; and potentially using the Special Relationship – if it survives – to act as a Churchillian bridge between a tense EU and isolationist USA. The failed Brexit fantasy of 'Global Britain' may become reality – but not for the reasons Boris Johnson foresaw. Starmer has inherited an antagonistic population and empty coffers, precisely at the time when Britain – as both Mr Sunak and Sir Keir emphasised – needs a muscular foreign policy.

In January 2024 former Defence Secretary Grant Shapps spoke at Lancaster House, warning that Britain is "moving from a post-war to a pre-war world". If he was right, Starmer may be a Prime Minister more akin to Neville Chamberlain than Clement Attlee – not an appeaser but the misinterpreted inheritor of a worn-down nation, frantically scrambling to rebuild Britain's defences and relationships with her equally worn-out allies (and reputation among her posturing adversaries) in very difficult times. Foreign policy and defence were significant factors in 2024. By 2029, they may be the ultima ratio populi.

The 2024 UK general election and the absence of foreign policy

During general election campaigns politicians usually focus on a select number of key issues in their national campaigns. These are usually driven either by current events or the policies which polls indicate are important to voters during a particular election. Polling evidence from Ipsos Mori in May 2024 indicated that the issues voters care about the most – the NHS, the economy, immigration – scarcely change (Ipsos mori May 2024). Rarely does foreign policy crack the top ten in voters priorities, although there is always the exception (Brexit being the most notable in the 2019 election or the impact of the Iraq war during the 2005 general election).

As with many elections, foreign policy has barely made an appearance in the 2024 general election. Politicians have focused their attention on domestic issues, with Brexit being entirely ignored by the two main parties (although the Liberal Democrats have indicated that rejoining the EU is their long-term goal (BBC News)). Indeed, a casual observer might be forgiven for forgetting that the UK is one of the strongest supporters of the Ukrainian government, which is currently at war with its nearest neighbour, a war which has been raging for over two years.

One notable feature of this election, indeed a feature which might suggest a lack of excitement amongst many involved in fighting it, is the reappearance of long-standing attack lines. Well-worn phrases and ideas such as "unfunded spending, higher taxes" and 'crime and defence …not taken seriously" are reminiscent of general elections of old (Conservative Party 2024 manifesto, p.1). While these lines might resonate with some voters, it would have taken far more than that for the Conservatives to beat Labour, and in the event their predicted defeat came to pass with Labour securing a majority of over 170 seats.

In foreign policy terms, this election has told the electorate very little they didn't know, and it has not highlighted any big divides between the two main parties. Indeed, both are steadfast in their support for Ukraine in their war against Russia and both are generally supportive of Israel (although the war in Israel and the Palestinian territories is so politically sensitive that both parties have tried to avoid public pronouncements on it during the campaign). Indeed, very little has been said about the potential impact of elections in the US and France, although again, those are subjects which tend not to be widely commented on within the UK political debate.

So, what has been discussed in foreign policy terms during this election campaign? Almost nothing. The focus has been on domestic policy, and there is undoubtedly good reason for that. While the attention of voters is dominated by domestic issues, in foreign policy terms there really is very little to choose from between the two main parties. Putting Brexit aside (as they have), there is no real dispute between them, and therefore very little to say. That doesn't mean that the reality is exactly the same as the election rhetoric. A Labour government MIGHT reinstitute the 0.7% GNI spending on development aid, they might soften relations with their European neighbours, they might take a slightly different line on Ukraine (although the changes, were we to see any, would be largely minimal). However, at the moment, we simply don't know. What history tells us is that Labour Prime Ministers tend to go out of their way NOT to be soft on foreign policy, perhaps because they are keen to fight the Conservative attack line that they are. Attlee, Wilson and Blair all made tough foreign policy decisions (the Korean War, the decision not to join the US in the Vietnam War, and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq) and Prime Minister Starmer will almost certainly need to make some tough foreign policy decisions. What those will be, we simply don't know yet, as foreign policy is often driven by events beyond the control of a single nation.

What we do know is there are threats in every corner. The world has rarely looked less safe since the end of the Cold War. Russia is currently engaged in a war with Ukraine, and it is unlikely to be the last in Putin's pursuits of a Greater Russia. Xi Jinping, the Chinese premier, has been exercising his influence in Hong Kong, with Japan and Taiwan looking on nervously. South Korea and Japan remain on high alert to a threat from North Korea. Donald Trump might be re-elected into the White House with uncertain results. Global warming, poverty and internal violence continue to put pressure on many nations, leading to death, destruction and mass migration. Any or all of these could affect the premiership of Prime Minister Starmer. The election has given little hint as to how he might deal with these, but as with anything, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. Winning an election is really only the beginning.

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Fractious consensus: defence policy at the 2024 General Election

Dr Ben Jones

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Defence policies are essential components of party manifestos, but they rarely provide the main dividing lines of an election campaign. British politics tends to reflect a broad consensus on defence policy based on NATO membership, nuclear deterrence, relatively high defence spending and readiness to use military force and the maintenance of a broad spectrum of military capabilities. Perhaps the most significant fracture in this consensus was Labour's commitment at the 1983 and 1987 General Elections to unilateral nuclear disarmament, a pledge debuted in a manifesto later dubbed 'the longest suicide note in history'. The policy still casts a long shadow, with campaigners tending to view defence as more of a 'sword' issue for the Conservatives, with their professed commitment to nuclear weapons and the armed forces, and a 'shield' issue for a Labour party with historically more diverse views. Indeed, since Neil Kinnock abandoned unilateral disarmament in the wake of Labour's 1987 defeat, the party has been careful to avoid being outflanked on defence policy. During his tenure as leader, Keir Starmer has been remarkably effective in this aim. According to YouGov's polling on the question of 'Which political party would be the best at handling defence and security?', Labour slashed a 25% deficit against the Conservatives in 2019 to reach parity by June 2024.

While a decisive section of the British electorate may view a 'credible' defence policy as a necessary condition for their support, other issues, particularly the cost-of-living crisis, healthcare and immigration have had far greater salience at this election. On the other hand, the parties have responded to fears over the deteriorating international security situation, particularly the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, with a noticeable hardening of the security consensus. The Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat manifestos all contained strong commitments to NATO membership, support for Ukraine, continuous at-sea nuclear deterrence via the Trident system and an uplift in defence spending with all pledging to reach 2.5% of GDP (though only the Conservatives put a date on the ambition, to be reached by 2030). The smaller parties took more radical positions, with Reform seeking to outflank the mainstream with a pledge to spend 3% of GDP on defence, while the SNP and Greens continued to carry the torch for unilateral nuclear disarmament. Several of the parties also made pledges to improve the lot of service personnel, though the same issues, particularly that of shoddy accommodation, come around at every election with apparently scant progress between.

Despite the broad consensus among the larger parties, there were also some areas of disagreement. The Conservative push for national service, no doubt in part intended to provide a wedge security issue with Labour, fell quite flat and was comfortably dismissed by others. Although the policy was roundly criticised, the related issue of manning gaps in the services is a growing concern, as is the historically small size of the Army, an issue highlighted by the Liberal Democrats in their pledge to expand its numbers. Regarding cooperation with allies, while the main parties agreed on the importance of bolstering bilateral European security ties, particularly with Germany, the Conservatives were (perhaps unsurprisingly) silent on the question of EU-UK security relations. By contrast, both Labour and the Liberal Democrats found space in their manifestos to call for a formalised relationship to address common concerns. Such arrangements could help repair damage to diplomatic relations and smooth foreign and security policy cooperation. Yet in the field of defence industrial cooperation, where EU institutions have become much more significant players since Brexit, the UK's absence from the single market and EU industrial policy is a significant barrier to deeper cooperation, even when the UK's allies acknowledge their worsening international security situation.

With Labour's resounding election victory, attention will turn to the credibility of its plans for defence, particularly on spending. Paul Johnson of the Institute for Fiscal Studies has put the price tag on achieving 2.5% of GDP by 2030 at around £12bn a year, a vast sum in a constrained fiscal environment in which Labour has pledged not to raise personal taxes. While Labour has committed only to meet the target 'as soon as we can', there may be domestic and international reputational risk if the target is missed before the end of this Parliament. Labour will hope its proposed Strategic Defence Review, procurement reform and international cooperation will reap efficiencies. Yet they are notoriously hard to capture, particularly when complex equipment projects are prone to cost inflation. In NATO's 75th anniversary year, Prime Minister Starmer will no doubt pay tribute to Ernest Bevin, the Labour Foreign Secretary who did so much to ensure the US pledged to defend a fragile Western Europe in the aftermath of World War II. Yet if Donald Trump, America's foremost NATO-sceptic, returns to the White House, it will take all the diplomatic skill of Bevin and then some to keep the alliance on track. The 2024 General Election reflected a fractious consensus on UK defence policy; Labour will soon find out whether its core tenets are fit for purpose.

The psycho-politics of climate denial in the 2024 UK election

Where has the climate crisis been for the two main parties in the UK 2024 Election campaign?

Less evident than it was in 2019, when Channel 4 "empty-chaired" Boris Johnson with a melting block of ice, when he was a no-show for the televised leaders' Climate Debate. This time, there have been no such debates; part of a larger picture of denial, minimisation and repression of our climactic futures from the two main parties (albeit to differing degrees). Sunak's Conservatives, following their against-trend win in the Uxbridge by-election (July 2023), on an anti-ULEZ platform, ran misleading Facebook election ads claiming, "Labour's national ULEZ: coming to a road near you this July". Labour, meanwhile, cut pledged funds for its "Green Prosperity Plan" in half, concerned about "fiscally responsible" optics, given the UK economy was in recession in 2023.

For the first time, warming globally has exceeded 1.5 degrees above the 1850-1900 pre-industrial average for a whole year, 2023-24. Yet, the public would hardly know that, in a sea of UK press headlines about "small boats". YouGov's "most important issues" tracker found that the cost of living (45%) and health (34%) were UK voters' top priorities in 2024. Meanwhile, in the European Parliament elections this June, the number of seats held by Green parties fell compared to the last European election (2019) from 74 to 54 seats, with support particularly falling in Germany and France. By contrast, the far-right increased their vote share, finding fertile ground for anti-immigrant sentiment amidst the cost-of-living crisis.

A turn away from ecological sustainability is consistent (in a Western context) with Inglehart's post-materialism thesis. The Silent Revolution (1977) discusses a shift in Western values in the Baby Boomer generation, due to a new post-WW2 material affluence, away from prioritising material needs towards an emphasis on quality of life (including the ecological). Conversely, evidence shows our present period is one of a decline in living standards. After the Greta Thunberg inspired School Strikes for Climate, pre-Covid, there has, arguably, in line with Inglehart's thesis, been a shift back towards values focused on immediate material security. The UK election has followed that trend, with an increase in votes for the far-right; Reform won five seats on approx. four million votes. However, the Green Party also won four seats (up three from 2019) on approx. two million votes. Materialist and post-materialist values are evidently in circulation in the UK concurrently, amongst different constituencies.

Of course, climate stability, healthy ecologies and biodiversity are far from immaterial. However, as DeLay (2024) writes, our mainstream Western polity continues to remain significantly in "reality denial and guilt denial" on climate. Psychologists might cite the "ostrich problem", where avoidance of self-monitoring enables the repression of psychological discomfort, otherwise strongly aroused by the evident cognitive dissonance between the trajectory towards planetary health we should be on, and the one we are on. Psychoanalyst Weintrobe (2021) argues that such processes of denial are connected to an omnipotent fantasy of self-sufficiency and exceptionalism, creating what Layton sees as "a perverse relation to reality". This functions as emotional containment, and a Manic Defence against anxiety about "the failures in care-taking" that have accompanied growing economic inequalities in "an increasingly dangerous world". The Manic Defence is characterised by a triumphantly scornful attitude deployed as a defence against feelings of helplessness and loss, and the paucity of "environmental conditions".

The psychology of denial as a form of manic defence can also explain the contemptuous tone and almost visceral public hatred of climate activist group Just Stop Oil (JSO). Starmer has referred to them as "contemptible" and Sunak dubbed their Stonehenge action "disgraceful cultural vandalism". However one views their strategies, JSO's point is not difficult to grasp – you think our actions are shocking - just wait until you hear about the fossil fuel industry's.

This election has seen both our main political parties in varying degrees of denial about the climate emergency we face, albeit there are clear differences. Sunak tried to make "net zero" a culture war issue and to frighten voters with the cost of energy transition, attracting condemnation even from a former Conservative energy minister. Global Witness referred to the Conservative party as "the political wing of the fossil fuel industry". Labour, by contrast, has the manifesto ambition "make Britain a clean energy superpower". Labour's denial therefore lies in timidity, in not, as Friends of the Earth said, fully acknowledging "the scale of the challenge ahead".

Perhaps our collective fear of the shambling spectre of the Goliath that is environmental degradation, reaching down to obliterate the world we knew, leads the majority as argued by Naomi Klein to deny the evidence of climate traducing "disaster capitalism" and to continue to hate David (JSO, Greta Thunberg) and his slingshot warnings instead.

Prof Candida Yates

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How will the Labour government fare and what should they do better? Results from a complex system model

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As expected, Labour have swept to victory in the UK elections. Labour have run a very cautious campaign, so it is fair to wonder what the next five years of Labour rule will look like. The party's manifesto is a good starting place, but how do all the pledges and promises combine for the future of people living in the UK?

During the campaign, we built a complex system model to try and encompass as much of the UK political landscape as possible. Complex system models normally have simple relationships between different model components (e.g. more police result in less crime), but complex and often surprising 'emergent' properties (more police may not reduce crime, if other factors such as inequality aren't reduced). We fed the model information from the manifestos of the main UK wide political parties (Conservatives, Labour, Liberal Democrats, Greens and Reform UK). Here we examine some of the main model outcomes, focussing on how well Labour faired out of the five parties, and what lessons they could learn from other party manifestos to perform better, based on model outcomes. The full details of the model and the results are available as a pre-print (not yet undergone peer review, which can take several months), but the types of models used have been peer reviewed before. Here we combine some model outcomes into broad themes that are public priorities, relating to personal finance, environment, immigration and public services.

Personal finance

Labour have been very cautious in relation to taxation, promising not to increase working people's taxes. As such, they rank mid-way of the five political parties, neither raising nor cutting taxes. However, they are also mid ranking on benefits and pensions, and overall, for average (post taxation) income. Our analysis suggests Labour might have been too cautious here. The highest average incomes are achieved under the Green and Liberal Democrat policies, despite their willingness to raise taxes. In contrast, tax cutting parties such as Reform and the Conservatives resulted in lower average incomes, and higher levels of economic inequality. Counter to the popular narrative, tax rises may increase income for traditional Labour voters, who may become disillusioned under Labour's tight fiscal rules.

Environment

Labour rank mid-table of the five parties in regard to the environment. Investment into carbon reduction, biodiversity and reducing pollution (including sewage pollution) was low compared to the Greens and Liberal Democrats, but commitments to the environment were not completely abandoned, as they were with the Conservatives and Reform. Another reason for poor environmental performance was a commitment to economic growth (Labour ranking highest on this factor, largely due to encouraging high levels of investment), which has been shown to be only partially able to decouple from environmental degradation. Ultimately, Labour cannot afford to ignore the environment for five years in a national or international context. They should focus on moving investment into green jobs (or public services with low environmental footprints such as the NHS and social care), rather than just boosting the financial sector and promoting economic growth for its own sake.

Immigration

Immigration is a contentious issue, but the popular viewpoint is that it needs to be lower. Labour score very highly on reducing immigration (tying for first place with Reform). Regardless of people's beliefs on legal immigration, strong policies on employment, apprenticeships and zero-hour contracts are likely to be positive aspects which will make the UK workforce more able to compete with immigrant labour. Reversing Conservative declines in the foreign aid budget will also help reduce asylum seekers and refugees, again, a measure which should be seen as positive, regardless of your views on immigration. These policies combine with more direct, but less inflammatory policies than Reform or the Conservatives, although it should be noted, Labour's policies and tone on immigration during the campaign have been criticised by some.

Public Services

We have predicted a very mixed bag for Labour here. Labour rank highly on improvements for state schools (largely due to an influx in funding from taxing private schools), yet very poorly on social care and the NHS (ranked second from bottom and bottom respectively). Largely, this was due to lack of investment in both areas. While promises of 40,000 extra NHS appointments per week were headline grabbing figures, this equated to an increase in only ~ 0.3% of the number of appointments. This contrasts with an increase in budget from the Green party of £28 billion (~16% of the budget), in addition to extra money for infrastructure repairs. Labour's cautious plan might well build the economy and lead to more money to the NHS by the end of this current parliament, but if they fail to improve and invest in the NHS is likely to disillusion voters next time around.

Overall, our analysis found Labour policies aligned better with voter preference than the Conservatives, however, it is clear they may need to do more than already promised to remain a popular party and win a second term.

Figure 1: Interaction diagram of the Bayesian belief network, demonstrating complex interactions between nodes

(positive interaction: black arrows; negative interaction: red arrows) and between different categories of node (Taxation and employment: grey, Training and education: tomato red; Health and wellbeing: gold; Economy and income: white; Environment: blue; Political landscape: green).

Finding the environment: climate obstructionism and environmental movements on TikTok

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Despite high-levels of concern for climate change and widespread support among voters for the UK's net zero targets, environmental issues seemed to be scarce during the 2024 general election. Research from Loughborough University, showed that television and print media coverage of the environment (including climate change) remained low, receiving only 3% of the overall coverage.

The two main political parties initially took different approaches to the climate. The tone seemingly set for the Conservatives with Rishi Sunak using his election announcement speech to claim his party have "prioritised energy security and your family finances over environmental dogma". Early election plans suggested Labour were pledging to make the climate a key focus of its campaign, yet Keir Starmer's election statement made no mention of the climate or the environment, referring only to "sewage in our rivers". The TV debates were equally devoid of substantive discussion of the topic with answers in the first leaders' debate on ITV conflating climate policies with energy security, lowering energy bills, and the cost of living. Combining issues in this way reveals an interesting aspect to the absence of the environment during this election.

My early research shows that across legacy newspaper outlets the focus on the climate at times tracked a more right-wing agenda and followed narratives dubbed 'new climate denial' or 'climate obstructionism'. Rather than focusing on the cost of inaction, this broad perspective centres on the financial cost of environmental policies, underpinned by an assumption that solutions to climate change are expensive. During the UK election, examples from newspapers reveal environmental policies painted as problematic to a country facing a cost of living crisis and the drive to net zero as harmful to the economy. It is possible that attention on finances resonated with what YouGov identified as the most important issue for voters in this election: 'the cost of living'. But, as noted above, the environment was also a concern to voters and the mixing of the two issues (cost of living and the climate) featured in news media reporting and social movement electoral communication.

The environmental movement, made up of multiple groups in the UK this election, tried to cut through on TikTok to refocus voter attention on the climate. A coalition of organisations came together under the banner of Restore Nature Now, including Extinction Rebellion and Greenpeace UK but, unusually during an election, also the RSPB, National Trust, The Wildlife Trusts, and The Woodland Trust. To differing degrees, the organisations' posts on TikTok highlighted the need for policies to address the worsening crisis, but also to respond to climate obstructionism.

Each of the larger national charities stuck to the rules of purdah by focusing their attention on non-election issues or on registering to vote, and building for the national Restore Nature Now demonstration held on 22nd June. Extinction Rebellion (XR) took a more backseat approach to this election, unlike in 2019 when it adopted multiple actions during a six week long 'Election Rebellion' campaign. Yet, in the same vein as their last election activities, XR demanded the government act by setting up a 'Citizens Assembly on Climate and Ecological Justice' and, like the People's Assembly Against Austerity in 2017, they focused social media content on mobilising for a national demonstration.

This time around it was Greenpeace UK that took up the mantle of election rallying, calling for people to join Project Climate Vote. Like XR in 2019, the group called upon the electorate to vote for the climate when casting their ballot and chose offline visual stunts such as activists climbing aloft the Conservative Party battle bus. In a challenge to climate obstructionism, the group reminded the electorate that renewable energy and home insulation can "help poorer households with energy bills. They also seem to respond directly to the fusing of climate policies with the cost of living when posting a video asking 'Why choose between the cost of living crisis and the climate crisis when we can solve BOTH?'

Greenpeace UK also sought to 'debunk' Nigel Farage's claim that it is "not fossil fuels that are making you poor, but the transition to net zero". They did so by challenging inaccuracies in the Reform leader's claims around renewable energy producing higher bills and the lack of economic benefits from a green transition. The group's counterclaims were coupled with a graph showing the falling cost of renewable energy and an infographic outlining the jobs a greener economy will bring. Not only do such messages stand in opposition to climate obstructionism and denial, they might also speak to voters not ordinarily associated with climate action who are concerned with the cost of living and support environmental policies.

Finding the environment in this election was not straightforward. Overt communication around the climate by political parties, legacy media outlets, and environmental groups was not as evident as it was in 2019. But, as this piece reveals, the climate was present. It was entangled with communication around the cost of living and the economy, which tracks the new climate denial narrative.

Irregular migration: 'Stop the boats' vs 'Smash the gangs'

It might go down in history as one of the most dramatic, elaborate, expensive, and ultimately disastrous electoral strategies ever mounted. The Rwanda Plan, forming the centre-piece of Rishi Sunak's Conservative Party's policy to reduce irregular channel crossings ('Stop the Boats') was also part of the push for a record 5th term in government. It promised to make irregular migration to the UK the main topic of the 2024 UK election campaign, putting opposition parties on the back foot while also displacing perhaps more difficult policy areas for the serving Conservative government, such as stalling economic growth, wage stagnation and the rising cost of living. However, the concession by the government that deportation flights would not leave before the election, despite the hundreds of millions spent, the emotional trauma suffered by those targeted in nationwide detention operations, and the extensive legislative gymnastics that enabled Rwanda to be declared a 'safe country', meant the Conservatives' electoral strategy was the proverbial dead duck. Despite this 'failure to launch', the ghost of the Rwanda plan continued to stalk proceedings and was referred to by party leaders, remaining a key part of the set-piece debates throughout the campaign. One of the results was that the topic of irregular migration created more pressure for the government as the incumbent, increasing electoral vulnerability on its right flank which would ultimately be exploited by the Reform Party.

The election debates on irregular migration were almost completely evidence-free, following a pattern set by the government in the lead up to both the Nationality and Borders (2022), and Illegal Migration (2023) Acts. Research points to neither deterrence nor border securitisation (or a combination of the two), as particularly promising policies for reducing irregular migration. On the contrary, the evidence suggests these are likely to increase risks of harm, particularly for those migrants that have experienced trafficking or exploitation.

A common refrain for all the main parties during the campaign was the statement that the 'system is broken' on irregular and humanitarian migration, albeit with competing claims on how this would be fixed, by what time-scale and through which methods. Indeed, when the topic came up in the final head-to-head leaders' debate, Sunak felt comfortable in joining Starmer making this claim, attempting to convince the public that asylum backlogs would be cleared and that the Rwanda Plan was the best approach, simply needing more time to work. Starmer, perhaps drawing on his prosecutorial background, garnished the Labour Party's criminal justice approach, with the flourish of not one but two additional three-word slogans, avoiding repetition of the Conservative's pledge to 'Stop the Boats', instead promising Labour would 'Smash the Gangs' to 'Stop the Chaos'. Overall, the leaders debates underlined how the manufactured fear and performative approaches to what is a fairly low (proportionately) level of irregular migration is such that "neither could mount a real defence of their own plans". Almost entirely absent from the debates, with the exception of the Green Party, were any concerted efforts to assert a human rights defense of the UK's membership of the system of international protection.

As with the head-to-head debate, the seven-leader version (held at the start of the campaign) yielded few surprises in relation to positions on irregular migration. The two main parties reiterated their securitised/enforcement approach while the others fell on each side along a spectrum. As with the general tenor of the wider media coverage, questions about irregular migration became subsumed by the wider (simplistic) argument about whether immigration as a whole is good for the economy (Scottish National Party, Green Party) or whether immigration is bad (for the economy and also everything else, e.g. Reform). It is notable however, that the prioritisation of irregular migration across the English Channel by the Conservative Party could be perceived as a strategy very much focused on English, rather than Scottish, Welsh or Northern Irish voters.

Are we back to the mid-1990s when then-Shadow Home Secretary Jack Straw boasted you could get 'barely a cigarette paper' between the Conservatives and Labour on immigration? While possibly true for most parts of the immigration system, there are some differences over irregular migration because of wider policy on humanitarian migration (refugees). The commitment to human rights is one clear dividing line, as is the overall approach to the asylum system. The Migration Observatory's comparison of election manifestos on irregular and humanitarian migration claimed that "Labour and the Conservatives are offering very different visions of how the asylum system will work". However, despite ditching the Rwanda Plan, the framing by Labour and the Conservatives is broadly similar, as demonstrated in 'immigration policy tracker' which shows how nuanced the differences are likely to be at the point of implementation.

Following the result of the election, newly installed Home Secretary Yvette Cooper wasted little time to announce the creation of a UK Border Security Command. In the true spirit of policy-based-evidence-making Cooper said that to support this there would be research commissioned into smuggling gangs, suggesting that both problem and solution have already been pre-determined by the new government.

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The sleeping dog of 'Europe': UK relations with the EU as a non-issue

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Given that the past decade of British politics has arguably been shaped by the question of Europe more than any other single issue, one might have expected to find the matter to be front and centre in the election campaign. The economic and social consequences of Brexit still reverberate, with profound dissatisfaction among the general public about how it has been handled and with previously strong advocates on both sides of the Leave-Remain divide still very present in the political debate. And yet, Brexit and present and future relations with the European Union (EU) were almost entirely absent from both the long and short election campaigns. How might we explain this and what consequence will it have for the new government?

Nothing to see here; move along

To some extent, the difficulties of European policy for the government provided a strong reason not to dwell on the topic in the post-Johnson period: the issue had been caught up with the ex-Prime Minister and both Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak wanted to change the conversation as part of an attempted refresh. For Sunak, the conclusion of the Windsor Framework deal in early 2023 and then the publication of the Strengthening the Union Command Paper in February (which opened the door to the resumption of the Northern Ireland Executive) drew a line under matters, allowing him to argue the fundamentals of the relationship with the EU were now settled and agreed.

For their part, Labour had long been content to let the Conservatives tear themselves up over Brexit and as they rose in the polls, there appeared to be an incentive in not pushing any particular line on the issue, mostly for fear of alienating disillusioned Leave/Conservative voters. As much as there were some grumbling on all sides about the policy of 'make Brexit work', it offered some reassurance that improvements could be made, without overturning the basic choice made in the 2016 referendum.

The result was a tacit ceasefire on the issue between the two main parties: neither leader voluntarily used the topic in their head-to-head TV debates – even the question asked about it in the final debate saw minimal discussion – and there were only passing mentions in the fine print of the manifestos.

Moreover, smaller parties also seemed to have made a similar decision. The Liberal Democrats and Greens retained their position of rejoining the EU, but neither put it at the heart of their campaigning, in stark contrast to 2019. On the other side of the debate, Reform UK also subsumed European matters into one small part of their general critique of mainstream politics, their manifesto more a list of complaints than a policy.

The only exceptions were found in Scotland and Northern Ireland. The SNP was more proactive about the failure of Brexit as part of Westminster's failure of Scotland and about the need for EU membership as part of an independent Scottish future. In Northern Ireland, the Windsor Framework produced much self-justification from the DUP and criticism from the TUV, as well as being prominent across the community as a key part of the economic and political landscape.

Perhaps the best marker of all of this came on 23rd June, the eighth anniversary of the referendum vote. Whereas in previous years there had been notable amounts of public debate and discussion, this time there was only a half-hearted probing of Labour's policy.

What happens in Brussels doesn't stay in Brussels

As much as the key political figures in the election did not want to discuss relations with the EU, it is also clear that the new government will not have so much choice in the matter.

The European Political Community summit at Blenheim Palace on 18th July will be an early reminder of this, as Prime Minister Starmer welcomes leaders from across the continent and will have to decide how much he offers beyond warm words. While there will be understanding that he has only just entered the job, his ability to start delivering on action will also be noted.

Part of this might involve movement on a new security pact with Germany, modelled on the Lancaster House arrangements with France, for which Labour has already laid some groundwork. But this bilateral move will not remove the need to engage on issues as diverse as carbon pricing, fishery quotas, Northern Ireland consent to the Protocol and the general review of the main EU-UK treaty in the coming 18 months. Despite Foreign Secretary David Lammy's flash tour of European capitals immediately after the election, talk of a non-binding security pact with the EU leaves matters very open.

Add to this the potential changes the EU itself will be undergoing in the next period of time and it is clear that not having an active interest and engagement with European affairs might prove to be a false economy for the new government. The consolidation of the radical right in the European Parliament and the constraining of the French political system following the legislative election, as well as the general day-to-day production of new EU legislation, will all produce impacts on the UK, which remains unavoidably exposed to the developments of its closest and largest neighbour. Whether Labour has an effective playbook to manage this will become apparent soon enough.

Labour: a very conservative housing manifesto

The UK has serious housing problems - high costs, overcrowding, poor quality, frustrated movers-out, buyers and downsizers, homelessness and carbon-dependency. These problems are increasingly acute, widespread and vocalised. But housing is a tricky area: many problems are long-standing and reform-resistant; many solutions are expensive. And most voters are well, affordably and securely housed.

So what has Labour promised on housing in its winning manifesto, and what were the alternatives?

In brutal summary, none of the three main UK parties' plans could have substantially altered current worsening problems, or met housing's contribution to net zero. For Labour, burdened by the Ming vase (a perceived fragile chance of winning a majority), spending and details were to be avoided. They have mirrored Conservative housing budgets and policy, making for a very conservative housing manifesto. The argument that spending on housing is investment not cost has failed again. The argument that spending on mass retrofitting is essential has been ignored. The IFS described a conspiracy of silence on inevitable public spending cuts. Conservative and Labour agreed to a real-terms decrease in spending on housing after 2024/25. Austerity on austerity: the amount spent on housing in England by UK central government fell 45% 2009/10-2015/16, and in 2022/23 it was still 20% lower in real terms (for a larger population). There was another conspiracy on reaching climate goals.

All parties but Reform planned substantial housebuilding – but how will they manage it and who will gain? Conservatives pledged 1.6m new homes over five years or 320,000 a year in England, clearly wanting to (just) out-promise Labour. But they hardly mentioned affordable housing. Labour offered 1.5m, and the 'biggest increase in social and affordable house building in a generation'. Careful wording: there haven't been any 'big' increases over the past 30 years. In contrast, Greens offered 150,000 new social rented homes a year. On top, all Greens' and Lib Dems' new homes would have met high green standards, while Labour and Conservative only made broad promises on quality. As context, over 2019-24 an average 200,000 homes were built annually, the vast majority for ownership, and not low carbon. To achieve their building goals, Labour will restore mandatory local targets abolished by the Conservatives. Signalling pragmatism (even machismo), they will allow some development on 'grey' green belt land and, with Lib Dems, promised more money for austerity-hit planners. Labour will make compulsory purchase cheaper for councils - but Lib Dems would have allowed them to buy at current use value (at the expense of landowners). More radically still, Greens planned to manage housing demand and costs, aiming for no real growth in housing prices, alongside rent control. With Plaid Cymru and the SNP, they emphasised efficient use of existing homes, reducing vacancies and restricting second homes and short-term lets.

To help people afford to buy, Conservatives promised to continue the Mortgage Guarantee Scheme, due to end in 2025, which provides government guarantees to lenders so people can buy with a 5% deposit (£12k on average). Labour mirrored again, even though the policy it was built on, Help to Buy (2012-23) was at best partly successful, and appeared to encourage price inflation and was wholly ineffective at helping the worst off.

Conservatives said little about benefits of any kind. Labour promised to improve fairness and efficiency, not generosity. In contrast, Greens promised increases, and while it cannot change the rules, the SNP will continue to protect Scots from the 'bedroom tax'.

In England, all parties except Reform promised something like the Renters Reform Bill, a victim of the early dissolution, including ending 'no fault' evictions for private renters. Labour will require homes to meet 'minimum' standards. Greens and Plaid planned limits on when and how much rent could increase. The SNP started this in Scotland this year, following pandemic measures. Labour will, more modestly, allow tenants to challenge big rent increases.

All parties promised some retrofitting (except Reform). Conservatives offered £6bn for 1m homes (4% of the total in England) over three years, but in office postponed targets. After trimming its plans, Labour mirrored again and will spend £1.1bn a year (£5.5bn over five years), but mentioned no targets. Lib Dems promised to end fuel poverty, and to restore the duty on landlords to provide homes at Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) C. More dramatically, Greens offered £29bn on insulation to EPC B over five years, and more for low-carbon heating.

Current light taxation of housing represents support for owners and landlords. Conservatives would have extended Truss's 2022-25 holiday on stamp duty for most First Time Buyers. Labour will increase stamp duty, but only for foreign buyers. Lib Dems would have done the same for UK owners of second homes. Greens would have raised taxes markedly.

In 2019, Conservatives promised to end rough sleeping by 2024, a goal achieved by Major, Blair and a special pandemic effort, albeit temporarily. However, in 2024 there were thousands on the streets, and Conservatives promised only to 'continue' work. And Labour unambitiously mirrored again.

Now the Ming vase has made it across the parquet, will Labour try to break with the pro-middle class, pro-owner, pro-older status quo in housing policy? The smaller parties provided plenty of ideas, but few without cost.

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Why the Labour Government must abolish the two-child benefit limit policy

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Scrapping the two-child limit policy is the most effective way for the new government to show that it is committed to breaking down barriers to opportunity. The two-child limit is cruel and regressive. Reversing it will immediately lift half a million children out of poverty at little cost. This is why it was so controversial that the Labour Party ruled out scrapping it well before the election had even been announced, which was a departure from their previous manifesto. Meanwhile, other mainstream parties like the Green Party and SNP pledged their commitment to remove the two-child limit in their 2024 campaign manifestos.

The two-child limit reduces social support for families with more than two children. From April 2017, a family claiming means-tested benefits, such as Universal Credit or Child Tax Credit, who had a third or subsequent child born after 6 April 2017 did not receive a child supplement for that child. This amounted to a loss of around £3,200 a year and affects 1 in 10 children.

The two-child limit rule is regressive because it punishes those who are already struggling. NGOs who work with poor families report that large families are cutting back on essentials as a result of the policy. Parents in large families talk of "children going to school in uniform that doesn't fit, missing out on after school clubs, and not being able to have friends to the house, as there isn't enough food to feed an extra mouth", according to Save the Children UK.

Our own research, using data from nationally representative income surveys, found that the poorest large families lost out the most, but better off large families were also affected. When the two-child limit was announced in 2015/16, 27% of children in large families lived in income poor households (before housing costs), compared with 17% of children in smaller families. By 2019/20, the poverty rate for large families rose to 37%, while it remained at 17% for smaller families. Between 2015/16 and 2019/20, the incomes of the poorest large families fell by 18% in real terms, while those of middle-income large families fell by 9%.

The two-child limit was never part of the Conservative Party's election manifesto. However, it was consistent with the "lost decade" of austerity and falling living standards. The rationale for the two-child limit was to reduce the government deficit, but it was also intended to "encourage parents to reflect carefully on their readiness to support an additional child" (as quoted in the 2015 impact assessment). If the Conservative Government assumed that there would be too few large families to matter, this is not the case. Our analysis shows that in 2019, one in three children aged 8–12 lived in large families.

Removing the two-child limit is not expensive. Half a million children will be lifted out of poverty today at a cost of just £2.5 billion, according to estimates by the Resolution Foundation. This is a fraction of the £117.5 billion the last government spent on social security for working-age adults and children in 2022/23. More than 100 organisations behind the End Child Poverty Coalition have called for the two-child limit to be scrapped.

If the Labour Government does not prioritise reversing the two-child limit policy, it is not serious about improving children's life chances. Their 2024 General Election manifesto mentions children 170 times in the section on breaking down barriers to opportunity. They promise to invest in childcare, education, healthcare and housing. All of this is necessary, but will take time to bear fruit. Abolishing the two-child limit is the quickest way to undo some of the damage done to poorer families over the past 14 years.

Take the next right: mainstream parties' positions on gender and LGBTQ+ equality issues

Election commentary has been captivated by the success of Reform UK in securing the third-largest share of the popular vote and a record five parliamentary seats. However, perhaps Reform UK's greatest achievement in this election was their ability to push their policies onto the agenda and into the manifestos of mainstream parties. In this piece I discuss how the Conservative and Labour parties shifted their positions on gender and LGBTQ+ equality issues in response to the electoral threat of Reform UK and consider the consequences of this behaviour.

Reform UK's success follows a trend more widely observed in the European Parliament elections a month previously, where far right parties made sizeable gains in several countries. These parties have historically gained support by mobilising nativist anti-immigration policies. But over time they have expanded their platforms to other cultural issues, such as opposition to gender and LGBTQ+ equality measures and feminist discourses. These policies appeal to a base of predominantly white, working class, male voters who feel 'left behind' by social and cultural developments intended to promote equality for historically marginalised groups, including women and LGBTQ+ people.

Reform UK's manifesto featured several pledges signalling opposition to identity politics and 'woke' ideology. These include a ban on so-called "transgender ideology" in primary and secondary schools, mandating single sex facilities, and a replacement of the 2010 Equalities Act, which they argue positively discriminates on behalf of minorities. These policies fit squarely into the narrative constructed by the far right that gender and LGBTQ+ equality measures - and feminism more broadly - are threatening to traditional societal order.

When a far right party becomes electorally threatening, mainstream parties often respond by accommodating their popular policies in an attempt to dilute their support. For example, over the last decade both the Conservative and Labour parties have adopted more hardline policies on immigration under pressure from the popularity of UKIP, the Brexit Party and now Reform UK.

In this election, both parties adopted a similar accommodative strategy on specific gender and LGBTQ+ equality issues. Most notably, manifestos promoted more conservative stances than previously held on gender self-identification and access for transgender women to single sex spaces. Moreover, parties framed these policies around safeguarding concerns for (cisgender) women and children, a popular strategy of the far right.

For instance, the Conservative Party manifesto included pledges to change the language of the Equalities Act to specify protection on the basis of biological sex rather than gender, mandate single sex spaces, and permanently prevent the prescription of puberty blockers for young people experiencing gender dysphoria. This is a notable development from their 2017 and 2019 manifestos, neither of which mentioned gender self-identification or transgender rights, besides a general commitment to protect LGBT people from violence and harassment.

In comparison, the Labour Party manifesto offered support for transgender people, yet simultaneously framed the issue around cisgender women's security. Pledges included reforming and simplifying the gender recognition process, a policy that also featured in their 2017 and 2019 manifestos. But new in 2024 was a commitment to protecting single sex spaces for (cisgender) women, under the existing Equalities Act. This more conciliatory position was consequently attacked by the Conservative Party, in a tweet from 3rd June: "We know what a woman is. Keir Starmer doesn't." In the final leaders' debate, both Sunak and Starmer reaffirmed their support for single sex spaces. Thus, gender self-identification became a battleground in the election campaign and both parties – though particularly the Conservatives – adopted more conservative positions and utilised frames and rhetoric that appeal to the Reform UK vote base.

An important question now that the election results are in, is what the consequences of this accommodative strategy will be. YouGov polling from May 2022 shows that attitudes towards transgender rights have eroded over recent years. Respondents show lower support of gender self-identification and significantly lower acceptance of transgender men and women's access to single sex spaces, as compared to 2018. Moreover, Stuart Turnbull-Dugarte and Fraser McMillan present experimental evidence from Scotland that framing debates on transgender rights around security concerns for (cisgender) women's safety has a significant negative effect on the public's support for transgender rights.

Therefore, by accommodating increasingly conservative positions on gender and LGBTQ+ equality issues, mainstream parties risk legitimising discourses that threaten the rights of LGBTQ+ people. Platforming these debates may also influence broader regression in voters' gender equality attitudes. However, it is worth noting that both the Green Party and Liberal Democrat manifestos offered comparatively more liberalised gender self-identification policies. Both parties also made record seat gains in this election, increasing their potential influence over the policy agenda. At the very least, we may expect to see gender and LGBTQ+ equality issues becoming significant sites of party competition in the future.

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The Digital Campaign

Local news and information on candidates was insufficient

Could voters find out enough about their constituency candidates during the 2024 UK Election campaign to make an informed decision on polling day? This question is particularly salient given the election was called unexpectedly, meaning that candidates were not selected until just weeks before the vote itself. Based on our research during the campaign, which builds on a similar study we did for the 2019 election, we find that the information available to voters about candidates was limited, haphazard and dependent on external factors. This has democratic implications and raises practical questions about how voters can find information about candidates in future elections.

Our 2019 study of election coverage published by over 95% of local news outlets across the UK online in the days leading up to the vote, found that less than 7% of articles contained information about the election, and only six in ten of these were about the local contest. The five years following the 2019 Election were very difficult for local journalism, as ongoing financial pressures were amplified by the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic. The 579 online local news outlets that we identified in 2019 had dropped, by the 2024 Election, to 460 – a decline of around one-fifth. This was driven partly by closures, but also by further consolidation. National World, for example, collapsed stand-alone news sites into regional hubs much like Reach Plc did a decade before.

During the 2024 campaign we monitored the articles published by local news outlets in four constituencies in the fortnight before the vote: Glasgow South, Blackpool North & Fleetwood, Banbury, and Poole. These were selected from the four areas that would, according to the *Financial Times*, 'decide the election'. In three of the four constituencies, two local news outlets published articles about the candidates. In Poole, there was only one outlet covering the contest, the *Bournemouth Echo*. In Banbury the news articles were supplemented by candidate interviews on independent local radio station Banbury FM.

Over the two weeks before polling day, the seven news outlets published 37 articles that referenced one or more of the candidates. Across the four constituencies this averaged out at less than one article in each outlet per day. There was, however, a significant range between outlets and candidates. Certain candidates, like Labour's Sean Woodcock in Banbury, were referenced in many articles (9). Others, like Danny Raja of Reform UK in Glasgow, were mentioned in none. The coverage was also highly contingent on external factors. In Banbury, it was boosted by visits from both Keir Starmer and Rishi Sunak. In Blackpool, most of the coverage was about a single hustings event, and written by Local Democracy Reporters. In Poole, there was minimal coverage of the contest (seven articles in this period), and all but one article was written by a single reporter (who was also covering other constituencies). Given that Poole was eventually won by only 18 votes, it would be reasonable to conclude that more coverage may have influenced the outcome.

Of course, in a digital age, there are other sources of candidate information available beyond that published by local news outlets. We identified three further categories of information online that were potentially available to voters: information published by the candidate/party themselves (on their own websites or social media); information gathered and published automatically – either for public interest or commercial reasons (e.g. WhoCanYouVoteFor, or Google's information boxes); and information published by other members of the public and/or civil society (chiefly on social media).

However, again, based on our research on these four constituencies, we found this information to be sporadic, subjective, and highly conditional on the candidate themselves. Some candidates provided regular and substantive information via official and personal profiles. Stewart McDonald (SNP), for example, had an SNP page, a public Facebook page, and a Twitter/X profile (on which he posted frequently). Others, such as Banbury's Social Democrat candidate Declan Soper, published no information online at all. For candidates like these, though there are websites which automatically collate material from the web (such as voteclimate.uk), if there is no information available, then there is nothing to collate. Twitter/X was the most popular self-publishing platform for these candidates, though some had a much greater audience on the service than others. Victoria Prentis (Conservative, Banbury), for example, had almost 17,000 followers and her posts sometimes received over 30,000 views. Neil Duncan-Jordan (Labour, Poole), by contrast, had only 210 followers and would rarely receive more than a thousand views.

This early analysis is based on only four constituencies, though it is consistent with our findings from 2019. During each election campaign, there was limited information about candidates available to voters, and information availability varied considerably according to constituency and candidate. External factors, such as visits by party leaders, or the presence of a Local Democracy Reporter, could have a pronounced effect on coverage. This raises normative democratic questions and suggests the declining provision of local news is unlikely to be offset by political information published elsewhere.

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The AI election that wasn't - yet

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At the start of 2024 – a year when half the world's citizens had a chance to vote – technology leaders such Sam Altman, head of Open AI, raised concerns about 'AI and democracy'. They really meant 'AI and the next US election'. But elections across the world are running for the first time after the release of so-called 'generative AI', which allows anyone to generate text, images, audio and video with written prompts. So, along with most 2024 elections, the UK election was labelled 'the AI election'.

How might generative AI damage an election? First, concerns relate to information. The democratic landscape could be deluged with low quality, potentially harmful misinformation at scale. Second, influence. AI might turbocharge perniciously targeted political advertising and persuasion, and be used to generate abuse, threats and intimidation at scale. So, what happened in the campaign leading up to 4th July? I deal with information and influence in turn.

Information

There were clearly bots at work in the campaign, with most evidence pointing to Reform as perpetrator of accounts across X, Instagram, Facebook and TikTok. These were pumping out low quality propaganda, but it is not clear that they were generated with AI. Accounts like GenZboomer, identified by a BBC initiative to capture propaganda-style content, claimed to be real humans albeit not willing to talk to a journalist.

What about deep fakes? There was little evidence of people seeing very harmful deep fakes – even to rival the audio deepfake of the London Mayor expressing inflammatory pro-Palestinian views that emerged in the May 2024 London election, that Sadiq Kahn described as almost causing 'serious disorder'. The most worrying evidence of an AI effect comes more from AI-hype than AI itself. A Turing Institute research survey showed that although only about 6% of respondents recalled being exposed to political deep fakes, over 90% were concerned that deepfakes could increase distrust in misinformation or manipulate public opinion.

Influence

A key issue here was highly targeted, personalised political microtargeting. All the main parties ran online advertisements during the campaign. But targeting was unsophisticated, in part because most social media platforms have tightened restrictions on targeting specifically for political advertising. Furthermore, when it comes to personalizing messages, new research shows that targeted messages devised with GPT4 did not become more persuasive however many attributes were used – the "best message" of GPT4 was just as good.

AI could reinforce 'negative persuasion', that is hate, abuse and intimidation – a longstanding concern in British politics that worsened during 2024, especially after Musk took over and rebranded Twitter as X. NBC reported that the platform was monetizing racist and antisemitic hashtags like #whitepower and a the NGO Global Witness claimed that 10 accounts spread 60,000 posts containing "extreme and violent" hate speech, disinformation and conspiracy theories, viewed 150 million times during the election. Gender disparity effects were demonstrated even before the election, with female candidates reporting to an Electoral Commission study during the May elections that online threats against them had got worse. Again, it is unclear that abuse is AI-generated – yet. But already observable effects on politics are worrying. Turing Institute research shows that 77% of women are not comfortable/not all comfortable with expressing political opinions online (far more than for men experiencing similar levels of abuse).

AI and our democratic future

So it wasn't the AI election, but what can it tell us about AI's impact on our democratic future? All the AI tools are there for the feared deluge of political propaganda, even if they didn't materialise this time, and generative AI will continue to evolve and develop. But 2024 suggests that the effects of hype around AI and election safety are also concerning. The focus on misinformation (also by AI assistants such as Microsoft's Copilot) can itself decrease trust in political information. In future, AI-powered negative persuasion may increase intimidation – and fear of intimidation decrease willingness to participate in political life.

One challenge with assessing the effect of AI is that in this election, the 'standard of truth was very low', as Channel 4's former political editor judged at LSE Election Night. Record levels of distrust in UK politicians' claims was evidenced by 58% of people saying they 'almost never' trust 'politicians of any party to tell the truth when they are in a tight corner', up 19 points from 2020. Rishi Sunak's characterisation of Labour's tax plans were widely circulated even after being refuted by Treasury officials, leading to a warning from the UK Statistics Authority to all political leaders in the campaign. AI-powered platforms are used to disseminate such claims, but the root lies elsewhere.

Democracy is for daily life – not just elections. In a democratic landscape with a focus on misinformation (be it from AI, fear of AI or politicians themselves), the danger is that people no longer trust any political information, even about the date, time, rules or results of the election itself. Future focus needs to be on prioritising the capability to get 'good' democratic information out, rather than relying on the information market.

AI-generated images: how citizens depicted politicians and society

Fears that AI-generated images, video and audio would bring an information apocalypse of misinformation ahead of the General Election did not materialize. Instead, the use of AI-generated images varied widely across tools, platforms and communities.

Despite blocks on generating presidential candidates in the US, Midjourney (a widely used commercial image-generating tool) allowed users to create images of UK politicians leading up to the election, albeit with unrealistic depictions of the politicians requested. Citizens largely used these tools in playful ways, creating memes, commenting on current events and inserting politicians as characters in their favourite films. Liam McLoughlin's chapter highlights how AI videos created by citizens formed part of a participatory culture, while official campaigns used AI tools to generate campaign content and even create AI candidates.

Although it was often difficult to tell which images are AI-generated in the wild, on Midjourney Rishi Sunak was undoubtedly the most generated politician of the campaign as citizens generated images and memes relating to current events. After his rain-drenched election announcement, images of Sunak speaking outside a flooded Downing Street were shared widely across social media platforms. After Sunak stated he went without Sky TV as a child, Generative AI images showed him staring at a blank television screen, crying and begging for Sky. Facebook events dedicated to Sunak's leaving drinks were flooded with satirical images following the events of the campaign.

Behind Sunak, Starmer and Farage were the next most generated party leaders. Few images were generated of Liberal Democrat leader Ed Davey, perhaps because the real photographs of him bungee jumping and falling off a paddleboard were exciting enough. On X and Reddit, some users shared images of Farage as a heroic and patriotic figure, for instance riding a lion while wearing a Union Jack suit. Images were used to mock or deify political leaders, and most focused on a politician's personal characteristics rather than policy issues.

One of the most popular uses of Midjourney was to generate illustrations of politicians. These included Midjourney's default painting-style images, as well as more political content such as cartoons and caricatures, which can serve as tools of political engagement and expression. A similar proportion of images related more explicitly to meme culture, taking and exaggerating current events. A category of images inserted politicians into popular franchises such as films (Dune, the Matrix), television shows (Fallout), and video games. Few images created with Midjourney appeared to be political and realistic in a way that could spread misinformation, potentially due to blocks on this content, although some showed politicians having coffee with each other or meeting other world leaders.

Alongside this more lighthearted content, AI-generated images shared amongst the far-right on X generated harm through depictions of dystopian futures. Such images visualized conspiracy theories of Muslims 'taking over' London. Amongst these X users, images of politicians wearing Muslim dress were created and shared. For example, an image of Keir Starmer wearing a pink hijbab was picked up and shared by GB News presenter Darren Grimes.

These insidious images have the potential to cause harm through their blatant Islamophobia, and gendered and racialized constructions of Muslims as an outgroup in society. Muslim women were portrayed as victims, with full-body covering Islamic dress being a recurring theme amongst the far right. Muslim men were depicted en masse, as a large group and with faces hidden, a depiction which a social semiotic approach informs us creates fear and anxiety. WWII soldiers were a recurring theme amongst these images, invoking nostalgia for a time when white men were revered as heroes. Lions, Union Jacks, the St George's Cross and figures such as Winston Churchill all construct the in-group as white, British and masculine.

Notably, many of these images were not realistic. Instead of fake news and realistic misinformation, they caused harm through their clear and divisive constructions of in-groups and out-groups. They perpetuated harmful stereotypes against minorities, sowing division and hatred between groups in society. This emphasizes the importance of not giving in to hype on issues like misinformation and taking a theory-led approach to AI-generated synthetic media and its dangers for society.

This election showed that AI-image generating tools are largely used in fun and playful ways. The post-election challenge lies in combatting the more harmful content in a holistic way. Technical initiatives such as labelling AI-generated images and including embedded image provenance are important and necessary steps to enable citizens to understand where an image has come from. However, we also need to adapt our approach to combat the harms of images which are more noticeably AI-generated and attack minorities.

Approaches could include regulations for platforms to remove harmful images, which may be more difficult to detect than text-based abuse, media organizations building media literacy, and academics developing theory around the unique impact of visuals on emotions and behaviour of citizens.

This article is based on early empirical findings of a content analysis of AI-generated images conducted in collaboration with the BBC R&D Responsible Innovation team, funded by the ESRC Digital Good Network.

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The threat to democracy that wasn't? Four types of AI-generated synthetic media in the General Election

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The intervening years between the 2019 and 2024 General Elections saw a proliferation of publicly accessible Artificial Intelligence (AI) products. Tools such as ChatGPT, Midjourney, ElevenLab's Speech synthesis, and Suno AI music generator, have allowed for the speedy creation of synthetic media content and campaign tools. These are partly marketed as solutions that lower the cost of media creation while simultaneously speeding up production times - a frugal campaigner's dream.

At the same time, these tools could threaten democracy. A primary concern for this election was the potential of deepfakes: AI-generated images, videos, or audio designed to deliberately mislead viewers through the creation of fake events or statements (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020). Fears were high. A YouGov poll in May 2024 found 49% of respondents thought AI-generated deepfake videos of politicians are likely to have a fair or great deal of impact on the General Election. While numerous articles such as those from the BBC and CNN warned of an onslaught of AI-driven disinformation.

The perceived AI threat overshadowed the more frequent (and positive) uses of AI-generated content this election. These include the use of image generation for satire; AI tools for campaigners; and even AI-generated candidates. This isn't to say, however, that disinformation was not present.

The most frequent use of AI-generated media was by citizens and satellite campaigners to create satire, memes or images otherwise supporting particular candidates. Niamh Cashell's chapter provides examples from Midjourney that includes Rishi Sunak crying, to candidates riding lions victoriously as a form of popular culture. But the campaign also witnessed video content generated by younger audiences as political expression. Highly shared examples include a deepfake of Nigel Farage playing Minecraft blowing up Rishi Sunak's base, and another of Sunak planning a game of Fortnite after conscripting Year 10 and 11 students into National Service. This is all evidence of a long-standing trend of using creative technology as part of participatory culture, which can be a net positive for democratic engagement.

A second form of AI use was by party campaigners themselves. This ranges from behind-the-scenes tools such as Campaign Lab's Chatbots designed to train doorknockers and educate on electoral regulation. Synthetic media has also been found in campaign materials. But for the most part, parties have seemingly drawn the line at using AI to directly create images of their candidates or their opponents. Instead, parties mix assets and join content together such as generating a scene using AI, then Photoshopping in relevant faces. Despite some of the reservations of AI use by campaigners (Dommett, 2024), it seems there is a limited, but useful, space for AI-generated media in campaigns materials.

Thirdly is the AI candidate. This is a less frequent, but nevertheless interesting use of AI in this General Election where candidates used AI representations as stand-ins. The first example is AI Steve, an AI-generated political candidate, which stood in Brighton and Hove. This candidate promised to be easy-to-contact and one that citizens could directly control. Certainly, AI Steve was an interesting possibility, but one which ultimately attracted more media attention than voters.

The second example of AI candidates are paper candidates who use AI-generated representations. Some paper candidates, who have little chance of success and minimal financial assistance from the party to campaign, used AI-generated media in an attempt present themselves as credible candidates despite their lack of resources. In one instance, a Reform candidate standing in the Labour safe seat of Clapham & Brixton Hill is represented by an AI image – claimed in a post to be due to a lack of photographers. In this election, it seems AI-generated content has allowed paper candidates to present themselves as more just a name and provide a more individualised content than boilerplate campaign material.

Finally, the fourth trend in AI-generated media was disinformation with a few potentially impactful cases. Most of these were to be found via the Facebook Ad Library which included deepfakes of Rishi Sunak and Keir Starmer. However, these were poorly produced financial scams. It seems to-date that the technology behind deepfake videos and photos is unable to produce convincing visual content, which may explain the limited occurrence of this type of disinformation within our data collection. It should be noted that disinformation may have been obfuscated by its spread through private groups, which researchers may struggle to access.

More convincing is the deepfake audio clips which proliferated on social media – with a fake audio of Labour candidates Wes Streeting and Luke Akehurst containing disparaging comments on Gaza and the electorate respectively. This is especially interesting as Streeting won his seat of Ilford North by only 528 seats, a decrease of -20.7% compared to 2019 – partially due to the issue of Gaza. It's the impact of this case that certainly deserves further exploration.

The 2024 General Election was not the AI election, but it certainly showed us the fledgeling uses of these tools by citizens and candidates during the campaign.

Screenshot of the Mark Matlock for Reform campaign website with a visibly AI-generated profile image

Shitposting meets Generative Artificial Intelligence and 'deep fakes' at the 2024 General Election

Dr Rosalynd Southern

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During the Labour conference in October 2023, a Twitter-user calling themselves 'El Borto' released a Generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI) generated voice recording purporting to be Keir Starmer. In it, 'Starmer' is abusive to his aide over a supposedly forgotten iPad, calling him a "fucking moron". The video rapidly went viral, receiving well over a million views, with several news sites picking it up. This clip led to much debate around the rise of AI 'deepfakes' and their potential threat to democracy, particularly in the run up to an election. It had a sheen of authenticity due to it being 'leaked' on the first day of conference, when leaks often occur, and echoing earlier scandals, such as Gordon Brown's 'BigotGate'.

However, it was also clear that this was a joke or, in internet vernacular, a 'shitpost'. This is a long-standing practice in tight-knit internet communities where people are 'in' on the joke. Looking at the account's name (a Simpson's reference) and avatar (Bort from the Simpson's) should have alerted any factchecker or even vaguely social media-literate internet user that this was a joke account. However, a joke can become unintended disinformation if it reaches outside of its intended audience, something which often happens on Twitter. It can then make its way onto other platforms with the context removed. I wrote about this for the last Election Analysis report, before GAI became mainstream. In 2019, it was faked images of Jo Swinson bragging on Facebook about killing squirrels that went viral. The concern at this election, however, was that more people could be duped by convincing GAI content as opposed to more obvious photoshops.

Fears that GAI is being used to maliciously damage democracy may be overstated, however. During the election itself there were some examples of GAI 'deep-fakes' being deployed, but some of these were not technically a 'deep-fake'. One clip posted by user 'Men for Wes' purported to show Shadow Health Secretary Wes Streeting calling Diane Abbott a "silly woman". This, however, appeared to be the account holder doing an impression of Streeting and splicing the audio into the real clip, rather than any actual GAI content. A day before the election, another audio clip purporting to be Streeting being rude to a voter went viral. Again, this was a poor impression of Streeting, which he himself responded to, calling it a "shallow fake".

Another video, which was certainly closer to a deepfake, showed Labour candidate Luke Akehurst, who drew some criticism for being selected for a seat he had no previous connection to, calling the residents of his prospective constituency "thick Geordie cunts". Again, however, despite being a real video of Akehurst, with the mouth manipulated by GAI, the audio was clearly an unserious impression of Akehurst. This could more accurately be described as a 'dumbfake' – manipulated media that is not believable and is almost certainly not meant to be taken seriously. The pinned tweet of the account that posted the Akehurst video was another GAI video of 'Princess Diana' doing "heroic defending" during several 1990s football matches. This tells us that the user has image manipulation skills, but that they also deploy those skills largely for laughs. This makes for easy basic fact-checking.

One concern is how more elite actors reacted to these clips. Some news outlets ran the story about Starmer abusing his aide seriously at first, before pulling it. The initial rush to get the story out was quickly corrected but it is likely some people read the originals first and not the correction. During the election, the BBC's Disinformation and social media correspondent put out several reports based on these instances. She conflated 'deepfakes', 'dumb fakes' and 'mash-ups', the latter being where real clips of politicians are remixed to say different things. These have been circulated for years now, with accounts like 'Cassetteboy' gaining a huge following for his mashups based on David Cameron and Jacob Rees-Mogg speeches. They are obvious satire and not meant to be taken seriously. It is not helpful or informative to put these all into the same category. A joke clip is akin to the satire that has always existed in a healthy democratic public sphere, whereas a fully-rendered and supposed to be believable and believed deepfake with the express intention of damaging a politician is a clear threat to democracy. Conflating them obscures what a real threat would look like.

All this is not to downplay the potential democratic risks of GAI – they are real and potentially serious. But we shouldn't take our eye off disinformation perpetuated by more elite sources and spread via more prosaic means. One example here could be that The Conservatives were fact-checked repeatedly for spreading false claims about Labour's '£2000 tax rise'. However, they simply repeated this verbally, largely via traditional media platforms, which was then amplified via certain elements of the press. No GAI needed. In this context, a joke for one's friends that gets out of hand may not be the most urgent threat to democracy that needs tackling.

Shitposting the General Election: why this campaign felt like one long meme

In this chapter, we discuss how internet memes were used by the main protagonists of the campaign. Our takeaways are firstly that 2024 saw a dramatic escalation of meme posting by parties on social media relative to previous elections, secondly that memes were used largely for negative campaigning; exploiting the target-rich environment created by the Conservative Party's dire campaign. Finally we argue that that the campaign arc itself had a memetic logic: it spawned iterative potent images and catchphrases, recalled and remixed across both social and traditional media, often expressing derision of party leaders through opportunistic and recursive reframing.

We adopt Milner's definition of memes as "multimodal artefacts remixed by countless participants, employing popular culture for public commentary." This captures the communicative format and political nature of the type of memes that political parties and partisans deploy in modern elections. Reflecting on the 2016 Trump vs Clinton campaign, Chmielewski asserts, "Internet memes have emerged as the lingua franca of the modern campaign. Those humorous images, short videos and slogans ricochet across Twitter and Facebook with the speed of an irresistible piece of celebrity gossip."

The cruel and fickle nature of memetic communication has long been apparent. One of the early innovators of digital campaigning using online humour was 2004 US presidential candidate Howard Dean, but, following his famous 'Dean Scream' he found the joke was on him; now, in 2024, Rishi Sunak has demonstrated winning the meme war in all the wrong ways.

Despite two decades' passage, how internet memes function within electoral politics remains little understood for being difficult to analyse. Part of this lies in the ambiguity of the meme qua concept – memes can be deployed as communicative devices but also serve as units/vectors of cultural reproduction and amplification and represent a form of (often subversive) humour. Anonymity and fluidity contribute to defying traditional campaign measurements of persuasion and influence. Polysemy, a term that captures the capacity of memes to simultaneously communicate multiple messages, which can be picked up in different ways by different viewers, is a further characteristic that makes memes intractable for political analysts and unpredictable for campaigners.

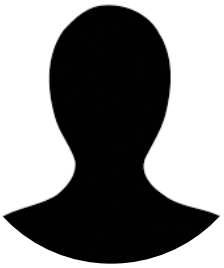
Southern provides a potted history of memes in UK elections up to 2019. She points to forerunners of memetic campaign activity that can be discerned as early as 2010 when www.MyDavidCameron.com allowed all comers to insert slogans into the Conservative's flagship poster. While 2017 saw extensive use of memes by supporters of Jeremy Corbyn, 2019 was the first UK election characterised by the sustained use of memes as part of the formal online campaigns of major parties and candidates.

It was from early in the 2024 campaign that memetic communications ramped up across the field. All parties deployed memes liberally across social media, some proving very popular. The most viewed party TikTok post of the campaign (with 5.1 million views by election day) was Labour's reprise of the Cilla Black 'Surprise Surprise' meme in response to Rishi Sunak's announcement of a new national service scheme as a Conservative policy. Notably failing to learn from Cameron's 2010 slogan-writing web app, Sunak generously gifted anti-Conservative shitposters with Photoshop-begging flip charts.

We are keen to emphasise the prevalence of a specific form of humour: snark. This combination of sarcasm, mockery, and irreverence was a common aspect of many of the memes deployed by the parties in this campaign.

The snarky tone of Labour's (and other opposition parties) memes in their treatment of Sunak makes contextual sense because the Conservatives ran one of the most incompetent campaigns by a governing party in the history of British politics. To many of us doomed by professional obligation to follow the thing day by day, suspicion arose that they were doing a bad job on purpose: launching the campaign in the rain, leaving the D-Day commemoration event early, becoming embroiled in a gambling scandal, and being generally oblivious – the Tories served up ample opportunity for memetic mockery. Notably, snark and memes are each well suited to leverage destructive communications and candidate delegitimization. Indeed, the Conservative Party's memes were also largely examples of negative campaigning, targeting Labour and Keir Starmer.

It is standard for academics to lament the lack of substance at the end of a political campaign, but the 2024 UK General Election felt particularly vapid. Absent a clash of ideas, we were largely treated to a clash of memes – often in images altered from what leaders sought to project. Absent purchase in compelling meme analysis, the meme listicle was standard fare reporting. Reappropriated and regurgitated images flooded online and traditional media throughout – Rishi Sunak is all wet, Keir Starmer is the son of a toolmaker, Ed Davey is sporty, and Nigel Farage is pranked – this is the election's cultural shorthand for the six weeks we've just spent – which, as the title of this chapter asserts, felt like one long meme.



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Winning voters' hearts and minds... through reels and memes?! How #GE24 unfolded on TikTok

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"I'm looking for a new Prime Minister: Big plans. Good vibes. Change lives." You'd be forgiven to think this TikTok reel, which borrows from the viral "I'm looking for a man in finance" song by influencer @girl_on_the_couch, is just parody crafted by another Gen Z personality on the popular social platform. Except that it's not. This 8-second clip ranks among the most-watched videos the Labour Party has posted on its official TikTok channel, with over 3.6m likes at the time of writing. There are other examples, too: a video titled 'POV: Rishi Sunak's searches' of the former Prime Minister googling flights to California has been viewed 2.7m times. The party's most viewed TikTok video, 'POV: Rishi Sunak turning up on your 18th birthday to send you to war' uses Cilla Black's song 'Surprise, Surprise' to mock the former PM's national service plan and has been viewed a staggering 5.2m times. As much as mainstream media continued to dominate coverage of the campaign, this was also an election where political parties, peripheral media and 'newsfluencers' on TikTok and YouTube were vying for attention.

And like in the 2017 and 2019 general elections, there was no shortage of election blunders that gave the Labour party ammunition to attack their opponents, and alternative voices meme-worthy content by the hour: from Sunak's surprise election announcement in the pouring rain (leading some to joke that that 'Things can only get wetter'), to his visit of the Titanic site (which led to inevitable comparisons to him leading a sinking ship) and his national service announcement (branded a 'Teenage Dad's Army' by Sir Keir Starmer), it was fair game for those ridiculing the Conservatives. Granted, political gaffes are part and parcel of often unpredictable election campaigns, and one can hardly fault parties for making fun of their rivals when so much is at stake. Just cast your mind back to Theresa May's disastrous social care policy in the 2017 election, or Boris Johnson hiding in a fridge to escape a TV reporter in 2019. In both elections, political parties spent significant money on Facebook ads to lure voters. What's different, this time, is that political parties persistently churned out content on TikTok, with both Labour and the Conservatives notably only joining two days after the surprise election announcement. This ties in with the rise of so-called 'spinfluencers' targeting a younger demographic that primarily gets their news from social media. But having observed the two major parties' TikTok accounts over the past few weeks, it's remarkable how thin they are on policy – and how relentless they are at bashing their rivals. So, how does this go down with those such content is aimed at – young voters?

"All it is is them having one over another. You don't learn anything of what they've actually got to offer you, but rather what the other party doesn't offer you," first-time voter Rachel said in a Channel 4 News piece as part of a survey by the Social Mobility Foundation. Regardless, it's easy to see why campaign strategists want to tap into the Gen Z target demographic: according to the same survey, 34% of 18-24-year-olds across 3,500 participants in the UK use TikTok as their main source of news. More broadly, 70% of 18-24-year-olds use social media as their main source of news. This year, the Reuters Institute Digital News Report finds short video formats as an increasingly important source, especially among younger groups. Tied to this, it highlights "an increasing focus on partisan commentators and young news creators, especially on YouTube and TikTok". In the UK, the TikTok account of Dylan Page (aka 'News Daddy') boasts 11.2m subscribers, and digital creator Jack Kelly hosts the popular Politics Joe and TLDR News. The latter publishes regular explainer videos on UK politics on YouTube, employs 11 staff in their twenties full-time, and is profitable on a £1m annual turnover. Among its most recent videos is 'The UK Election Results Explained', which garnered 1.1m YouTube views just two days after the election, and currently ranks among the Top 50 trending videos on the platform. I couldn't help but think back to the Channel 4 News piece. In it, Evelyn, another first-time voter, said of the parties' TikTok presence: "If you're going to have a TikTok account, and you're going to talk about politics, actually tell me what you're going to do: why does this matter?" Sure, young people may well get a laugh out of a funny political meme or reel they can share with friends and family on WhatsApp, but there also seems to be an appetite to understand politics and have it explained to them in short, accessible ways – especially when it comes from online personalities perceived as authentic and relatable.

I have studied digital-native alternative and peripheral media since 2016 when I moved from the UK to Australia and have found their rise and occasional success nothing short of fascinating. The emergence of social media platforms, which has lowered publication thresholds and has made it easier for alternative voices to be heard above the crowd, has only further increased their prominence. Traditional media, like Channel 4 News, tap into that with its 'Shorts' section on YouTube featuring vertical videos for mobile consumption, which includes explainer content by younger presenters. But with the two major parties having only recently joined TikTok to engage younger voters, it seems that both traditional media and campaign strategists have something to learn from how newsfluencers and alternative voices successfully engage younger voters.

Debating the election in "non-political" third spaces: the case of Gransnet

Third spaces are formally non-political online communities where political talk emerges. Building on Oldenburg's concept of third places, Wright retheorised the concept for online communities where people can come together for informal conversation and socialising. Wright argues that third spaces may overcome some of the challenges with online political communication, including that people may avoid political talk; that it can become polarised; and that it can lack discursive quality. This is because political talk is harder to avoid; people in third spaces are not coming together based on their political views but based on a shared interest; and community norms, 'regulars' or 'super-participants' act as gatekeepers, plus moderation will maintain a generally respectful tone of debate. While political talk can emerge anywhere, we have observed that some local Facebook groups and forums do not allow political talk. For example, one of the UK's largest forums, MoneySavingExpert, which has previously been shown to facilitate a range of political talk and participation, asks participants "to please avoid political debate on the Forum. This is to keep it a safe and useful space for MoneySaving discussions. Threads that are - or become - political in nature may be removed…". There is further anecdotal evidence that party activists strategically target such forums, and this, alongside concerns about mis and disinformation, may also be a factor.

While lots of research has studied how politicians use social media, research on everyday online political talk about UK General Elections, particularly in third spaces, is limited. This study seeks to address this limitation. We present here some initial findings and reflections on a study of election debates on 'Gransnet', a forum founded by Justine Roberts in 2011, owner of the large and politically influential Mumsnet forum.

Gransnet and the 2024 General Election

There was extensive talk about the general election on Gransnet, often driven by the news agenda. Using the keyword 'election', we identified a range of threads covering everything from voting to the TV debates and Nigel Farage to Brexit. The biggest threads focused on the polls (709), Diane Abbott (505 posts), trans rights (247), and some 587 posts on the clothing choice of one female politician (initially the debate was about whether it was fair to comment on this, and this evolved into a wider debate). Overall, the threads provided an ongoing account of the campaign and result. Some posters noted that they get their political news largely from Gransnet. An example of the dynamics of third spaces is a thread focusing on Farage announcing he would stand received 484 posts. This started off as highly critical of Farage, who was variously described as 'vile', 'a chancer' and a 'narcissist!' until post 30 in which someone responded to a question about what is good about Farage that "he'd got us the Brexit Referendum". Another person then commented, thanking the pro-Farage poster for pointing the thread out, and they were now watching it – suggesting they had been contacted via Direct Message. Another replied that "He might be marmite but plenty love marmite me included." There followed an ongoing back and forth 'debate' which quickly descended into polarised insults, with little substantive discussion and a debate about whether people were being racist.

After the election, several threads reflected on the result, with comments that were positive about both Labour and Remain in particular. There has also been a push from some to move on, including a thread titled "Now the election is over, let us talk about something else - like the weather!" A particular feature on Gransnet is for people to just post a daily update on what they have been doing, and these also included several reflections on voting and staying up to watch the results.

Finally, it is worth noting that there were 'regulars' in the election threads – highly frequent posters – who tended to have strong political views. Based on the initial data collection of 4,232 posts, 43% of all posts were made by the 10 most frequent super-posters, with 352 distinct posters and 161 people making a single post.

In summary, our initial analysis finds that Gransnet featured significant, often strongly cross-cutting political talk that at times descended into personal attacks, particularly around divisive figures and issues. These were largely political threads, in the news and politics sub-forum; this is a specific subset of everyday political talk that tends to appeal to the politically interested and is more easily avoided by those less interested in politics. The next step is to undertake content analysis of the threads, and for a future election it would be important to assess both strategic manipulation by activists and the moderation processes.

Note: this piece was jointly written by participants in the Bournemouth University Digital Methods Summer School.

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Which social networks did political parties use most in 2024?

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In recent years much ink has been spilled over the possible influence of social media on UK general election results. This year—perhaps because the was little doubt about which party would emerge victorious, or because the focus has shifted to the influence of AI—there's been much less talk about social media.

Reflecting the fact that social media use has become more fragmented since the last general election in 2019, some commentators have, however, speculated about where in cyberspace the campaign is being fought. Is the battle taking place on private messaging apps like WhatsApp? Or are parties fighting for attention on newer, more video-based social networks like TikTok, perhaps at the expense of 'legacy' social networks like Facebook and X?

To explore this, I analysed the number of posts from official party accounts during the official General Election campaign (30th May to 4th June inclusive). I looked at the six parties with the highest vote share (Labour, Conservative, Lib Dem, Reform, Green, SNP) on the five most popular social networks in the UK (excluding messaging apps) according to the 2024 Reuters Institute Digital News Report (Facebook, YouTube, X, Instagram and TikTok).

This data, of course, does not tell the full story. It does not capture the broader political conversation, or that parties themselves are active on social media in other ways, often across multiple accounts (e.g., those of party leaders or regional divisions). And it says nothing about the important issue of political advertising. But it does provide a broad sense of where parties are putting their resources, and where they think they are best able to reach potential voters.

Despite the buzz around newer networks like TikTok, the results show that parties were (still) most active on 'legacy' social networks like X, followed by Facebook (Figure 1). As well as having more posts in total, all six parties individually posted more to X than on any other platform. This focus on X is perhaps unsurprising given that it is still home to a disproportionately large number of users interested in news and politics. But the way the parties prioritised Facebook is perhaps surprising, given its recent efforts to deprioritise news and politics in people's feeds. Though, on the other hand, it remains the most widely used social network for news in the UK.

Instagram was less widely used by the main parties, but on average they each still posted to it 2-3 times per day during the campaign. This puts it level with TikTok, which was used by the parties for the first time during a UK general election campaign. YouTube, although relatively popular for news in the UK, was rarely used. However, given its huge user base, parties may still have chosen to use it more for political advertising.

Focussing on the parties, Figure 1 also shows that Labour and the SNP were the most active on social media overall—each making a total of just under 1000 social media posts each during the campaign (which is about 30 posts per day). The SNP were the most active individual party on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Labour were the most active party on YouTube, and the Lib Dems were the most active party on TikTok. The Conservatives posted a lot to Facebook and X, but rarely on other networks. The Greens posted relatively little, but fairly evenly across networks.

To some extent, the results are aligned with the more fragmented patterns of social media use we see in 2024. No one social network is used by everyone, and the use of specific networks is influenced by people's age and interests. Therefore, parties (much like news organisations) recognise that they need to communicate across multiple platforms to reach the public. But, it seems, they still prioritise networks with large, politically interested userbases, while also experimenting with newer networks.

There is, however, a potentially more interesting trend under the surface. Posting from the main political parties (at least on Facebook and Instagram, where there is reliable past data from CrowdTangle) was down considerably compared to the 2019 campaign. On Facebook, the average number of posts per day across all parties was down by around 42%, while on Instagram posting fell by around 24%. This isn't true for every individual party—the Lib Dems upped their use of Instagram, for example. And, of course, new networks like TikTok may be picking up some of the slack (though TikTok alone simply isn't used enough to fully compensate for the Facebook decline). But it nonetheless begs the question—given the parallel decline of news participation on social media in recent years—of whether the importance of social media in election campaigns starting to wane? Let's return to this question in 2029.

X saw the highest number of posts from the official party accounts during the campaign. The SNP and Labour accounts were the most active.

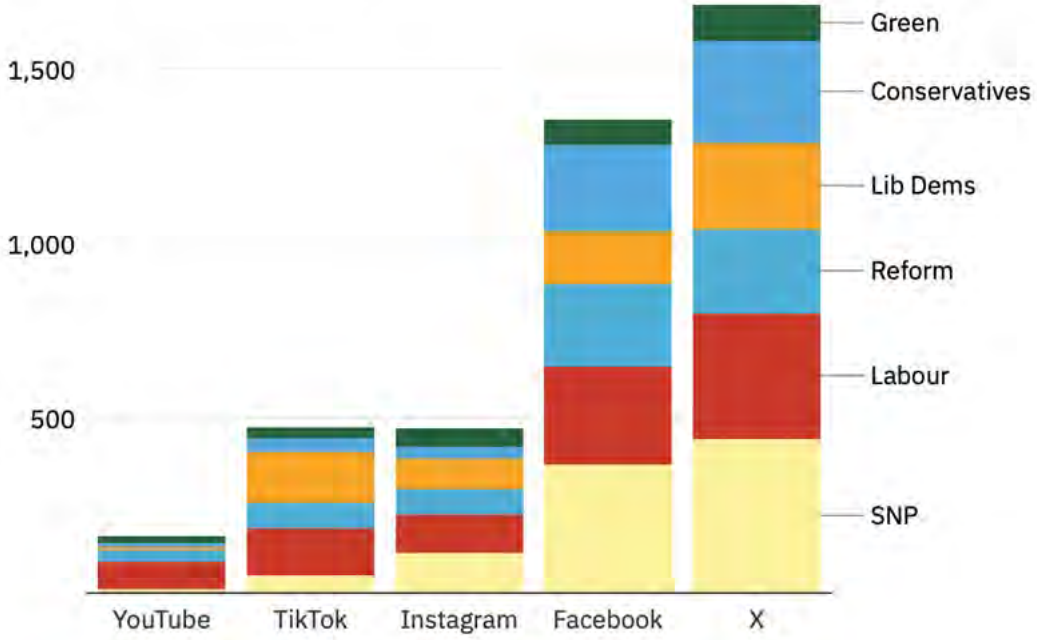

Figure 1: Number of posts from official party accounts during the 2024 UK General Election campaign

Facebook's role in the General Election: still relevant in a more fragmented information environment

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While pundits and pollsters were accurately predicting Rishi Sunak would be trounced after calling the snap general election on 22nd May, it didn't slow down his share of public attention on Facebook.

Of the 5.2 million public Facebook interactions with the major parties and candidates since the election was called, Sunak stood out – although admittedly getting more HAHA (49,510) than LOVE (33,257) interactions. That was until Reform UK leader Nigel Farage entered the fray on 3rd June. Farage quickly dominated Facebook political traffic, with 2.12 million interactions, or put another way, 40 % of the total of all Facebook traffic of the major parties and candidates during his campaign.

Facebook data is a useful measure of online public engagement in the campaigns because it is the most widely used social media platform in Britain. According to the 2024 Reuters Institute Digital News Report, 63 % of Britons use it to consume general online content (63%) and about one in five (17%) specifically for news.

But Facebook tends to appeal to an older audience and as this special election series shows us, it is only one part of the overall campaign story. Despite headlines heralding politician's massive online advertising spend and audience reach on social media, this was not a social media election. But nor was it a mainstream media election.

What is clear about the 2024 UK election result is that astute political campaigners understand the highly fragmented media environment and will tailor their messages across a variety of media platforms with paid and organic (free) content. While Facebook still plays a role in political actors' overall election communication strategy by amassing followers (as Table 1 shows), Meta's deliberate move away from politics and its deprioritisation of news suggests its influence on public opinion in politics is waning.

For example, our analysis of Meta's CrowdTangle data of the race between Sunak and his major political rival, the Labour Party's Sir Keir Starmer, finds Sunak captivated the older Facebook audience with more than half a million interactions (569.3k), just ahead of Starmer (482.4k) during the six-week campaign (see Figure 1).

Similarly for Farage. While we cannot be certain that his extraordinarily large audience share on Facebook was not inflated by bots and artificial activity, it may have bolstered his profile and helped deliver his first House of Commons seat after seven failed attempts.

While the major parties and candidates recognise the need to have a Facebook presence as Table 1 shows with their number of followers, they use the platform in different ways.

A deeper dive into the CrowdTangle data reveals different approaches in communication styles between the parties and candidates. Despite its leader's audience share, the Conservative party, attracted much less attention on the platform with about a quarter of a million Facebook interactions (259.1k) compared to Starmer's Labour party (423.5k). Why was this? It may be that despite the Presidential styled campaigns, voters still recognise that they are voting for a party and a local candidate – and Labour was clearly more popular. But it might also have something to do with the smart use of online video and its appeal to younger audiences. While both major parties posted 100 videos each during the campaign, Labour attracted more video views and kept eyeballs engaged for longer by posting on average lengthier reels —the sweet spot being between one to two minutes— with more policy content compared to the Conservatives who opted typically for shorter videos under one minute (see Figure 2).

The latest Digital News Report finds across nations that audiences are adding more video to their news diets, particularly younger audiences. This public preference for video content seems consistent during the election campaign. Of the 8.6 million audience views of political parties and candidates' Facebook videos, it is Starmer (509.2k) and Labour (625.6k) and Farage (4.3M) and Reform UK (1.8M) that garner almost 85 % of the video viewing audience by posting longer clips.

The General Election has shown that Facebook continues to play an important role in parties' campaign strategies and in the way people engage with politics and information about the election. However, it faces increasing competition from other platforms – and traditional news sources.

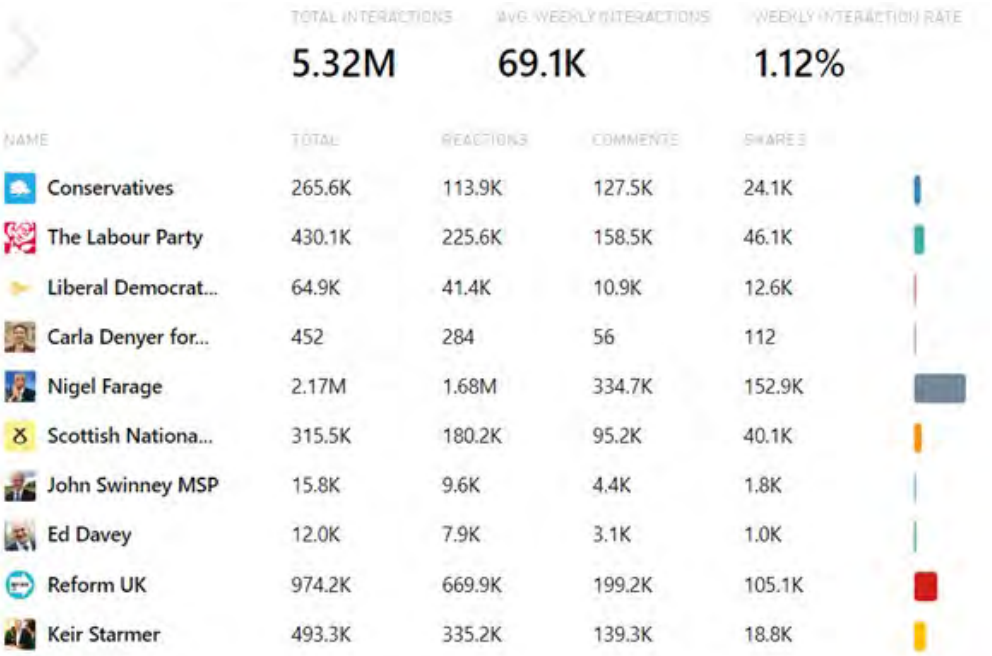

Figure 1: Facebook audience interactions of the major parties and candidates during the general election campaign

Parties/Politicians	Facebook Followers (5/7/2024)
Conservative Party	751,900
Labour Party	1,070,000
Liberal Democrats	201,600
Scottish National Party	339,300
Reform UK	282,100
Keir Starmer (LP)	231,400
Nigel Farage (RUK)	1,170,000
Rishi Sunak (CP)	972,100
Ed Davey (LD)	10,500
John Swinney (SNP)	41,400
Carla Denyer (Greens)	2,800

Table 1: Number of Facebook followers of the major parties and candidates. Source: Authors using Facebook data

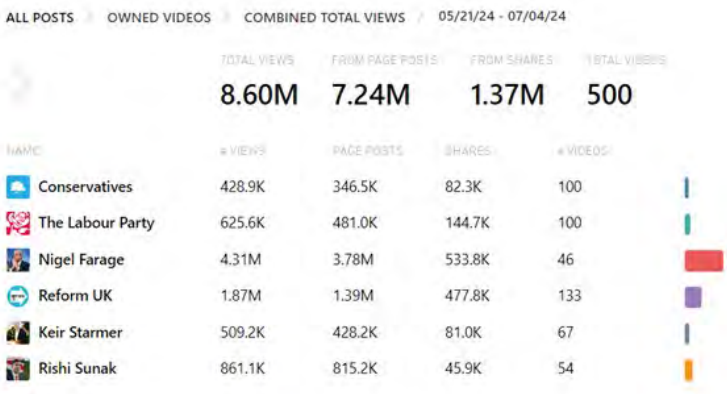

Figure 2: Parties' and candidates' Facebook video views during the election campaign. Source: CrowdTangle

Farage on TikTok: the perfect populist platform

Prof Karin-Wahl Jorgensen

University Dean of Research Environment and Culture at Cardiff University, Wales, and Professor in the School of Journalism, Media and Culture. She has authored or edited ten books, more than 80 journal articles and 45 book chapters on media and citizenship, including Emotions, Media and Politics *(2019).*

In an election campaign widely described as "boring," the return of Nigel Farage provided a dramatic highlight. Farage ran a high-profile campaign, ultimately winning the seat in Clacton as one of five Reform MPs.

While mainstream media devoted significant attention to Farage, he also garnered a significant following on TikTok, with his account outperforming all other candidate and party accounts. This is important because the platform is seen as a vital means for reaching younger audiences.

I analysed all 52 videos posted by Nigel Farage's TikTok account since the election was called 23rd May, until polls closed July 4, to understand how he crafted his appeal. While Farage initially campaigned for Reform more broadly, he announced his candidacy for Clacton on 3rd June.

So, what do we learn about Farage's political agenda? In some ways, not much. As connoisseurs of the platform will know, TikToks are usually short and light on content. Most of Farage's videos are less than a minute long, many last just a few seconds. As Table 1 shows, a majority of the TikToks – 57.7% - consists of brief campaign trail snapshots and contain very little policy substance.

Early on in the campaign, Farage seemed a bit of a lost soul. On D-Day, he appeared to be wandering endlessly around the Ranville War Cemetery (well, it felt that way, with a total of 4 videos filmed there) reading aloud from tombstones and quizzing elderly passersby to awaken their memories of World War II.

However, after D-Day, he found his groove. Over the course of the campaign, he used the platform to construct a political persona fit for the social media age and, specifically, for an appeal allegedly targeted at young men, looking for new role models in the vacuum left by the departure of Andrew Tate. This is consistent with what Darren Kelsey has described as Farage's project of building a hero persona aligned to right-wing populism. So, who is Farage the populist hero?

First, Farage is a man of action, and specifically, one who is on the move. While he does not quite match up to the antics of Ed Davey, he does deploy a bewildering array of modes of transportation. He travelled by limo and train. But also: Helicopter! Armoured vehicle! Boat! Another boat! Oh, and a combine harvester! Occasionally, he is on foot, striding confidently through a shopping centre, exclaiming "lovely melons!" and getting drenched in rain on a Normandy pier.

Second, Farage is a fan of manly pursuits. Several videos see him drinking pints of beer in the pub, where he often (three times) watches England football games in the company of men. He goes to a boxing gym and a betting shop, he enjoys a sneaky trip to a shooting range, and shares that he has been voted "sexiest politician in Britain" – though he also has his nails done for good measure.

Third, Farage is down with the kids. He's mobbed by Sunraze, an up-and-coming band, he sings along to Eminem (who, while popular with target audiences, could be their grandfather) and urges his viewers to "have fun" (which involves drinking and singing, apparently) while watching the Euros.

However, for anyone looking for Farage's key message, it is not difficult to find. He has just one thing on his mind: Migration. As he notes in a TikTok posted on 30th May, reflecting on the latest immigration figures: "If you're wondering why you can't get a house, why your rent is up 20% over the last three years, if you're wondering why your granny can't get a GP appointment, it's because we've had a population explosion... The most affected group by this are the young people of this country." If there is a theme, then, it is pinning the blame for all the ills of the nation on immigrants – and the failure of the main political parties to address their arrival. Indeed, immigration is the only real policy issue addressed in his videos (just 4 videos, or 7.7%), dwarfed by videos about D-Day (8), and just above the number devoted to football (3).

Taking a leaf out of the right-wing populist playbook, Farage is centrally focused on creating "Us" and "Them" binary distinctions premised on xenophobia and nativism.

If anything, Farage's success is enabled by the affordances of Tiktok, which work a treat for the simple messages of right-wing populists. If the future belongs to platforms like TikTok, political actors must adapt to their logic of simplicity. This, however, does not bode well for democracy, suggesting the erasure of substance in favour of style. Just as many observers will worry about the implications of Reform's electoral success, we must not underestimate the consequences of social media affordances for the future of political deliberation.

Table 1: Topics of Nigel Farage's TikTok videos

Topic	Number	Percentage
Election/campaigning	30	57.7
D-Day	8	15.3
Immigration	4	7.7
Attack videos*	3	5.8
Football	3	5.8
Other**	4	7.7
Total	52	100

*This included videos about Father's Day, Armed Forces Day, an awards ceremony, and a video in defence of shooting.

**Attack videos directed at Boris Johnson, Piers Morgan and mainstream media. This count does not include videos attacking Rishi Sunak and Keir Starmer, which are included under "Election/campaigning."

Figure 1: Farage voted sexiest politician in Britain (TikTok posted June 18, 2024)

Figure 2: Farage on a combine Harvester (TikTok posted June 20, 2024)

7

News and journalism

Why the press still matters

Anyone reading the British national press in the runup to this election could have been forgiven for predicting a crushing defeat for Starmer's Labour Party. While the *Telegraph* was warning us that "Starmer's sinister plan for Britain will end the country as we know it" and the *Express* stated unequivocally that "we are doomed if Labour wins a massive majority", the *Mail*'s election day front page listed all the diabolical evils that would be visited upon the nation with a Starmer/Rayner victory: "Soaring taxes, uncontrolled immigration with Rwanda scrapped, rampant wokery, betrayal of women's rights, Net Zero mania, weaker defence, surrender of our Brexit freedoms – and votes at 16 to 'rig' future elections".

Even *The Sun*'s lukewarm endorsement was accompanied by an editorial which was much closer to the Conservative Party than Labour: backing the Rwanda plan, the abolition of National Insurance, and "[t]he ban on teaching harmful gender ideology in schools", while praising Sunak's promise to curb "the headlong rush towards Net Zero" and his "long-held and principled commitment to our Brexit freedoms".

Meanwhile, the Liberal Democrats were dismissed as a joke with "a leader who has spent this most depressing of campaigns pulling ridiculous stunts".

And yet. Not only did Labour win its predicted landslide with an overall majority of 172, but the Lib Dems' 72 MPs was its best performance since its 1988 merger between the Liberals and Social Democrats. Whatever the chorus of disapproval and dismay from our dominant right-wing press, they were comprehensively ignored. And so, the narrative goes, we can now safely assume that the influence historically ascribed to the national press can now be consigned to history.

There are three reasons why this theory is both wrong and dangerously complacent. First, Labour's majority may be extensive, but it could still be precarious. The party's vote share (on a historically low turnout) was the fifth lowest of any election since 1931. It has been variously described as wide but shallow and a "sandcastle" majority, with many voters – like the *Sun* – giving half-hearted rather than full-throated support. There is no sense of Tony Blair's triumphant and optimistic coronation in 1997. In a volatile political environment, partisan and opinionated media will have greater influence.

Second, these legacy media are not diminished by social and online media, but in some cases could actually be enhanced. We will need to wait for post-election studies to determine the key sources of voters' election news and information, but YouGov gave us a foretaste a few days before the election: 58% said they used TV to access news, followed by 43% for social media, and 42% for a newspaper's website or app. Even amongst 18-24's – notoriously press averse and supposedly social media obsessed – nearly half gave a newspaper website/app as a news source.

Once we take into account the news stories originating with mainstream media news outlets but being distributed on social media – the *Mail*, for example, has a significant presence on Facebook – newspaper reach will be even higher.

Third, there is still widespread agreement that national newspapers in the UK play a significant role in setting the broadcast news agenda. Whether it's the BBC's nightly obsession with the next day's headlines both on its website and on Newsnight; Sky's twice nightly press reviews; the newspaper columnists, pundits and commentators that frequent all the broadcast studios; or the newspapers routinely scattered around Radio 4's Today studio, broadcast journalism still owes much to its press counterpart. Katie Perrior, Theresa May's communications director in Downing Street, said recently that broadcasters planning the day's headlines are "still taking some of those from our national newspapers that drop at 10pm the night before".

That agenda setting role was illustrated graphically during the election campaign when the Conservative minister Grant Schapps raised the frightening spectre of a Labour "supermajority" – a non-existent construct in UK politics. As a subsequent analysis demonstrated, this partisan hype was first reported as a news story by most national newspapers, followed by strident opinion pieces in the Times, *Telegraph*, *Express* and *Mail* repeating the same dire warning – including, on 29th June, an eight-page *Daily Mail* guide to "avoid a Starmer supermajority".

Such blatant client journalism has increasingly disfigured the UK's newspaper journalism culture. On his own podcast Media Confidential, former *Guardian* editor Alan Rusbridger recently spoke about a huge failure of print journalism "where a generation of journalists has grown up for whom ideology is the thing and the secondary aspects of simply and fairly informing readers about the facts has become almost a sideshow".

This is the problem that Keir Starmer is going to face as a Labour Prime Minister attempting even a vaguely progressive policy agenda: a press that is less concerned about truth, accuracy and an informed electorate than pursuing its own anti-woke, anti-immigration, anti-EU priorities. We saw during the Brexit referendum the damage that such propaganda can inflict on the body politic. Labour has been warned: the press still wields power.

Prof Steven Barnett

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When the *Star* Aligned: How the press 'voted'

Prof Dominic Wring

Professor of Political Communication, Centre for Research in Communication and Culture, Loughborough University.

Prof David Deacon

Professor of Communication and Media Analysis, Centre for Research in Communication and Culture, Loughborough University.

If a party lost nearly half its support during a single parliament, diminishing media interest in the politicians concerned might be expected to follow. But despite the precipitous decline of print circulations since the 2019 General Election (See Table 1), broadcasters have not abandoned newspapers as arbiters of what is deemed newsworthy. During the 2024 Election flagship programmes like BBC Radio 4's Today, ITV's Peston, and Sky News' press review continued using frontpages to frame their reporting of the campaign. Famously British newspapers are not subject to impartiality rules of the kind that regulate their counterparts on television and radio. The press therefore can and does offer highly partisan coverage during elections and of the kind that broadcasters regularly use to help them explore controversies. This continuing reverence for print journalism, especially in hard copy format, underlines the enduring influence of newspapers even while their circulations are in freefall. More broadly this reflects the way that legacy brands owned by News UK, Reach and others continue to matter in the UK media landscape despite – or arguably because of – audience fragmentation.

An overwhelming majority of national newspapers normally endorse a party during elections. In the late 1990s a once dominant 'Tory press' gave way to the 'Tony press' during the Blair era but this break with tradition was short-lived. In 2019 half of the national dailies supported the Conservatives and collectively these five titles accounted for nearly three-quarters of total print circulation at the time. Although Labour received the same number of endorsements in 2024, the newspapers involved represent less than 50% of combined (and much diminished) sales. The potential impact of this shift in press allegiances was not, however, merely a psychological boost or setback for the rival parties concerned: online *the Guardian, Mail, Sun* and *Mirror* each boast digital audiences of over twenty million and are only outdone in this respect by the BBC news website.

Table 1 lists the electoral preferences of the ten paid-for UK wide dailies as formally set out in their editorial endorsements. Commonly analysis of this kind focuses on which newspapers supported which parties without considering the strength of these allegiances. Table 1 therefore seeks to acknowledge the intensity of the partisan attachments and not just their electoral preferences. Only one newspaper, the staunchly pro-Labour *Mirror*, published an editorial that was unconditional in offering its 'very strong' endorsement. Although the traditionally loyal *Express, Mail* and *Telegraph* remained 'strong' Conservatives, all three nonetheless qualified their support through acknowledging some of the party's shortcomings in office. Critically none of them backed Nigel Farage despite their shared ideological outlook and, in the case of *Express*, the presence of leading Reform UK member Anne Widdecombe as a columnist. And while *the Guardian* and *Financial Times* offered criticism of Labour in their endorsements of the party, both statements were noticeably warmer towards their choice than they had been in 2019. The repositioning of the *FT* also meant the Liberal Democrats lost the backing of their only newspaper supporter.

The *i* continues to make a virtue of the paper's now established practice of staying politically neutral including at election times. Interestingly *The Times* effectively did the same this time having strongly endorsed the Conservatives in 2019. Fellow News UK title *The Sun* also shifted its position in declaring for Labour having previously denounced the party as 'extremists' in the last election. Although the timing of the title's eve of poll conversion was somewhat dramatic, the accompanying 'weak' endorsement was markedly less so, replete as it was with various caveats. By contrast the *Star* was more sincere in expressing its partisan allegiance. Having been acclaimed for comparing the waning premiership of Liz Truss to a wilting lettuce, the paper felt sufficiently emboldened to abandon its longstanding policy of neutrality in this election. The formal endorsement that followed, simply entitled 'New start is needed', pithily encapsulated the core Labour message dwelling as it did on the Conservatives' record in office. Ultimately the repositioning of the *Star* proved to be emblematic of the wider change afoot in the 2024 Election.

Title	**2024** (2019)	**2024** (2019)	**Circulation loss 2019-24**
Daily Mirror	**Very Strong Labour** (Very Strong Labour)	**226** (455)	-50%
Daily Express	**Strong Conservative** (Very Strong Conservative)	**140** (298)	-53%
Daily Star	**Moderate Labour** (None)	**127** (289)	-56%
The Sun	**Weak Labour** (Very Strong Conservative)	**700*** (1,217)	-45%
Daily Mail	**Strong Conservative** (Very Strong Conservative)	**689** (1,133)	-39%
Daily Telegraph	**Strong Conservative** (Very Strong Conservative)	**190*** (309)	-39%
The Guardian	**Moderate Labour** (Weak Labour)	**60*** (129)	-53%
The Times	**None** (Strong Conservative)	**180*** (365)	-51%
The i	**None** (None)	**125** (220)	-43%
Financial Times	**Weak Labour** (Very Weak Liberal Democrat)	**109** (163)	-33%
Totals	**Share of endorsements by circulation %** (2019) Con **40%** (72) Lab **48%** (13) LibDem **0%** (4) None **12%** (11)	**2,546** (4,578)	-44%

Source: Audit Bureau of Circulations, May 2024 (November 2019); figures marked * are *Press Gazette* estimates.

Table 1: Daily newspapers' 2024 partisanship with circulations (hard copy in 000s) (with 2019 equivalent partisanships and circulations in brackets)

Visual depictions of leaders and losers in the (still influential) print press

Prof Erik Bucy

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Dr Nathan Ritchie

Sociology teacher at Loughborough University. His research covers the intersection of politics, history, and media. He focuses on memory work through British media, holds a doctorate on media representations of the Partition of India, and publishes on political communication, particularly elections in the UK and Europe.

Election outcomes don't always turn on campaigns, or on media coverage of party leaders—sometimes larger forces are at play. They certainly were in the 2024 UK General Election. Nevertheless, visual framing of major candidates by the agenda-setting print press in this year's watershed election told an interesting story about political leaders and losers, reflecting back to voters' prevailing sentiments about Keir Starmer and Rishi Sunak in a manner that reinforced their status in the race.

Across six newspapers analysed for this study, Labour Party leader Starmer was on the whole visually depicted as the presumptive prime minister, an ideal candidate with mass appeal. Meanwhile, Sunak, the sitting Conservative PM, came across as a loser from the start, a lonely, rain-soaked figure surprising all but a handful of trusted insiders with the announcement of the election on 22nd May. Additional missteps ensued.

Other party candidates, notably Ed Davey of the Liberal Democrats and Nigel Farage of Reform UK, were treated as novelties and outliers, characterised by depictions of Davey's paddleboarding stunts and Farage's exuberant but unhinged expressions. These observations are backed by systematic analysis of party leader portrayals across six newspapers for the duration of the campaign.

For the study we analysed the visual portrayals of party leaders on the front pages and inside spreads of three broadsheets and three tabloid papers representing a diversity of partisan views: *The Times*, *the Guardian*, *Daily Telegraph*, *The Sun*, *Daily Mail*, and *Mirror*. Despite recent dips in circulation, newspapers were analysed because they remain important in their own right and serve as agenda-setting heralds for other media.

Using a skip interval sampling technique, we performed a visual framing analysis of the hard copies of each paper every two days. Only candidate images were analysed, not the news narratives. If no images appeared in a given title on a given day, we coded the next day's paper. Altogether, 254 images were coded across 18 days of coverage between 23rd May and 2nd July.

The analysis tracked three major visual frames identified in previous election studies: the populist campaigner (comfortable in plain clothes and ordinary situations, popular amidst adoring crowds); ideal candidate (formally dressed, depicted with other elites, capable of showing compassion); and sure loser (coming across as buffoonish or pitying). In addition, the facial expressions of party leaders were coded, along with the evaluative tone of each visual portrayal (favourable, neutral, or unfavourable).

As shown in Figure 1, and reflecting poll results that favoured Labour, Starmer received positive visual framing as both an ideal candidate and populist campaigner (49% on average) at a higher rate than Sunak (40%), with almost no losing depictions. Sunak was depicted with these winning qualities as well, but less than Starmer and received the lion's share of loser framing (61%), although the number of instances was not that great (n = 23). Farage was also mostly framed as a loser (37%), despite winning a seat in Parliament (on his eighth try) and five seats for Reform UK.

Further analysis revealed that Sunak's negative framing was more heavily weighted among left-leaning papers (*the Guardian* and *Mirror*), although conservative titles participated as well. Interestingly, positive visual framing of Starmer and photographs of him smiling were proportionately higher in conservative titles than liberal, although article counts for Sunak were higher in the right-leaning press. These findings portend *The Sun*'s ultimate endorsement of Labour, which hadn't happened since Tony Blair's election in 1997.

While the visual trends described here explain the broader patterns of coverage at play, two episodes stand out as particularly memorable beyond Sunak's soggy announcement: Farage being hit by a banana milkshake while launching his personal election campaign in Clacton—a humiliation he also endured in Newcastle in 2019; and, Sunak's ducking out of the 6th June D-Day commemorations early for an ITV interview, which produced a furore and cleared space for Starmer to assume the role of statesman and prime minister-in-waiting.

For many voters, Sunak's D-Day blunder epitomised the tone deaf quality of the Conservative Party after 14 years of largely unchallenged rule, which was also tarnished by a betting scandal on when the election would be called. By contrast, stunts such as Davey's falling off his paddleboard in Lake Windemere (the site of illegal sewage dumping in February) or bungee jumping in Eastbourne (encouraging voters to take a chance) were viewed as harmless fun—the exploits of a rollicking campaigner. Whether Davey's stunts or strategic voting accounted for the Lib Dems' historic wins in Parliament, his antics certainly didn't hurt.

Both in their presence and, in the case of Sunak ducking out from D-Day commemorations, absence, visuals are influential elements of campaign communication that are well remembered by voters. By receiving positive visual treatment across both left- and right-leaning press, Starmer and therefore Labour benefitted from coverage that crossed the ideological divide, whereas Sunak's visual reinforcement mostly derived from conservative titles. Visuals most certainly did not determine the outcome of the election on their own but they played a role, particularly in allowing conservative audiences the opportunity to see Labour in a positive light.

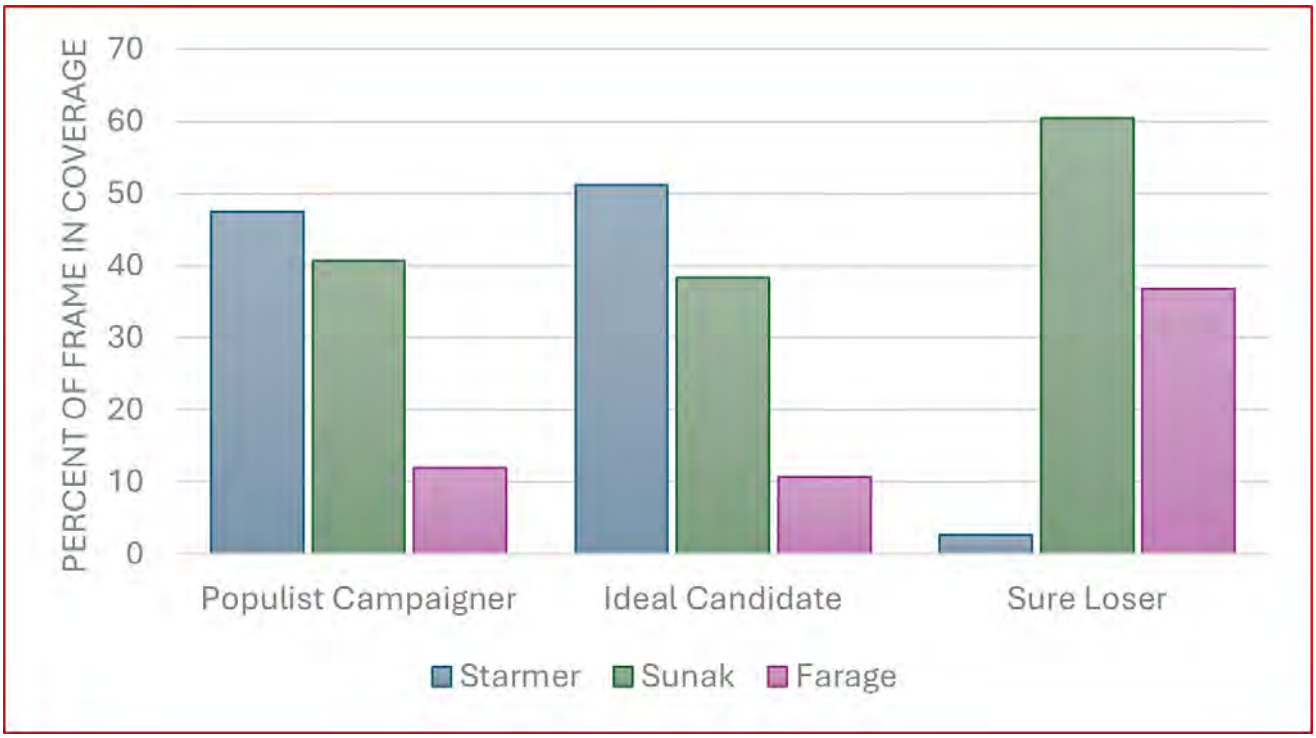

Figure 1. Visual framing of party leaders across six newspapers

Towards more assertive impartiality? Fact-checking on BBC television news

Prof Stephen Cushion

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Election campaigns have always involved political parties trading claims and counter-claims about which policies best serve voters. But, over recent years, a new era of 'post-truth' politics has shaped election campaigning, with parties increasingly making dubious, misleading or even false statements.

To help understand the many conflicting claims of political parties, many people continue to invest their trust in broadcast news above other media during election campaigns. Unlike most online sites and social media platforms, broadcast news is legally required to be duly impartial. But as politicians have become more underhand and deceptive with their electioneering, singling out the egregious claim of one party or campaign group and not another has proven uncomfortable for impartial broadcasters.

Our research at the Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Culture, Cardiff University, found the UK's television news bulletins interpreted impartiality as balancing Remain and Leave perspectives during the 2016 EU referendum, rather than regularly assessing campaign claims on both sides of the political debate. During the 2019 UK and 2020 US election campaigns, our research also discovered that BBC broadcast news adopted a 'he said, she said' style of reporting. While this led to politically balanced reporting, it did not provide robust scrutiny of claims and counter-claims. Yet the BBC's fact-checking service questioned and, when necessary, challenged the false and misleading claims of UK and US political leaders, as well as dubious statements during the EU referendum.

The BBC enhanced its fact-checking in 2023, beefing up its goals and resources, and re-naming the service Verify. Launching it, the CEO of BBC News, Deborah Turness, claimed it would "be fact-checking, verifying video, countering disinformation, analysing data and - crucially - explaining complex stories in the pursuit of truth…They will contribute to News Online, radio and TV, including the News Channel and our live and breaking streaming operation, both in the UK and internationally".

In order to assess whether the BBC's fact-checking service has become a more prominent part of BBC broadcast news, we monitored how Verify informed its flagship bulletin, The News at Ten, since the start of 2024. We examined over seven months of News at Ten coverage, including during the six-week general election campaign.

Between 1st January and 3rd July 2024*, Verify was referenced as fact-checking 26 stories. Of the issues covered, 17 of them related to international conflicts, such as events happening in Ukraine or Palestine, while the remaining nine were about UK domestic politics. Apart from one item about the UK government's budget in March 2024, domestic politics was only fact-checked by Verify during the election campaign.

The findings demonstrate that the BBC's flagship bulletin has not routinely used its new fact-checking service in 2024 and, when it did, Verify largely covered matters of international dispute, rather than regularly assessing the claims of politicians from UK parties. However, after a general election was called, the number of UK domestic political items fact-checked by Verify increased in June, with policy claims in areas such as migration, taxation and economy subject to close scrutiny.

The most prominent Verify fact-check that appeared on the BBC News at Ten involved a contentious Conservative claim that a future Labour government would cost households £2,000 more in tax. The day after the Prime Minster, Rishi Sunak, had repeatedly claimed Labour would increase taxation during a prime-time televised debate, the BBC Political Editor, Chris Mason, described the claims live on air as "misleading" and "dubious" – a departure from the typically cautious language adopted by broadcasters during the 2019 general election campaign. A BBC Verify reporter then broke down the Conservative Party's alleged figures and identified where its political advisors had influenced the calculations of the civil service. This decisive approach to fact-checking specific party policies was displayed in other BBC News at Ten stories over the campaign.

Compared to our analysis of previous UK election campaigns, including the EU referendum, making explicit judgements about the veracity of party claims on a flagship evening bulletin represents a break from cautiously balancing competing political perspectives. It points towards the BBC adopting a more assertive approach to impartiality on television news during the 2024 general election campaign, reflecting the forthright and fact-driven way of debunking claims that BBC journalist, Ros Atkins, has championed over recent years.

But while the BBC ramped up its use of Verify on the BBC News at Ten, the fact-checking service still only appeared in six out of a possible 35 programmes during the campaign period. For the public service broadcaster to fully embrace the value of fact-checking and maintain an assertive approach to impartiality, BBC's Verify service could become a more regular part of reporting during and after election campaigns.

* 6 February transcript was unavailable

The outsize influence of the conservative press in election campaigns

After facing some hostile questions from a BBC Question Time audience on the final Friday before the July 4th election, Nigel Farage said that he would no longer appear on the BBC due to its bias. What type of bias concerned Farage? The BBC has been accused of being biased in favour of the major parties, hostile to the left, and captured by pro-government forces.

Another type of potential bias is the extent to which impartial broadcasters, such as BBC and ITV follow the lead of the conservative press, allowing it to set the news agenda and tone of debate for the day. In our forthcoming edited volume Media Effects and British General Elections (University of Edinburgh Press), we bring systematic evidence to bear on this question of media bias. We examine the volume, tone of coverage of issues and the major party leaders during the 2015, 2017 and 2019 general election campaigns on the BBC, ITV, the *Daily Telegraph*, *Daily Mail*, *Guardian* and *Daily Mirror*. We ask a straightforward question of who follows whom: does the volume and tone of BBC and ITV broadcasts seem to follow changes in these features of press coverage or vice versa?

There are two principal answers to this question of "intermedia agenda-setting"—media being influenced by each other. First, it could be that there is no relationship between television and newspaper coverage, and they are very much independent of each other. Second, it could be that there is a relationship, but it is one that is consistent with impartiality: following news cycles could lead us to expect that the volume, but not the tone, of coverage of leaders and issues on television will agree with the volume of coverage in the press simply because they are covering the same campaign events.

The answer we found was somewhat different, however. The BBC and ITV news coverage were systematically more responsive to coverage in the *Telegraph* and the *Mail* than in the *Guardian* or *Mirror* — especially for issues such as the economy and the NHS but less so for tone. This was particularly true of the *Mail*'s coverage of the issue of immigration and of the *Telegraph*'s coverage of the major party leaders. In other words, the BBC and ITV in these elections exhibited a bias towards the agenda being set by the Conservative press.

While it is too early to say whether this was also the case in the 2024 campaign. The analysis by the Centre for Research in Communication and Culture at Loughborough University suggests the Conservative press has been less positive in its coverage of the Conservative Party than in other recent election. However, we could point to anecdotal evidence that this type of intermedia agenda-setting bias was evident in 2024.

First, the coverage of the letters from "business leaders" published in 2015 in the *Telegraph* supporting the Conservatives stands in stark contrast to 2024 coverage of a similar letter in the *Times* supporting Labour. The 2015 letter was reported on the front page of the *Telegraph*, which said that "business seems to be coming out in favour of Conservative policies" and the letter also showed "Labour's rift with British business." The publication of the letter then led the BBC 10pm news, reporting that "Labour denies it's anti-business following criticism from over 100 business leaders", lauding the list of high-profile signatories and referring to the letter as "Hammering home the good news" (for the Conservatives). In 2024, Conservative newspapers, such as the *Telegraph*, dismissed the business leaders' letter supporting Labour, not because of its lack of famous names, but because it did not have signatories from executives in the FTSE100. The BBC then described the signatories as, "not necessarily a representative sample of business."

Second, Loughborough's analysis of the 2024 Election also shows that taxation was the leading issue in the media for most of the campaign. In addition, a search of the terms "Starmer" and "tax" in articles in these newspapers in June 2024 on Nexis showed 30 percent more stories in the *Telegraph* than the *Guardian*, suggesting that taxation loomed larger in the Conservative press. The BBC seemed to follow the lead of the *Telegraph* who accused Starmer of "opening the door to tax rises" after he said he did not want to raise taxes for working people during an LBC phone-in the previous day. The BBC Today show picked up this line from the *Telegraph* asking Rachel Reeves the following morning what was meant by "working people." Meanwhile, the *Guardian* cited a poll by the Financial Fairness Trust where twice as many respondents wanted tax rises as wanted tax cuts.

Of course, there may be reasonable explanations for both of these examples from 2024. But given our analysis of the 2015, 2017 and 2019 media coverage, our own starting point is that they are likely reflective of a systematic bias in BBC and ITV news.

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GB News – not breaking any rules...

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The Editorial Charter of GB News states: 'Impartiality and integrity are at the core of our commitment to delivering authoritative and accurate news the public trust ...' GB News can, like Fox News its counterpart in the US, have the look of a 'normal' news channel. It bookends its almost endless opinion-led chat shows with travel information, weather forecasts and, above all, news bulletins. For the most part, the news is professionally presented and does not appear overladen with the political bias that is so clearly identifiable across the rest of the channel's output. However, not everything is as it appears.

The news stories produced by GB News do not just provide a veneer of respectability for the TV channel but are sliced and diced across all its social media outlets. These include Facebook where it has 698,000 followers, Twitter 636,000 followers, Instagram 262,000 followers and a surprising 1.1million followers on the youth-orientated TikTok. However, its biggest social media following is on YouTube where it has 1.29million followers who use it to watch standalone items and its live feed (adding substantially to its daily TV audience) presenters are increasingly making reference to this streaming audience. In addition, its radio channel claims a weekly audience of 455,000 whilst its TV channel has a monthly reach of over three million, in other words GB News is not a minor player un the UK's political ecology.

Arguably though its biggest impact comes from its news website which, the channel claims, reaches an average of 2.7m viewers per month. The trade magazine UK Press Gazette's recent survey of UK news websites found that GB News was in twentieth place of the most used news sites, capturing 15 % of the audience - by comparison, Sky News, in seventh position, captured 36 % and the BBC News website had 38 million regular users.

The research being reported here involved monitoring all the items that were published on the GB News website under the 'Politics' banner in the last weeks of March, April, May and June 2024, a total of 559 items - an average of 20 stories a day. And it revealed a distinct right-wing bias in terms of the story selection.

In March, 25% of the politics postings favoured the Conservatives (13% pro-Tory and 12% anti-Labour), this compared with just 8% being either pro-Labour (2%) or anti-Conservative (6%). In April, the overall figure favouring the Conservatives was 24 %, made up of just 5% of items being pro-Conservative and 19% anti-Labour. In the same month the postings favouring Labour constituted 10% of the output (6% pro-Labour and 4% anti-Conservative).

In May, with a general election campaign under way, the channels' pro-Tory/anti-Labour bias eased somewhat (perhaps because of an awareness that its viewers might be expecting more evenly balanced coverage during an election campaign). 18% of its output was classified as pro-Tory/anti-Labour, but this, more or less, even balance didn't last as the gloves came off in June but with the Tories in the channel's cross-hairs as their star presenter, Nigel Farage, became a Reform UK candidate. For whilst the balance between pro-Conservative and anti-Labour constituted 13% of the output (5% and 8%), 10% of the output was anti-Conservative and pro-Reform UK posts constituting a hefty 17% of all stories.

The survey also revealed some oddities, but in the context of GB News perhaps oddities is the wrong word. Throughout the period under review the station appeared somewhat obsessed with what it would no doubt term 'woke' issues, despite not a single survey showing that the British public prioritised the issue. Their posts on various 'woke' topics averaged 10% of their entire politics output across the four months monitored.

Another oddity was the channel's focus on the American presidential election. Clearly an important issue, but one that is still five months away. Across the four months monitored, the channel devoted 11% of its entire politics coverage to the Biden/Trump context. Unsurprisingly, particularly after Biden's poor debate performance, its coverage leaned very heavily in favour of Trump – with 10% of all posted being pro-Trump or anti-Biden and less than 1% anti-Trump/pro-Biden.

So overall we can conclude that despite protestations to the contrary GB News is consistently biased to the right, not just in terms of its presenters, but also its news coverage. But given that the Ofcom code does not cover written news on TV news station's websites, the channel is not breaking any rules as such, only the spirit of its own Editorial Charter.

Vogue's stylish relationship to politics

Only once in its history has *Vogue* ever endorsed a leadership candidate in a general election and that was Hilary Clinton in 2016 in the US edition of *Vogue*. This is not to suggest that *Vogue* ignores political civil and social issues – it doesn't. It has, for example, a long history of promoting women's right, opposing racism, decrying class inequality, and addressing other forms of injustice. Indeed, the previous UK editor, Edward Enninful, was quite explicit about this. The point being that political news and discussions are generally 'hidden' in *Vogue* – they appear under 'Viewpoints', 'News', 'Forces for Change' and the editor's letters. Since the announcement of the UK election, on 22nd May 2024, British *Vogue* posted a short piece informing its readers about the election, and a few other opinion pieces - 'I'm 24 And A Paying Labour Party Member… But I Have No Idea How I'll Vote In This General Election' (26th June); 'Why Single Mothers Like Me Matter In The Next Election' (15th June); "This Is Not A Fringe Issue": What's At Stake For Disabled People In The General Election' (10th June); What's At Stake For Women In The 4th July General Election (23rd May) – as well as some pieces after the announcement of the election's outcome with emphasis on women's and climate change issues.

In its socials ('X', 'Instagram' and 'YouTube'), however, *Vogue* has not been vocal at all. Its 'X' account acts a repository of the articles posted on *Vogue*'s website, whereas its Instagram and YouTube accounts are primarily focused on lifestyle, celebrity and fashion news. As for the people that are central to the election – even though none of the election candidates made it to British *Vogue*'s front page - *Vogue* has featured the Labour party leader and recently elected Prime Minister, Sir Keir Starmer in its March 2024 issue, whilst a few months earlier, in November 2023, it featured Labour's Deputy Leader Angela Rayner. Other UK politicians have also featured in either the UK or US *Vogue* namely Theresa May, Dianne Abbott, Ruth Davidson, Nicola Sturgeon, and Rishi Sunak.

Following the *Guardian*'s lead, we might ask "why is acceptance or non-acceptance by a 130-year-old magazine important to politicians? And what is it about *Vogue*'s image enhancement that sets political figures off on both sides of the Atlantic?" Or to put it another way; why on realising Sturgeon had appeared not once but twice in *Vogue* did Liz Truss look as though "she'd swallowed a wasp". For the record not everyone is susceptible to *Vogue*'s charm. Tony and Cherie Blair, and David and Samantha Cameron are said to have expressed concerns that *Vogue* readers were not 'in keeping' with the message they wish to send. Nevertheless, the desire amongst politicians to accept the invite by *Vogue* to appear seems to outweigh those who are squeamish. So, what's on offer for wannabe leaders (and others)?

Straightforwardly, *Vogue* is a certain specific type of a didactic and cultural icon. From the start, it conceived of itself as a centre for the performance of social discernment and a space where it could endorse or condemn certain mores, norms, and behaviour. Like any icon it operates at two levels - the physical concrete real surface and the deeper more rooted meanings and narratives that the surface points to. In other words, it has a form of social force based around offering both a materialistic conception of fashion and through this it roots its cultural meaning and significance. The former - the glossy and artistic magazine, the latter - the discursive/textual and ultimately judgemental viewpoints. In other words, *Vogue* exemplifies social, civil and cultural distinctiveness derived from being regarded (judged) fashionable. The question is: do politicians understand being fashionable as meaning more than just being well turned out?

As Simmel noted in 1904, fashion represents a form of social equalisation that changes incessantly, and which can simultaneously unite and divide. It is a social force and like that of election, it is relentless. As the *Guardian* points out "the fashion magazine offers an aspect of continuity the political sphere alone cannot muster". A magazine story and its cover may reach people outside the realm of typical messaging. It stays in circulation for a month and lies around for longer. Alongside of which, in the case of *Vogue*, content is presented within the confinements of a rich and well-defined symbolic framework that structures a particular action, quality or condition, in this case, whilst 'performing politics.' The performance of politics in *Vogue* is both structured by the requirement to appear to be authentically political and constrained by the evocative background that is the symbolic framework that is the deep narrative of *Vogue*. The two dimensions are in tension as a particular political narrative becomes contextualised by high quality visuals, adverts for hi-end goods, lifestyle commentary and observations, reports and stories concerning being fashionable, culturally significant, influential, and so on. A successful performance is dependent on the fusion of the performance with and in terms of the symbolic framework that it is set in.

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Tiptoeing around immigration has tangible consequences

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Despite the centrality of immigration in British political debates since the early 2000s, and the key role this debate played during the EU referendum campaign, coverage of immigration was relatively low-key during the 2024 Election. But this is not to say the topic was absent from the media during the six-week campaign. Whilst the Rwanda scheme spearheaded the Tory government's immigration policy over the preceding months–if not years–to the extent that it had been turned into one of the five pledges Sunak's premiership should be held accountable for, the failures of the plan and the alternatives suggested in party manifestos were–surprisingly–seldomly discussed. We believe this is a symptom of the way immigration is more broadly dealt with by politicians and the media in the UK.

From a strategic point of view, there was little incentive for the main candidates to discuss immigration. In a textbook case of political parallelism, most media outlets–with the exception of the most vociferous tabloids–sang from the same hymn sheet as their preferred candidates, and only tangentially discussed immigration during the campaign. While the two main political leaders tiptoed around this issue, the media's discrete coverage of a topic that had been focal until that point meant space was left for populist, far-right voices to take over the debate.

The Rwanda scheme and immigration overall were key questions in the immediate aftermath of Rishi Sunak's announcement of election. What would happen with the already delayed flights before the election and, especially, after a possible Labour win, were issues addressed by the media. As anticipated, they were also discussed in televised Leaders' debates. However, it was the discussion on taxes that virtually monopolised the attention of the media afterwards. Even when the *Guardian* revealed the Rwanda plan had already cost £320m that would be lost if the Conservatives left Government, the story did not make headlines–and it was indeed under 'World' news and the section on 'Africa' in the newspaper itself. The lack of media interest in this political fiasco, of course, means failure to hold the Tory government accountable for a huge mistake.

Most importantly, however, this further allowed populist extreme voices, such as Nigel Farage and the Reform party, as well as the tabloid press, to frame the immigration debate within familiar xenophobic frameworks. When Farage announced his decision to run with the anti-immigration Reform party on the 3rd June, he did so by declaring this should be the 'immigration election'. His announcement dominated all the front pages in national newspapers. *The Telegraph* published a column where Farage himself justified his decision to stand because of the main parties' failure to tackle immigration. His attack on other parties' immigration policies in the televised debate a few days later were secondary in media coverage that largely focused on Rishi Sunak's apology for leaving the D-day ceremony early.

The combination of the main parties' quiet stance on immigration and the media's infatuation with Nigel Farage's persona somehow reflected–and amplified–Farage's arguments in the tabloids, such as the *Sun*, the *Daily Mail* and the *Express* (as well as the *Telegraph*, which on immigration performed like a tabloid in all but format) which continued their xenophobic attacks against immigrants and asylum seekers. In some cases, coverage made links to Brexit and the EU border, a favourite trope of the tabloids before the 2016 EU referendum, especially after Boris Johnson joined the Tory campaign.

The failure by other media and politicians to challenge such coverage means the immigration debate will be left to fester, as it already has over the last decades. Even when immigration did make the news beyond the tabloids during the election campaign, the discussion was still set according to their populist and xenophobic terms. It largely focused on numbers, questioning whether the number of small boats had indeed decreased, as Sunak claimed, the increase in net migration, or how many migrants were still expected to cross the Channel.

This largely dehumanising coverage has perpetuated the sense of a threatening invasion that was a major trigger for the Brexit vote and has never been put to rest since. At the same time, this coverage has failed to reflect on the centrality of foreign staff in key sectors of the economy, such as the care industry or the building sector, and the economic fallout of a crackdown on immigration as promised by all political leaders. Whenever it was covered, regardless of the outlet and its political allegiance, immigration and immigrants were presented as a problem, and coverage failed to consider the problems of immigrants.

This limited view of immigration, the disproportionate focus on Nigel Farage during the campaign and the failure to challenge the agenda set up by politicians have proven that no lessons have been learnt by the British media since the Brexit vote. This is by no means surprising. It marks, however, another missed opportunity to reframe the immigration debate in the UK.

A taxing campaign

This was a taxing General Election for journalists in two respects.

First, our General Election news audit shows that 'tax and taxation' dominated the substantive policy agenda in news reporting of the campaign. By comparison, the culture wars flickered but didn't catch fire. Brexit remained in its box. Immigration emerged then disappeared. And many of the topics that polls consistently indicate to be of greater public concern – such as, the NHS, housing, climate change, social care – received far lower levels of media attention. By this measure, this might be deemed a media election fought within the preferred parameters of the Conservative party.

Second, journalists found it taxing to sustain interest in a horse race where the front runner seemed such a racing cert. One editorial response was to speculate extensively about the scale of the anticipated Labour victory, or to search for psephological signs of any dial shifting, particularly after Nigel Farage's shock announcement that he was going to stand for Reform. Opinion pollsters certainly had a good media campaign, being featured far more frequently than in previous elections. Opinion poll findings and other 'horse race' speculation was very prominent in the 'process' coverage that typically dominated a lot of electoral reporting.

Another editorial response was to seize upon any gaffes, missteps, and controversies that occurred. And there were rich pickings in this election. Reform found itself on the sharp end of journalistic scrutiny in the latter stages as the repellent racism of several party candidates and activists was exposed. But the evident discomfort and displeasure this created for Farage paled by comparison to the editorial travails confronted by the Conservatives. Mistakes always have a media cut-through in election reporting and the Tory campaign had more bad optics than a derelict cocktail bar. The most news-worthy were the allegations about Conservative insiders betting on the timing of the election and the Prime Minister's decision to stand up D-Day veterans and international leaders to keep a longstanding date with ITV News.

In any media election, the meta-coverage matters and this is where the Conservatives' campaign fell apart. For lengthy periods of time they couldn't even get on message let alone stay on message.

Inevitably, the 'foregone conclusion-ness' of the election led to a degree of editorial disengagement. In the last 25 weekdays of the election, 44% of the main stories on the BBC News at Ten were not about the General Election. The equivalent figures for other main broadcast programmes were: ITV News at Ten (28%), C4 (20%), C5 (68%), and Sky (44%).

In terms of news presence, our research shows that the 2024 media campaign was slightly more dominated by the two main parties and slightly less presidential than the previous General Election. Conservatives and Labour sources accounted for 66% of all political party appearances on the main TV news bulletins and 85% in the national weekly press (in both cases up 2% for our equivalent measures of GE2019). Party leaders overall commanded 52 percent of TV appearances (down 7% from 2019) and 39% of press appearances (down 3% from 2019).

The most significant difference in this election was how the remaining scraps of coverage were divided between the other parties. The two party squeeze is always most evident in national press coverage, but even in TV news, several of the other parties found themselves on thinner rations than before. Ed Davey may have been deemed to have had a good campaign but it didn't prevent a reduction in the Liberal Democrats' media presence (frequency of TV appearances down from 7.8% to 4.5%, quotation time down from 13.4% to 8% of all politician speaking time). The SNP were also more marginalised: down to 4.7% of TV appearances from 7.3% in GE2019. In contrast, Reform UK gained markedly more media exposure than their predecessor, the Brexit Party. Whereas in GE2019 the Brexit Party accounted for 7% of party appearances on TV and 5% in the press, these figures respectively increased to 10% for TV and 9% for newspapers in 2024. Whatever the basis of Nigel Farage's recent complaints about his party's treatment at the hands of the mainstream news media, he can't claim he was ignored.

Finally, this was, yet again, a 'mansplaining' election. That only 1 in 5 of the politicians featured in coverage were female could be deemed a product of the male dominance of main party leaderships. But male voices had similar preponderance when representing the interests of business (82% of relevant sources), academia (72%) public professionals (70%), trade unions (74%), and think tanks (67%). Here again, we see a consistent privileging of male voices and it shows that gender disparity in news reporting is not just a reflection of inequalities in our political representation.

The CRCC's analysis of the 2024 Campaign can be found at https://www.lboro.ac.uk/news-events/general-election/

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Not the Sun wot won it: what Murdoch's half-hearted, last-minute endorsements mean for Labour

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Leaving it as late as editorially possible, the *Sun* has endorsed Labour. With an election day front page saying it's "time for a change", the Murdoch-owned tabloid says the Conservatives "have become a divided rabble, more interested in fighting themselves than running the country".

Mere weeks ago, the former *Sun* editor Kelvin Mackenzie told the Independent that it would be "absolutely shocking" if Rupert Murdoch allowed any of his newspapers to endorse Keir Starmer. He must have been surprised then, when the *Sunday Times* announced its decision to back the Labour Party, which it hasn't done since 2005.

Sunday's editorial stated:

We cannot go on as we are, and we believe it is now the right time for Labour to be entrusted with restoring competence to government … The exhausted Conservatives are neither up to it nor up for it. There comes a time when change is the only option.

The endorsement was tempered, saying that the Tories have "forfeited the right to govern" and now must regroup, with Labour the only option to take the reins. This is hardly a full-throated endorsement of Starmer.

It was also not much of a shock. While the newspaper, along with its sibling titles, was consistently and virulently anti-Jeremy Corbyn, it should be remembered that the *Sunday Times*, the Times and the *Sun* all supported Tony Blair on the eve of Labour's 1997 landslide election victory, and again in 2001.

The *Sun*'s endorsement is a much bigger deal for Starmer. Indeed, the Labour leader has enjoyed the backing of a number of publications known for endorsing the Conservatives, including the Financial Times and the Economist.

Rupert Murdoch is nothing if not pragmatic and reportedly hates losing, so it is not surprising that the paper came out for Starmer, given the widely predicted Labour victory. As former editor Stuart Higgins told the BBC: "The *Sun* wants to be on the winning side."

Starmer and the *Sun*

But the endorsement, in addition to being days behind other papers', isn't exactly enthusiastic, nor is it the self-congratulatory fanfare of the *Sun* of 1997.

Like the *Sunday Times*, the *Sun* backs Labour as a last resort, describing Reform as a "one-man band" and the Lib Dems as "a joke". The paper praises Starmer for distancing his party from the Corbynite left, for his backing of Ukraine and Israel and for the party's commitment to "turbo-boost" economic growth.

But it notes Starmer "has a mountain to climb, with a disillusioned electorate and low approval ratings", and takes aim at his immigration approach ("do not have a clear plan") and the possibility that taxes will rise under Labour.

Starmer has long had a fraught relationship with Murdoch and his media entities. It is far colder than the mogul's more-than-friendly relationship with Blair, who became godfather to Murdoch's daughter Grace in 2010.

Starmer was director of public prosecutions in 2011 and was ultimately in charge of accusing 29 *Sun* and *News of the World* reporters of criminality during the phone-hacking scandal. As Mackenzie said: "Most of the journalists were cleared but they still had their lives damaged or destroyed."

This is something the *Sun* appears not to have forgotten. In January of this year it published a story on Starmer's legal past, accusing him of working "for free as a lawyer to help scores of twisted killers around the world". As a criminal defence lawyer specialising in human rights, Starmer defended many people facing a death sentence for violent crimes.

The paper dubbed Starmer "Sir Softie", as in, soft on crime and criminals. An editorial earlier this week attacked Labour's perceived shortcomings on immigration, stating that the party would hand "an effective amnesty to tens of thousands of illegal migrants".

The last-minute endorsement shows that, as with other tabloids, the *Sun* never had as much political power as it likes to boast, in the sense that it influenced voter behaviour. Murdoch has always had an ear for the zeitgeist and his papers have backed whichever party he believes will win.

The *Sun*'s 2015 election website *Sun Nation* was as bombastic as you might imagine, proclaiming: "From Maggie's win in 1979, to Kinnock's defeat in 1992, and Tony Blair's 1997 victory, our iconic front pages have literally written history."

Nearly three decades later, the power of the press is waning. If Labour gains a big enough majority, it may (and should) feel emboldened enough to govern without continually reflecting on what the Murdoch media may think. Perhaps Starmer will pay heed to the regretful feelings of Tony Blair, expressed in 2007: "We paid inordinate attention in the early days of New Labour to courting, assuaging and persuading the media."

Is this the first Podcast election?

'Could this be the first podcast election?' asked *Times* columnist, James Marriott (5th June 2024). For the two of us it certainly was. A few months before the election was called, we had started producing *The Sound of Politics* podcast (available on Spotify and Podcast Radio) and added four new 'election special' episodes over the course of the campaign.

Hardly significant at the time of the last UK election, podcasts have now become a leading media platform in the UK with over two-thirds of adults listening to at least one podcast each month. The weekly podcast listener - that's 30% of the UK population - consumes on average 5 hours and 27 minutes each week from around 5 podcasts. Among these is a growing number of political podcasts, some of which regularly hit 2 million downloads per episode. For example, there was nearly double the number of people watching *The Rest Is Politics* podcast commentary on the televised leaders' debates than watched the debates themselves.

Podcasting is an intimate medium that builds a relationship of trust with its listeners. Consequently, its audiences are loyal, and they are usually the ones to introduce the podcast to their network connections. In a world of fake online news, it is ironic that people place their trust in an online platform, which suggests that trust has more to do with the strength of cultural connection than any deterministic technological logic.

Just as there is no single, generic 'political website' or 'political blog', political podcasts come in several different forms. Three of those forms came to the fore during the 2024 Election campaign.

Bringing rivals together

In this format two or more people with opposing views share a podcast studio to share their insights and experiences about what it's like to be in the political fray. They reflect upon the latest political news, debating in a way you might with your friends over a coffee, before agreeing to disagree. One of the UK's most popular podcasts during this election campaign was *The Rest is Politics,* with former Labour spin doctor, Alistair Campbell and Tory rebel, Rory Stewart. Listeners to this podcast are invited to believe that they are listening in to an informal conversation between political frenemies. Another popular election podcast, *Electoral Dysfunction*, has Sky News journalist Beth Rigby moderating conversations between Labour MP, Jess Phillips, and former Scottish Conservative leader, Ruth Davidson who aim to relate election issues to everyday life for women. Such bi-partisan approaches appeal to voters on both sides of the partisan divide, while inviting each to become aware of the other side's perspective.

In-depth extensions to traditional media

These podcasts tend to feature journalists who want to tell a more expansive and developed story than the crowded schedules of mainstream media election coverage allow for. They also offer a freer space for journalists to express thoughts away from the rules of Ofcom, often with 'expert' guests alongside them. Amongst the best of these in the 2024 campaign were BBC's *Newscast*, ITV's *Talking Politics*, Channel 4's Fourcast and *Politico*'s *Politics at Jack and Sam's*.

Laughing through the election

A number of comedic political podcasts featured sharp and witty comedians spending much of their time observing the passing electoral show. These podcasts often tackled serious issues in ways that only comedians could get away with. Amongst the best of these were *Triggernometry* with Konstantin Kissin and Francis Foster, and Comedian Matt Forde's *The Political Party*.

A non-assertive political medium

Podcasts are 'media disruptors', presenting yet another challenge to the increasingly outdated notion of 'media schedules' around which audiences are expected to adjust their listening habits. Podcasts can be accessed at any time and dipped into by people living increasingly busy, mobile lives. They offer convenience, but this is not at the expense of attention. Their most important contribution to elections (and wider democratic culture) is that they do not sound like politics as usual. Neither 'on message' politicians nor 'single-narrative' journalists are likely to do well in the world of podcasting. The election podcasts that worked best during this election campaign were the ones that took listeners seriously by assuming that they could make up their own minds without propagandist assistance. Podcasts, at their best, offer stimulus rather than slogan; conversation rather than declaration. It will be fascinating to see how this addition to political communication will have developed by the time of the next general election.

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Prof Stephen Coleman

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A numbers game

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What do data journalists write about when an election result appears to be a foregone conclusion? That was the challenge that reporters in the field faced during the election anti-campaign of 2024.

The answer for some was to skip to the end ("Brace for the most distorted election result in British history") and focus on live election prediction services.

For others, it was an opportunity to look back: The *Manchester Evening News* looked back at 14 years of Conservative rule in the city, while *the Guardian* went all-out with a six-story retrospective series. *The Economist* explored "The inheritance awaiting Britain's next government" and the *FT*'s John Burn-Murdoch led his last opinion piece before the election on "How the Conservatives came to the brink of wipeout". Stories that would in any other year have been planned for the post-election review were brought forward by weeks.

Between those extremes, the biggest data scoop of the campaign was the revelation by the *Telegraph* and *FT* of a spike in bets on a July election before it was announced. Both titles were able to identify the spike thanks to the availability of data on betting patterns. It was a landmark moment for data journalism: where normally the actions and words of politicians on the campaign trail make election headlines, this was a rare case of a set of numbers other than polling figures feeding the news agenda (although only after the initial allegations and investigations had begun).

But this was an exception. For the most part (aside from the *Guardian*'s story establishing the scale of contracts given to companies linked to Tory donors), data journalism teams did little to set the news agenda, and the vast majority of data journalism output treated the election as a numbers game. Electoral Commission data on donations was scrutinised; Meta and Google's political ad data and open source information provided an insight into tactics; and TikTok performance provided a rich seam for measuring engagement — but the focus was on money and strategy, rather than voters and issues.

Look across the stories produced by the major outlets during this period and what is striking is the almost total absence of voices outside of the Westminster bubble — or indeed any voices at all: of over 50 articles with data journalist bylines published during the election campaign, more than half had no original quotes at all. When people were quoted, they tended to be politicians or party spokespeople.

Exceptions in this landscape were notable: *The Times*'s Tom Calver's feature on millennial voters stands as an exemplar of what a good data journalist can do: driven by a human case study, it manages to paint a rich and subtle picture of the issues concerning a particular group of voters. It was one of only four stories in my sample which quoted any case study who wasn't a politician (the others were a BBC England Data Unit piece on the cost of living, its investigation into rent, and the *Manchester Evening News*'s triple-bylined retrospective).

Some of the limitations in the coverage can be blamed on the foregone nature of the contest and the defensive nature of the two biggest parties' campaigns — but it is not just the responsibility of politicians to put issues on the agenda. The BBC England Data Unit had a clever way of hooking one data-driven housing investigation by leading with the scale of private renting's rise since the last general election.

The lack of voices can also be partly blamed on the quick-turnaround formats that data journalists were able to fall back on: mapping of changing boundaries is purely informational — but can it be done without the people living there remaining voiceless? Factchecking of Facebook adverts is a worthy watchdog activity — but would it be more engaging to report why it matters? Can we bring charticles to life with quotes?

But perhaps the most interesting cause of the lack of diversity in voices and subject matter might lie in the nature and status of political reporting, and what happens when data journalism is pulled into its orbit.

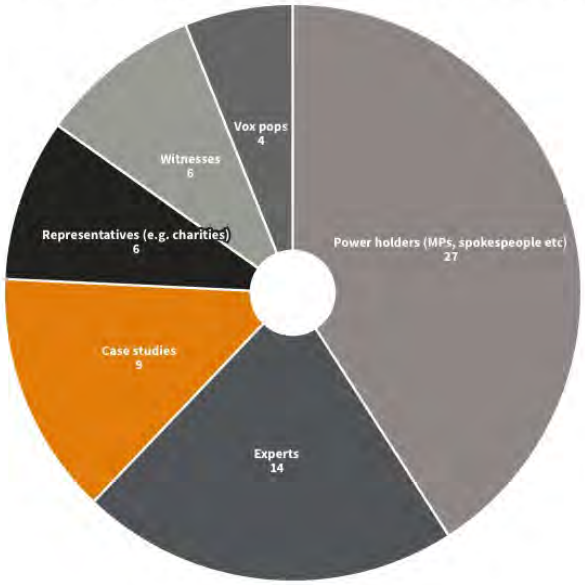
We've been here before: during the coronavirus pandemic it was political reporters who were sent to the daily coronavirus briefing, rather than health and science specialists, contributing to suspicions of 'gotcha' journalism. When it came to the 2024 Election, was there a similar dynamic that saw 'horse race' reporting driving data journalism and other opportunities were missed?

Take the story about Rishi Sunak's tax figures: this was a story ripe for the skills of data journalists, who could have created interactive calculators, or explainers about the government's own historic taxation, or looked at the real world impact of tax. Yet none of these things happened. Instead, the story quickly became a routine Westminster story of claim and counter-claim.

Did voters simply believe the side they supported? Were they persuaded by critical statements? Could an interactive approach such as the *New York Times*'s 'You Draw It' format have been more effective in engaging audiences with a truth they were less prepared to believe? Initial research suggests so. More research is needed.

Case studies were rarely used in data journalists' output during the election

Most sources in stories written or co-written by data journalists were politicians or other holders of power

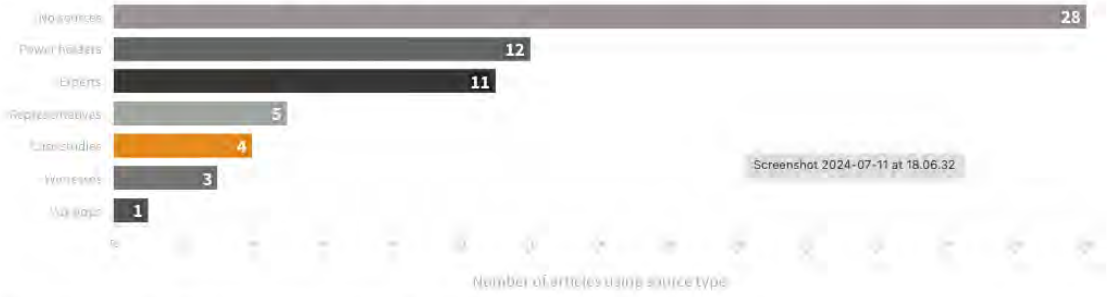


Source: analysis of 51 stories where data journalists had a byline.

Figure 1: sources

Case studies were used in only four of 50 articles by data journalists during the election

More than half of articles had no original quotes at all.



Source: Source: Analysis of 50 stories where data journalists had a byline, Read more about the typology

Figure 2: case studies

Election 2024 and the remarkable absence of media in a mediated spectacle

Prof Lee Edwards

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The mediatisation of politics is now a feature of political life and at the heart of party strategies, particularly during election campaigns. While Rishi Sunak's campaign was plagued with gaffes and revelations that led to media and voter amusement, shock and incredulity (perhaps in equal measure), Keir Starmer was criticised for a lack of capacity to deliver a performance that captures media attention. Doggedly following the PR prescription of key message repetition, he and his team repeatedly deflected personality critiques in favour of the Labour mantra of stability and 'fully costed and fully funded' policies, apparently content to observe the Conservative party construct their own defeat.

The media's role in maximising visibility for politicians and their messages during and beyond election campaigns is of course critical. From a politician's perspective, media maximise the reach of their carefully crafted messages, as well as giving a sense of how those messages might 'land' with the public. Media also provide representation for all candidates and parties and act as an essential proxy for the public interest when journalists robustly challenge claims designed to appeal to voters. However, fulfilling these roles does not guarantee a strong foundation for the democratic process of voter decision-making; that depends on having a robust media landscape, designed to foster democratic participation and deliberative debate, and protected by a coherent and civic-oriented media policy. Yet this is rarely a key feature of the election agenda.

Equally, analysis illustrated, media policy attracted very little space in the Labour and Conservative manifestos for this election and nothing radical. While the Liberal Democrats and Greens were much more focused on constructive reform to challenge current distortions in the media landscape (for example, expanding media ownership and providing support for local news ecologies), their status as smaller parties unlikely to secure a governmental majority meant they received far less exposure and their media policies were completely overlooked.

Media-related issues that did feature primarily focused on concerns about misinformation and associated challenges for election integrity. Tips for voters engaging with campaign material came from the Electoral Commission, while Ofcom collaborated with Shout Out UK and the Electoral Commission to launch the Dismiss campaign, helping younger voters understand and evaluate potentially misleading online content. Both strategies attempted to enhance media literacy skills, although stakeholders agree the effectiveness of such interventions remains under-researched.

Debates did not address the 'elephant in the room': that trust in media has declined, and that this lack of trust might also affect election outcomes. Edelman Trust Barometer showed almost 70% of UK respondents did not trust the media to 'do what is right'; trust in government was equally low. But while trust in politics and politicians was a regular theme in election coverage, trust in the media, and how it might be addressed, was not.

By focusing on users' media literacy and combatting misinformation, the institutional structures of media and their power to influence both election coverage and audience engagement, have been overlooked. The result is a remarkable absence of media self-scrutiny. Instead, scrutiny is left to regulators and professional associations: Ofcom regulates broadcast coverage of election campaigns in the interests of balance and accuracy, while the Independent Press Standards Organisation lightly regulates newspapers and magazines via its Editors' Code, which leaves its members free to campaign for any party, cause or individual, as long as they 'clearly distinguish between comment, conjecture and fact'.

The Media Reform Coalition's Media Manifesto argues in an era of mediatised politics, with high media influence on political process, ensuring diverse media ownership, protecting a robust public service media sector, and supporting increasingly cash-strapped local media content, should be central to the media policy of any democratic government. But such reforms can only result from a clearly thought-through and informed understanding of media and its value as part of the democratic process.

Perhaps it is too much to ask journalists and politicians to reflect on media policy when they are so focused on securing legitimacy from voters and media policy is low on the public agenda. But now that Labour has a secure majority, this remarkable absence should be addressed so that in the next election, voters are both more informed about the power of media, more aware of its capacity to influence them, and ultimately more prepared to engage with the information they circulate, based on this knowledge.

Even before their Labour's victory, Keir Starmer argued that improving trust in politics is essential in the longer-term fight against polarisation and populism. But as the Edelman Trust Barometer shows, we face an equally urgent lack of trust in the media, which needs urgent attention. Sleepwalking into a world where media trust remains low, public service media are increasingly treated as a political football, media ownership is limited to a few dominant actors, and media coverage remains focused on spectacular, rather than consequential, events in politics, offers no benefit for voters, journalists or politicians.

2024: the great election turn-off

Just after 4pm on 22nd May, everyone taking part in Radio 4's *The Media Show* was fired up because of talk that Rishi Sunak was going to call an election any minute. Former Newsnight presenter Kirstie Wark was desperate: "For us [journalists], it's meat and drink and it kind of energises everyone". Presenter Katie Razzall then asked the specialist election broadcaster Peter Snow whether his body was "tingling": "Are you as excited as you were back in the day?" to which the veteran journalist replied "Katie, there is nothing more exciting than an election. Roll on an election."

Not everyone shared this excitement. Elections may be "meat and drink" for the media and political establishments but this is far from true for the rest of the population. Indeed the 2024 general election saw near-record levels of abstention (rarely discussed in the media) following an insipid and uninspiring six-week campaign.

This disinterest was partly because of the very limited differences between the two main parties on key policy matters – from fiscal to foreign affairs – and partly because the prospect of a Labour landslide removed an incentive to rush to the polls.

Yet mainstream journalism, obsessed with the performative routines of electoral contests, largely reproduced the charade that this was a dramatic and transformative moment. They achieved this by, as usual, focusing their coverage on the mechanics of the campaign itself – for example, opinion polls, candidates betting on the outcome of the election and intra-party rivalries – such that 42% of all coverage, according to researchers at Loughborough University, was dominated by stories concerning either the electoral process or sleaze.

Meanwhile, issues central to the population as a whole were marginalised. Even if the main parties didn't want to talk too much about how to meet net zero commitments, there is no justification for the fact that climate stories occupied just 2% of all coverage. While UK complicity in Israel's war against Gaza remains a major concern for millions of voters – leading to the election of five independent MPs standing on pro-Gaza platforms – it barely featured in the campaign with most discussion of defence and security issues focused on which party was more pro-NATO. Similarly, the 'conspiracy of silence' about the likely public spending cuts that might follow the election was rarely challenged.

Instead, further 'drama' was injected into a languid campaign by giving Nigel Farage, leader of far-right Reform UK, a wholly disproportionate amount of coverage. Farage accounted for nearly 10% of all press and TV coverage in the penultimate week of the campaign while the co-leaders of the Greens didn't even make the top twenty. According to a search of the Nexis database, while most major outlets mentioned Keir Starmer approximately twice as much as Farage across the whole campaign (itself a significant overrepresentation of a party which, at the time, had a single MP), BBC 5 Live and Radio 4 mentioned the Reform UK leader significantly more than the future prime minister.

All this served to drag the campaign further to the right and to demoralise, not galvanise, an already disillusioned electorate. The first TV debate on 4th June between the main candidates was watched by an average of 4.8m viewers, more than 2m down on 2019 when Johnson and Corbyn repeatedly clashed over key issues. The BBC's Question Time Leaders' Special on 20th June was watched by 3.3m at its peak, down by nearly 25% on its 2019 equivalent, with around half of the audience watching Spain v Italy in the Euros at the same time.

Indeed, according to Techne polling, the percentage of people most likely not to vote increased during the course of the campaign from 21% to 26%. For 18-34 year olds, the campaign actively turned them off with likely abstainers increasing from 38% at the start to 44% just ahead of polling day. The more these younger voters saw – whether on TikTok or on the BBC – the more they were put off from voting.

Of course it shouldn't be this way. Elections ought to be spaces in which genuine differences are thrashed out and where campaign promises are linked to actions that follow. Yet modern elections are often – although with some significant exceptions – spectacles that run parallel to the real exercise of power located in boardrooms and opaque offices of the state.

The journalist Paul Foot wrote a wonderful book, The Vote, about the importance of the struggle to achieve the universal franchise while also acknowledging the "thin gruel of democracy it offers us". He called for "economic and industrial democracy as well as parliamentary democracy. We want to see not just those who make the laws elected, but those who enforce them elected too – the judges, the police, the armed forces. We want to see those in authority in the factories and workplaces subject to election too, and those who control the media."

This campaign – although not the spectacular implosion of the Tories – will soon be forgotten because one dominated by 'more of the same' politics and covered by an insular and unaccountable media represents a fake, not vibrant, democracy.

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8

Personality politics and popular culture

Ed Davey: towards a Liberal Populism?

The notion of a liberal populism seems paradoxical. Liberalism has been the dominant ideological position in Western electoral politics since the mid-twentieth century. This has made the construction of a liberal outsider, or alternative, seem impossible. The politicians, movements and parties that we label as 'populist' have positioned themselves as anti-liberal in order to be anti-elite. If we understand populism as a form of anti-establishment politics, then liberalism and populism must be viewed as mutually exclusive. However, if we understand populism not as ideology but as political style, then that style may be adopted by a wider range of political standpoints and parties, especially when illiberal actions by the incumbent government have caused widespread anger and disgust. During the 2024 General Election campaign, the Liberal Democrats have begun to make sense of the liberal-populist paradox. Performances by party leader Ed Davey have been a key factor within this.

At its core, liberalism holds a commitment to universalism, the rule of law, governance through large institutions and, consequently, to government by experienced individuals who are accomplished in the performance of political etiquette and competence. Populists have opposed all of these ideals. They reject the liberal aim of a heterogenous but unified society and instead appeal to a specific base, from the ethno-nationalism of Reform UK and Marine Le Pen's National Rally in France, to the anti-economic establishment policies of Podemos in Spain and the Five Star Movement in Italy. In the UK, the Conservative Government subverted the ideals of liberalism in ways that may have been intended to appeal to populist demographics, but seriously backfired: the electorate was to punish the Government's rejection of the rule of law (see, for example, attacks on the judiciary in the wake of the Miller cases, the Partygate scandal, or the undermining of treaty commitments in the Safety of Rwanda Act) and its lack of technocratic competence (see, for example, how Liz Truss' poor oratory and the image of Rishi Sunak announcing the election, umbrella-less in the rain, have stuck in the public imagination). This opened the possibility for the Liberal Democrats to perform liberalism as the outsider position.

In The Global Rise of Populism, Benjamin Moffitt focuses on the staging of populism. Here, populism is a performance style characterised by the eschewing of technocratic language and the harnessing of crisis to communicate with a specific demos, or social group. This moves away from more established ideas about what populism is – including, for example, Paul Taggart or Cas Mudde's positing of populism as a specific ideology, or the discursive approach to populism as political logic by theorist Ernesto Laclau - instead suggesting that populism exists in how populist politicians perform politics.

Davey held the media's attention through a series of stunts in which his position as a long-standing, mainstream politician was incongruously juxtaposed with images of him riding the teacups, falling off a paddleboard, and hurtling down a waterslide. Media coverage has repeatedly highlighted the "undignified" nature of these activities, and Liberal Democrat strategists have acknowledged that "Ed looking silly" has been the price of vital publicity for a small party that would otherwise struggle to hold media attention or register in voters' awareness. Davey has emphasised that the stunts are each linked to a meaningful policy pledge and, he argues, have been successful in raising awareness of his party's offer.

Arguably, this tactic belongs to populist politics. Moffitt identifies that populist leaders actively demonstrate their difference to the technocratic political classes by behaving in ways that competent politicians should not; this appeals to audiences who are disengaged with, or distrustful of, the mainstream political class. Importantly, Davey's stunts are also designed and performed in ways that emphasise his authenticity: his visible enjoyment in baking with children and drumming on exercise balls with the elderly, the visceral reality of a body falling into chilly water, all contribute to the persuasiveness of the performance. Much of the wider campaign likewise hinged on Davey's authenticity, with the Liberal Democrat's first election broadcast aiming for an intimate portrayal of his home life and role as a carer.

Atypical behaviour is typical of populist leaders. Nigel Farage, for example, appeals to his target audience with a persona that opposes the polite technocracy of Westminster's mainstream with brash, anti-politically-correct boisterousness. This is effective both in engaging his core audience and alienating many others. The difference with Davey's brand of liberal populism is that Davey employs comic licence and play. Both give him access to a suspension of the rules around competent and polite behaviour which, crucially, both Davey and his audience understand to be temporary. The use of joking and play enable Davey to demonstrate his rule-breaking before snapping back in to more traditional performances of political competence.

The Liberal Democrats may not fully realise a liberal populism, but we argue that they have shown us what it could look like. Following their historic success on election night, a liberal populism seems significantly more plausible than it ever has before.

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Why Nigel Farage's anti-media election interference claims are so dangerous

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As the headlines about alleged racism in Reform UK piled up during the election campaign, party leader Nigel Farage stepped up his own campaign to paint the media as undemocratic.

With a week to go before election day, a Channel 4 undercover investigation caught a Reform canvasser on camera using racist language about the prime minister Rishi Sunak, and saying the army should "just shoot" asylum seekers crossing the Channel. Reform has now dropped support for three of its candidates over a number of offensive comments, and a Reform candidate has defected to the Conservatives over the row.

Farage described the Channel 4 investigation as a "stitch-up on the most astonishing scale". According to Farage, the canvasser was a paid actor set up by the broadcaster to make his party look racist. Reform then reported Channel 4 to the Electoral Commission, accusing the broadcaster of election interference.

When Farage appeared on BBC's Question Time the following day, audience members challenged him about the racist comments and asked why his party attracted extremists. Farage subsequently attacked the BBC for having "rigged" the audience. The organisation was a "political actor", he claimed.

Speaking at a Reform rally in Birmingham on the last Sunday of the campaign to an audience of 4,500 Reform supporters and canvassers, Farage attacked both the BBC and Channel 4 as partisan institutions not worthy of the label of public service broadcasters.

Accompanied by pyrotechnics and Union Jacks, Farage implied that the broadcasters, as part of the establishment, were conspiring to stop Reform in its tracks for fear of its success. He rehearsed this narrative in posts on X, framed as a "POLITICAL INTERFERENCE ALERT".

This strategy of media populism is a mirror of US president Donald Trump's rhetoric, and dangerous for democracy where it, as in this case, is unjustified. It doesn't just paint broadcasters as a scapegoat for Farage's own electoral failure, it sets the scene for complaints of election rigging in the new parliament.

Fake news, populist reality

It may be Trump who brought the phrase "fake news" into the mainstream, but Farage has long attacked the supposedly conspiring media elite as part of his populist approach.

Since his election to the European Parliament in 2014, Farage (then leader of Ukip) has repeatedly accused the BBC of bias and double standards. He has presented mainstream media as distorting reality (especially in connection with unfavourable representations of himself) in a way that interferes with people's ability to practise their democratic rights.

He appears to have ramped up this rhetoric in the final weeks of the election campaign. For instance, Farage accused *the Daily Mail*, Google and Ofcom of "political interference" and "election interference" for various alleged mis- and under-representations.

He has now added TikTok to the list, saying they had suspended the live feed from Reform's rally on 30th June because of alleged hate speech. Farage's repeated use of terms such as "election interference" and "rigged", which he used to describe BBC's Question Time audience, are unlikely to be incidental. They are a striking imitation of Trump's repeated accusations of the "rigged election" in the US since 2020.

This populist tactic serves two purposes. First, it uses Farage's status as supposed persona non grata in establishment media circles as proof of his unorthodox truth-telling. As the Reform UK chairman, Richard Tice, introduced Farage at the rally, he complimented Farage's bravery to stand up against a conspiring establishment, "to tell the truth … against all the pressure to stick at it".

This self-portrayal of a certain truth-telling faculty is characteristic of populism. Untruthful claims and disinformation – such as some of Reform's claims about climate change – are presented as truth and often taken as such by supporters because they appear to be authentically performed. This authenticity-based understanding of truth is what Trump's then-campaign manager Kellyanne Conway famously referred to as "alternative facts".

In the story populists invent about political reality, the truthteller/leader is a saviour of the good people who are being misled by a self-interested and lying political and media establishment.

Preparing for the future

The second purpose of Farage's tactic of anti-media populism is the long game. By accusing the media of interfering in his electoral success, in combination with the UK's first-past-the-post voting system, which favours the large parties, he can claim that his views have far greater support than Reform's representation in Parliament suggests. He can then use this claim to build even greater momentum behind him for the following election in five years' time.

Farage has openly declared his intention to become prime minister in 2029 and to build a movement to that effect during the upcoming parliament. The new Labour government now needs to consider how to best respond to his increasingly Trumpian rhetoric – even launching his campaign with a promise to "make Britain great again" – and expected disruptive behaviour and the threat these pose to the norms of British democracy.

Nigel Farage and the political circus

Gore Vidal had a famous quip about Ronald Reagan: "Prepare yourself for some bad news: the presidential library just burned down! Both books were destroyed. But the real horror: he hadn't finished colouring either one of them." To Vidal, Reagan was a puppet of big business: a slick 'cue-card reader' who helped corporations gain control of the country after the malaise of the 1970s.

A former Hollywood star, Reagan was, at the beginning of the 1980s, the best example to date of the celebritisation of politics: a process that, as John Street, Mark Wheeler, and other scholars of celebrity have shown, has long historical roots, but which, in the words of Wheeler, "came to maturity with the advent of mass communications in the early twentieth century", was honed by waves of "celebrity politicians [who] incorporated matters of performance, personalization, branding and public relations into the heart of their political representation", and is now ubiquitous across Europe and around the globe.

Reagan displayed a mastery of the process theorised by P. David Marshall in his book Celebrity and Power whereby, using the media, politicians "convey… affective information" that addresses "instinctive feelings" of voters rather than "rational decision making". Where his predecessor Jimmy Carter would talk about the complexities of world affairs, Reagan's simple rhetoric about the American Dream cemented his position as a beloved figure for many Americans. This man-of-the-people persona can be seen in a later cowboy president, George W. Bush, whose performance of folksiness appealed to a large swathe of the American population.

Another thing that tied Reagan and Bush Jr. together was the response they commonly induced from liberals in the mainstream media: that is to say, that they were both often branded as idiots or clowns. During Bush's tenure there was a veritable industry based on pointing out the president's assumed lack of intelligence, while the word "idiot" trended in 2018 when it became known that Googling it threw up images of Donald Trump.

The Reform UK leader Nigel Farage, who was elected as MP for Clacton having stood unsuccessfully for Westminster on seven previous occasions, has often elicited the same kind of response. While these patronising responses to figures on the Right are sometimes amusing, they are increasingly less funny in an age where nativist parties and populist politicians are thriving, and serve to feed the sense of anti-establishment feeling that Farage – a consummate celebrity politician – is adept at fomenting and exploiting.

As such, an important response to the 2024 General Election from serious politicians and commentators across the respectable political spectrum should be careful reflection about how the radical right should be countered, now that Farage's celebrity and cultural power has transformed into seats in Westminster and influenced a historical realignment of the right. This response should address three main points.

First, there should be understanding that the disorientation and anger that Farage has channelled is a valid response to the inevitable consequences of a long-term structural collapse, created by neoliberal economic policies which have led to deep wealth inequality, years of stagnant wages, historic levels of state and personal debt, and a contemporary labour market defined by temporary, precarious jobs that undermine possibilities of long-term life planning. Austerity implemented in the post-2008 period, and the response to the Covid-19 pandemic, turbo-charged this long process, but equally important was New Labour's move to the right in the mid-1990s which resulted in a lack of political options for traditional Labour voters and waves of left-behind voters moving to UKIP: Farage's first successful vehicle.

Second, while Farage has distinguished himself as highly adept at exploiting social media for clicks, and while it's only to be expected that tabloids and partisan 'news' channels are happy to exploit Farage for content, the mainstream media should reflect on the key role that it has played in extending his reach, making full use his charisma as an easy way to boost viewing figures and to add some cheap spice to dull political analysis. The BBC's Question Time stands guilty as charged, having Farage appear 36 times since 2000, as do other high-profile entertainment shows that have traded on his celebrity appeal.

And third: the political and media class should understand that calling opponents idiots and treating them like clowns is entirely counterproductive as a method of dampening the radical right, no matter how smugly satisfying it may feel in the short term. The increasing panic in Conservative ranks following Farage's 'shock' announcement in early June that he would stand in Clacton after insisting that he would not run, and the suggestions that Sunak called the election early because they feared that giving Farage more time to build his campaign in Clacton would lead to an even bigger Tory wipeout, suggest that the penny may have finally dropped, albeit much too late.

As such, after decades building his brand, Farage has moved centre stage. The political circus continues but Farage is surely not the biggest clown.

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Binface, Beany and Beyond: humorous candidates in the 2024 General Election

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Shepuya Famwang

Chunghui Chuang,

Ahmet Buğra Kalender

Nadia Haq

Maggie Ka Yi Yeung

Aneta Postek – Mioduszewska

Soroush Sayyari

Bao Duong,

Ibrahim Awawdeh

Laure Dedecker

'Humorous' candidates running for election are as quintessentially British as fish and chips. Statements to this effect are common: there is indeed a long history of humorous and satirical election candidates, dating back to the 19th Century, and the right to stand is an important part of the democratic system. This frames broadly supportive (and often extensive) media coverage. They have arguably gained more visibility since the 1980s when 'Screaming Lord Sutch' launched the 'Official Monster Raving Loony Party' with David Mellor complaining that the backdrop to the declaration in his constituency was "a lot of people dressed like idiots, behaving like idiots, and waving idiotic slogans."

In the 2024 General Election, there were numerous humorous candidates. Candidates 'do' humour in different ways – often blending into a more critical satirical form. Some are poking fun at the mainstream parties and politicians; some use it purely to highlight single issues (e.g. fathers' rights and Elmo); some are poking fun at the system itself, using the electoral process to promote themselves or their business. Then there are candidates from the major parties using humour to gain attention such as Ed Davey's "comedy cannon".

While a prominent phenomenon in British electoral politics, they have received scant scholarly attention. Here we present some initial findings from a wider piece of research that seeks to understand the phenomena – drawing here on interviews with humorous independent candidates: Count Binface (comedian Jon Harvey), Captain Beany and The Mitre TW9 Pub party (landlord, Chris French).

Motivations for Campaigning

The candidates had diverse motivations for running for election. Most were running to make a serious political point. Captain Binface noted that he wanted to "celebrate and defend the wonder of British democracy, which allows any citizen the right to stand for election no matter how idiotic their platform or ludicrous their get-up." This was echoed by Captain Beany, who noted that democracy is "what I love about this country – we can air our views –free speech, in moderation of course." Binface's underlying political message was to highlight "the appalling chaos of the last 14 years, the damage being done to democracy across Earth, the horrific and increasing effects of climate change, and the continuing lack of Ceefax on British TV." Captain Beany, who noted he was 'eccentric' and had some "half-baked" [bean] policies, was inspired by Sutch. He was motivated in part by a belief that people shouldn't have to sit in baths of beans to raise funds and cited food and baby banks to decry the current state of the UK.

Chris French's sole motivation was different: to gain "some free publicity for the pub". He was making no direct political points and had limited interest in politics. He was effectively poking fun at the electoral process. French calculated that the cost of standing for election (£500 deposit returnable if a candidate wins 5% of the vote), was a cost-effective way to have a leaflet for the pub delivered to everyone in the constituency.

Impact of Humorous Candidates

While humorous candidates have had some success historically (e.g. Hartlepool FC mascot H'Angus the Monkey becoming mayor), most receive less than 5% of the vote and lose their deposit. But, as indicated above, the motivation is not to win power, but to highlight political or systemic issues and/or their brands, encourage democratic participation, have some fun, and the like. As French noted: "If I do win, I'm in the shit", but only "5% of candidates actually win" and he'd "won before the election started" as he'd "achieved what I set out to do" in promoting the pub.

Each candidate received local, national and even international media coverage, allowing them to reach well beyond their local area. Binface, for example, was endorsed by the *Daily Star* and received features in the *Guardian*; BBC analysis of his policy proposal to cap the price of croissants, and international coverage (e.g. Global News in Canada). Beany was featured in the *Independent*, another 'humorous' candidate, AI Steve, was covered by NBC News amongst others. These candidates receive the kind of coverage most candidates can only dream of. While all lost their deposits (Beany receiving the most votes with 618), they were all effective in highlighting their concerns.

Looking forward, the £500 cost of running for election has not changed since 1985, making it cheaper year on year. There has been a doubling of independent candidates at this election to 459, continuing recent trends. It may be that the Electoral Commission moves to increase the deposit. However, such moves must be carefully balanced. Beany noted that he'd tapped into his pension while Harvey had "dipped (unwisely) into the "Binface piggy bank" (having crowd-funded the £10,000 to stand for mayor). Humorous candidates can perform an important democratic function, providing political critique and levity, and prompt reflection and dialogue about elections and democracy. What cost humour?

Note: this piece was jointly written by participants in the Bournemouth University Digital Methods Summer School.

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What Corbyn support reveals about how Starmer's Labour won big

As the presiding officer announced Jeremy Corbyn's vote tally confirming his re-election, his supporters at the count in Islington North erupted to screams of 'yes' in a form of release rarely heard outside football stadia. Over the past four general elections (2015, 2017, 2019, 2024), we have traced the ways in which support for politicians and political parties resembles the fan-like ways in which we engage in other aspects of mediated culture – a trend part of a wider process of 'fanization', the increasing prominence in our everyday lives of engaging in an emotionally committed, affective mode in and beyond popular culture. 'Fanization', in turn, is driven by changes to modern societies as many roles against which identities have long been constructed and articulated (employment, relationships, religion, etc.) are more fluid. As we seek out new markers of identity through media consumption, political activism is an important space of identity construction. The emotional jeopardy at display at Corbyn's constituency count is an illustration of the degree to which political support is deeply personal – tied into what we believe as much as who we are. For those invested in politics, it is about a sense of identity.

We conducted three waves of interviews with Jeremy Corbyn supporters before the General Election in December 2019 and in the aftermath of Labour's defeat. The pain of a shattered political project and the end to Corbyn's party leadership was experienced as a personal loss by many of our participants. In the months after the election they described disengaging from politics and avoiding news and current affairs. There is ample evidence that some of Corbyn's supporters have 'tuned out' and become less engaged in politics, though our evidence suggests that it is primarily enthusiasts most committed and actively campaigning for Labour under Corbyn who have withdrawn from politics. In the words of one respondent: "I don't know much about what Jeremy is up to. I've lost interest and hope in elections and the government"; or in the words of another respondent who actively campaigned for Corbyn in 2019: "I'll always look up to him with admiration and respect I think, even though spending so much time fighting expulsion […] is futile and makes me ultimately confused about politics and what we should be focusing on."

While support for Corbyn among a sizeable group of our respondents has peeled away – in broadly equal parts to the Green Party, Labour under Keir Starmer and Reform, giving Ukraine, antisemitism and an inability to win elections as main reasons for moving on– the majority of our participants echoed this sentiment in reaffirming their affective bond with Corbyn. As 'Labour' and 'Corbyn' have increasingly become separate political 'brands' (again), over half indicated that they would vote for Corbyn as an independent candidate over their current voting intention. Among those who have remained loyal to Corbyn, we find another manifestation of the emotional significance of their support reminiscent of sports fandom: whom we support is simultaneously defined by whom we dislike. The most committed Corbyn supporters in our panel were also most likely to be dissatisfied with Keir Starmer as Labour leader.

Political fandom, especially in an era of populism, is frequently driving, or even driven by, anti-fandom. In our analysis of the 2019 General Election we highlighted the degree to which Corbyn had not only attracted an emotionally committed group of supporters but a much larger group of those motivated and committed to stop him coming to power, spelling the electoral doom witnessed in 2019.

The 2024 General Election was similarly shaped by strong sentiments of dislike or what we might call anti-fandom: as the strong constituency-by-constituency and region-by-region variations in Labour's vote share illustrate, the overriding theme shaping the outcome of election was a strong dislike of Conservative incumbents. In this context of 'politics of against', the seeming weakness of the post-Corbyn Labour leadership – its inability to create a similarly motivated 'fan base' – was its biggest strength. This is not to argue that Starmer's Labour does not have emotionally invested supporters, nor is it difficult to see how, for instance, the often-cited figure of the 'centrist dad' is deeply embedded in articulating the identity position of those who would opt for such a self-description. Yet, even among those participants who had most firmly distanced themselves from Corbyn and were most positive about Starmer's leadership, we did not find the intense enthusiasm that has characterised Corbyn support. In this sense, Starmer's victory might be more shallow; however, that does not mean it is less stable. As the trajectory of another master of asymmetric demobilisation, former German chancellor Angela Merkel, demonstrates, Starmer's ability to avoid evoking strong emotional responses among most voters thus far – with the notable exception of those most committed to his predecessor as Labour leader – is an electoral asset in the age of 'fanization' that is not to be underestimated.

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"Well that was dignified, wasn't it?": floor apportionment and interaction in the televised debates

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The General Election televised debates of 2024 were distinctive in that there were two seven-party debates between 'leading figures' on 7th and 13th June. In the first, Mishal Husain moderated a debate for the BBC with Penny Mordaunt for the Conservatives, Labour's Angela Rayner, Liberal Democrat Daisy Cooper, Stephen Flynn from the Scottish National Party, Rhun ap Iorwerth from Plaid Cymru, Carla Denyer from the Green Party, and Nigel Farage from Reform UK.

These multi-party TV debates are highly competitive events in which the speakers' ability to take the floor is key to their success. Although the moderator's role is to regulate equal participation of all members, this rarely happens in practice and speakers' floor allocation is often highly variable. In this debate, the speaking time of each speaker is shown in the Chart 1.

This shows that Penny Mordaunt took the floor for the most time, followed by Nigel Farage and Steven Flynn. Previous research has shown that incumbents gain more floorspace in debates because other candidates and the moderator address more direct questions and criticisms towards them which offers them more speaking turns, and this appears to be the case here. As the primary political opponent for many of the parties, Angela Rayner also gained more speaking turns because of direct challenges and questions, mainly from Mordaunt. However, Rayner did not capitalise on this advantage and instead consistently used up less time on her routinely allocated speaking turns where she was not competing for the floor.

Given the lack of the advantages of the additional speaking turns afforded to the main players, it was Farage, Denyer and Flynn who accrued the most space on the debate floor by successfully interrupting, confronting other speakers and making asides and wisecracks in other speakers' turns. These are all strategies that have been identified as markers of successful speakers in debates because they can manipulate the 'key' of the debate from a serious tone to a mocking, ironic or humorous one, and thus help to construct speakers' authority and authenticity. The second debate in this format on ITV on 13th June (moderated by Julie Etchingham) followed a similar pattern where it was the smaller parties that made up the most interactional ground with interruptions, interjections and wisecracks.

The position of the speakers on the stage for both debates was arranged by drawing lots, and the placement of Rayner and Mordaunt next to each other in the first debate allowed one of the most distinctive features of this debate – direct challenges mainly from Mordaunt towards Rayner. These were illegal in terms of the debate rules, and frequently broke the debate discourse down into two-way or 'dyadic' exchanges between the two speakers which excluded other participants. These two speakers often resisted the moderator's attempts to stop the exchanges and continued to speak at the same time as each other for sustained periods (something that happens very rarely in spontaneous speech because it renders both speakers inaudible). The refusal of either of these speakers to give way to each other, the confrontational nature of their exchanges, accompanied by Mordaunt jabbing a pointing finger at Rayner, can be seen as risky behaviour in the context of political TV debates.

Debate participants must carefully balance the impression that they make on the audience, often in 'double bind' situations where they must appear strong but not aggressive, eloquent but not glib, and friendly but not obsequious. Gender plays a part here too, as women politicians in the 2015 General Election debates have been shown to have been judged much more harshly than their male counterparts when speaking in positions of authority. They were represented in ways that re-attached them to female stereotypes and archetypes (mother, seductress, pet, iron maiden) in media coverage. Here, Mordaunt and Rayner risked being judged harshly for being 'too aggressive'; 'too argumentative' and 'too forceful' as women politicians, a precarious position that was exploited by Carla Denyer who interjected "That was extremely dignified, wasn't it?", after a particularly heated exchange between Mordaunt and Rayner.

Apart from a few references to the 'feisty' Mordaunt and Rayner (a ubiquitous sexist word only used of women and animals) in the news media following this debate, there was little evidence of them being described in sexist terms as bossy head girls, matrons and headmistresses. Their exchanges were described in less sexist albeit fairly negative ways as 'slugging it out'; 'clashing' and 'chaotic' with a focus on debate content (particularly Mordaunt's criticism of Sunak leaving the D-Day commemorations early), rather than the women politicians' appearance. Refreshingly, it appears that the media representations of this debate have improved in terms of sexist tropes and judgements since 2015.

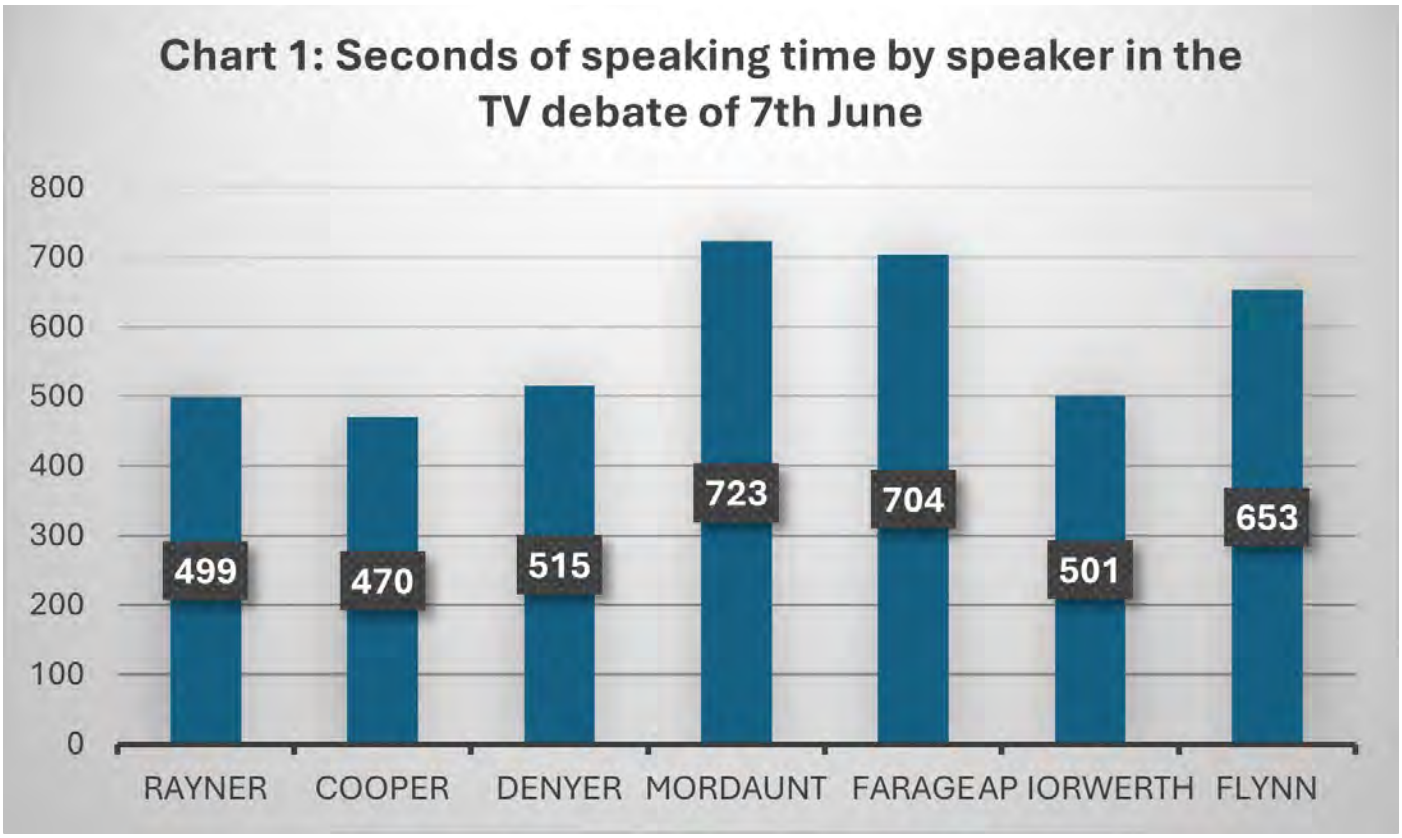

Chart 1: Seconds of speaking time by speaker in the TV debate of 7th June

TV debates: beyond winners and losers

Prof Stephen Coleman

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There were more televised election debates in this campaign than in any since they first took place in Britain in 2010. These ranged from debates involving up to seven party leaders to head-to-head encounters between the two leaders most likely to become Prime Minister. Sunak was keen to take part because his incumbency advantage was outweighed by his unpopularity disadvantage. As challenger, Starmer saw these as an opportunity to convert unenthusiastic opinion poll preferences into actual votes.

The most common question asked about these debates was 'who won?' - a strange obsession of lazy journalists and over-excited party spinners, given the empirical weakness of the relationship between polling-based performance victories and voting preferences. For example, in 2019 post-debate polls voters were closely divided in their evaluations of the performances of Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn, but this offered no predictive insight into actual voting decisions. Indeed, the notion that the main purpose of election debates is for one or other party to achieve a marketing coup misses the point. Normatively speaking, democratic elections are not about deciding which politician is the slickest performer, but the exercise of informed democratic choice by citizens. The more pertinent question to be asked is, how useful were the debates in understanding the choices before them, determining the veracity of claims being made by politicians and engaging in the electoral process as confident democratic agents? Within a Machiavellian conception of politics, such civic questions might not count for much. But moving beyond strategic politics, vibrant democracy depends upon being able to answer them positively.

I have been tracking how voters view UK televised election debates since they began fourteen years ago. In 2010 two-thirds of debate viewers told us that they had learned something new from watching the debates. In a poll immediately after that election 74% of respondents said that they now knew more 'about the qualities of the party leaders', 69% reported having learned more about 'the policies of each party' and 53% said that the debates had helped them 'to understand the problems which the country is facing' better. Particular beneficiaries of debate-viewing in 2010 were first-time voters: 74% of 18–24- year-olds reported having learned something about the parties' policies from the debates and 50% of them told us that the debates had helped them to make up their minds how to vote. These trends continued in our polling after the 2015 televised debates and in 2017 when, although Theresa May refused to participate in a head-to-head debate with Jeremy Corbyn, both leaders took part in a BBC *Question Time* special.

So, what about 2024? We only have one survey that asked about civic learning to go on, in which JL Partners polled 957 debate viewers immediately after the first Sunak-Starmer head-to-head on ITV on 4th June. Asked to agree or disagree with the statement, 'The debate was useful and I learned things I didn't know before' 71% agreed. This suggests that whatever their limitations, these media events still perform a worthwhile civic function. One notable feature of this generally positive appraisal of the debates relates to older survey respondents who were significantly less likely than younger ones to say that they had learned something new from the debates. 73% of 18-25 said that they found the debates useful, as against 50% of 55-74 year-olds. Could it be that older voters feel that they have less need to seek out basic information about the problems facing the country, the policy differences between the parties and the quality of potential national leaders? Or might it be that it is older voters who are now the most political distrustful of the political system? These are people who had lived long enough to have seen a lot of election debates over the years. Perhaps some of them were part of the majority who had felt informed by watching the debates in 2010, but have since become less easily impressed by the patter of well-rehearsed politicians. It will be interesting to explore the socio-demographics of low turnout as they emerge after the 2024 Election. Might older people, who are usually the most likely to vote, have been less inclined to do so this time? Is our democracy facing an experience-weariness crisis?

My overall impression is that the 2024 televised election debates continued to serve a positive civic function, even though that is too often drowned out by the din of spin. In an era in which local public meetings and hustings have become largely nostalgic phenomena, it makes good sense to bring the drama of electoral choice to the televised public domain - which is still the main medium of choice for citizens seeking reliable political information. However, the debate formats of 2010, which were not very different from those of the US televised debates in 1960, are now looking rather worn. There is scope for format innovation. Creative minds should be focused now on how to do debates better in 2029.

Is our television debate coverage finally starting to match up to multi-party politics?

Dr Louise Thompson

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After a spate of elections between 2015 and 2024, televised general election debates now seem pretty standard fare. However, they are still bedding down in the UK having only been used for the first time during the 2010 General Election and having changed in scope and in frequency over the last five election campaigns. The 2024 television debates saw yet another change in format and continued to raise some questions about how best we can transition away from majoritarian media coverage to more multi-party coverage in future elections.

Political scientists have long talked about the impact of the majoritarian electoral system being one of alternation of power between the two largest political parties. During elections in the 1950s and 60s in the era of partisan alignment, the cumulative vote for Labour and the Conservatives was well over 80 % at each election. But there's been a gradual decline since then and this has really plateaued in the last few years, reaching just 56% in 2024. It's a far cry from the 65% they achieved in 2010, when the television debates were used for the first time.

During the 2024 campaign, we certainly saw progress in terms of who was invited to the debates. The leaders of the Conservative Party, Labour Party, Scottish National Party, Liberal Democrats, Greens, Reform and Plaid Cymru all received a slot on a national debate. Most of these leaders also took part in a detailed BBC Question Time special, while country specific coverage enabled parties like Plaid Cymru to have their say more directly to their own voting constituencies.

Yet we still seem to be grappling with two issues when it comes to these televised debates. Firstly, when we think about who is to be included, there is still a niggling remnant of majoritarianism which continues to reinforce the notion that a Labour or Conservative Prime Minister is the only option. We saw once again in this campaign that there was a 'head-to-head' debate between Rishi Sunak and Keir Starmer but no binary debates between any other parties. With some polls towards the end of June predicting that the Conservatives may not secure enough seats to be the Official Opposition, this decision may have seemed rash. National Question Time specials took place with six parties, but Reform UK and the Greens had initially been excluded, with the decision only being overturned following a complaint from Farage himself. Commenting on the decision to add an extra debate slot, the BBC said that it was important to 'reflect the fact that it is clear from across a broad range of opinion polls that the support for Reform UK has been growing'. Their 14% share of the vote suggests that this was in hindsight the correct decision to make. It also suggests that in future elections, the schedule for TV debates will have to be more flexible and willing to bend to changes in polling dynamics during the campaign rather than being based solely on the current state of the House of Commons or a general election result which is now five years' old.

There is also a question of how different parties should be included in the debates. Increased multi-partyism in the UK and the presence of so many national parties now contesting general elections, means that bringing every single party leader together to debate each other is not particularly elegant. The seven way debate between the parties on 13th June demonstrated this well. They also end up, inevitably, becoming something of a shouting match between the two largest parties which, as the Green Party co-leader Carla Denyer noted at the time, is not very dignified. The Question Time specials were an excellent way to offer voters a real insight into each party. We saw Adrian Ramsey for instance discuss the party's immigration plans as well as more typically green issues such as electric cars. These sessions also put all parties on a level playing field, giving equal time and space for a detailed probing of their policy issues, even if Reform UK were not happy with the end result. The final issue that we should consider further for future elections is perhaps the terminology used to describe parties and debates. References to 'small parties' and 'challenger parties' reinforces the idea that they are somehow less worthy than the two largest parties when it comes to election debates. And with TV debates thought to be the 'most influential' thing for voters in previous elections, there is a responsibility on our broadcasters to be seen to treat all parties as equally worthy participants in future election campaigns.

Tetchiness meets disenchantment: capturing the contrasting political energies of the campaign

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It never rains, but it pours. Rishi Sunak's rain-soaked General Election announcement on 22nd May, drowned out by the unmistakable 1997 Labour-landslide anthem, D:Ream's 'Things Can Only Get Better', attracted an array of media commentary, ridicule, and memetic activity. Symbolically, a tone for the election campaign had been struck. The *Guardian's* political sketch writer John Crace captured the public mood: "the country felt a mixture of indifference and relief. Indifference to Rish!'s *(sic)* exit, relief that we were to be put out of our misery". The weather, Sunak's own misguided attempt at statesmanlike 'optics', and Steve Bray's powerful speakers, all conspired against the prime minister. Bombarded by the elements; atmospherically, visually and aurally, who wouldn't be irritated?

The election announcement set the low octane tone for what has followed, with a sense of attunement between the depressed tetchiness of Sunak and the mood of disenchantment and disorientation that has emanated from citizens. As the campaign progressed, commentators repeatedly drew attention to Sunak's tetchiness, a quality already noted by Ben Williams in his Conversation piece in January 2024. Sunak already had a reputation for being tetchy, with such behaviour unlikely to win public support. When political authenticity is a valued currency, tetchiness presented a breakthrough authentic emotion in an otherwise sterile, low energy, uninspiring campaign.

We are interested in this term particularly because it conjures an almost involuntary reaction to suppressed anger, a physical manifestation of irritable energy. Our own survey of newspapers in the Nexis database during the campaign period demonstrated that while other political actors have also been deemed 'tetchy' during this election, Sunak accounted for by far the most references (69 out of 102 relevant articles; by contrast Starmer had 9, mostly from the *Daily Mail*). Unlike Sunak's repeated claims to be 'incredibly angry' about the election betting scandal, while delaying any action to suspend implicated candidates, tetchiness conjures an affective reaction, readable to a public who are losing faith in the quality of our political leaders. Televised debates showed us grim-faced audiences asking wince-inducing questions full of hurt and contempt. The issues raised appeared almost secondary to the charged manner of the asking. A NatCen report released during the election campaign showed a marked fall in the public's trust and confidence in the British political system and its leaders. Disillusionment with democracy is particularly stark among younger voters. Our argument is that tone, mood and energy are integral to understanding how public attention and energy coalesces around certain issues, and how the media intervene to shape such configurations.

Continuing our interest in the affective energies around political moments, we see the disappointed tone of media commentary about political actors' performances as emblematic of the contentious relationship between members of the public and politicians. As Stephen Coleman argues, paying attention to mood stories and accounts of political intuition "takes seriously the force of pre-cognitive affectivity and its shaping of public disposition". For Coleman, "intuition may well carry greater epistemic authority than logical cognition", and so shapes not just citizens' immediate political reality but the scope for future actions. Our own 2019 Election Analysis piece focused on emotionality, and specifically the toxic parliamentary atmosphere that had led many MPs, and especially women, to stand down. Here we argue that opening up the metaphorical scope beyond emotionality and mood, to encompass energy and tone, allows for a richer understanding of how voters subjectively experience their own political reality and their levels of attention, commitment, and expectations in the political arena.

The concept of political energy is used here to capture degrees of affective commitment, but also the motivation and opportunity for action, and the way such forces ebb and flow over time. 'Energy' affords agency to political actors, but it also recognises the inequalities that constrain opportunity to express and exert such energy. Synonyms of power, liveliness, and strength speak to the qualities associated with the concept, and which can be applied to examine how values of weakness or strength are revealed through critical analysis. 'Energy' also has the advantage of avoiding the normative disapproval sometimes associated with emotions in politics – it implies action, or potential for action, but with potentially constructive and destructive consequences.

A voter turnout of around 60% confirmed this public malaise with the politics on offer – as Gary Gibbon dubbed it on Channel 4 News, this is a 'loveless landslide' for Labour, which oxymoronically captures the challenges the new government now faces in changing citizen perceptions of politics and how they can meaningfully intervene in political life. The current electoral energy might not match the optimistic enthusiasm of 1997, but a parliament with a record number of female MPs, a commitment to the most working class Cabinet of all-time, and a rhetorical focus on public service signals a renewal in the affective formation of political realities. Despite the low turnout and Labour's low vote share, there is now a new political energy, and the opportunity at least to re-ignite democratic trust.

"We're just normal men": football and the performance of authentic leadership

Speculation continues over why Rishi Sunak called a July election, but the moment he did football-based photo opportunities became inevitable thanks to EURO 2024. Keir Starmer even gave his first campaign speech at the Gillingham FC ground. While Starmer has a track record of visiting football clubs across leagues and counties, Laura Kuenssberg commented that during the campaign he was mostly seen at "non-league football grounds" in his casual "centrist dad uniform". She suggested this was an effort to move away from more obviously staged photo-ops, and present Starmer as "a man of the people".

Both Sunak and Starmer faced challenges, however, in using the European Championship for this purpose. As James Stanyer argues, politics has become 'intimised': we've become used to knowing more about our politicians' personal lives, and journalists asking them what they watch on TV. But politicians' pop culture references can easily come off as inauthentic.

In addition to a clunky dribble around some cones at Chesham United, Sunak was mocked for asking people in Wales – which did not qualify for the tournament – whether they were "looking forward to all the football". This felt reminiscent of David Cameron appearing to forget which team he supported during his own premiership, a slip which suggested his supposed lifelong interest in football had actually been retroactively manufactured.

Commentors suggest it would be unfair to accuse Sunak, who shared memories of watching Southampton as a child, of doing the same. But it was harder for Sunak to pass as a "genuine football fan" (as Simon Hattenstone argues Blair did) than Starmer, who says he has played "football pretty well every week since I was 10 years old" and plans to continue as Prime Minister. This fits Gunn Enli's conception of authenticity as something audiences assess according to how consistently a persona is presented.

Starmer faces a different problem using this passion for political purposes. After visiting Bristol Rovers FC, he posted that "Football and patriotism go hand in hand". But while happy to pose with a Bristol shirt printed with "Change 24", Starmer was not to be spotted sporting the three lions of England while seeking to spearhead a Labour comeback in Scotland. As New Labour sought a patriotic re-brand, Blair was able to leverage 'Cool Britannia' and the chant for football to come home to England. In contrast, as we've seen the return of the Union Jack to Labour's branding materials, Starmer has not capitalised on Gareth Southgate's re-brand of the England men's football team into progressive patriots.

Starmer did, however, pledge his allegiance to what Clavene and Long term 'Southgatism' in other ways. While Kuenssberg might be right that he wanted us to see him as a "man of the people" having a "kickabout with his mates", he used references to football to pitch himself as a manager, not a player.

In the first televised leaders' debate, Sunak and Starmer were asked to "advise" Southgate on whether the "best leadership approach" was to "play it safe, or take some risks and go for the win". The question suggested it was preferable to be radical, and Sunak pledged he would take "bold action". Starmer on the other hand emphasised that, like Southgate, he had spent several years "building a squad".

One of Labour's Party Election Broadcasts (PEBs) saw Starmer walking through the Lake District, the site of his childhood family holidays, with former England and Manchester United footballer Gary Neville. Neville also commentated on EURO 2024 for ITV, and yet, the broadcast does not mention football once. Why then, aside from his support for Labour and familiarity to audiences, choose Neville?

The answer may lie in his entrepreneurial endeavours. Neville is a property developer with multiple business ventures, and recently appeared as a guest judge on Dragons Den. His PEB with Starmer feels like one project manager interviewing another about his leadership competencies, and strategies to deliver. In his continued effort to distance his Labour from Corbyn's, Starmer describes how he has set a "country-first" mission for his team, assessed their motivations, and set the expectation they will be "ready to deliver from the get go".

Neville does not stand-in for "the British people", but claims to know their priorities and "disappointment". He seeks assurances from Starmer that he is capable of challenging negative perceptions of politicians, "comforting" people on tax, and changing preconceptions that Labour "can't manage the economy". Starmer shares his vision with Neville for a "decade of national renewal", while setting a series of targets as "first steps" on this mission.

While photo opportunities and football chat were inevitable, Starmer was less interested in playing around to perform ordinariness. Instead, he harnessed the language of management to reinforce a campaign narrative that the 'grown ups' were coming home to govern.

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‘Make the friendship bracelets’: gendered imagery in candidates’ self-presentations on the campaign trail

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If anyone had fun on the campaign trail, it was Ed Davey – that appeared to be the consensus among social media users during the campaign. Davey’s Instagram account features images of him trying thrill rides, gleefully riding a bike with both legs in the air, or falling off a paddleboard. When asked what inspired him to share such unconventional campaign posts, Davey said it was his way of showing that politicians are just normal people too.

But there is more to it. Images hold significant power on the campaign trail, and they can invoke specific emotions and gendered perceptions of political leadership among voters. While Davey focused on thrill rides and other activities, Rishi Sunak and Keir Starmer relied on more traditional campaign imagery, but with stark differences. Here, I will consider the gendered self-presentations of the candidates, using the example of Instagram posts by Sunak and Starmer.

When we speak about gendered representations, we more often than not mean *stereotypical* associations with gender and social roles. Despite growing representation of women in political leadership roles, executive roles are still seen in highly masculinized terms. For instance, the view of an ideal president or prime minister is often associated with stereotypically masculine characteristics such as agency or strength. But this is not always what voters look for in a candidate. Particularly during crises related to stereotypically feminine policy themes such as health and social welfare, voters are more likely to support candidates who display stereotypically feminine traits such as empathy and who emphasize community.

The UK has undoubtedly seen political turbulence in recent years and is facing significant challenges related to healthcare, education and social welfare, including the cost of living crisis. From that perspective, a good campaign strategy this year should have been to use more stereotypically feminine visuals in campaign communications, for instance showing community engagement and empathic listening, and invoking relatability.

In line with this strategy, Rishi Sunak’s Instagram posts showed him engaging with the public and represented more stereotypically feminine visuals during the early days of the campaign. For instance, Sunak was shown crouching down to interact with children, feeding lambs on a farm, taking selfies and embracing voters, high-fiving a junior women’s football team, and posing with his own children for Father’s Day.

Two weeks before Election Day, however, Sunak’s Instagram strategy shifted. He increasingly posted images that represented more stereotypically masculine visuals: Sunak standing tall among a sea of voters, giving energetic speeches, driving a tractor, cheering on England in the UEFA Euros with a fist in the air. He was less frequently shown engaging with community leaders and other voters as had been the case in the earlier weeks of the campaign. Indeed, Sunak often centred himself in his Instagram posts, putting the focus on him as the agentic political leader. Even posts about the less political elements of the campaign did not quite hit the mark on presenting a down-to-earth, one-with-the-people image: Sunak was pictured getting takeaway twice but missed the opportunity to be pictured interacting with the workers while doing so.

Keir Starmer, on the other hand, presented himself through more stereotypically feminine visuals throughout the campaign. He was less likely to be front and centre in his posts but was instead usually pictured with others, whether it be Labour candidates across the country, voters, or community leaders. His Instagram account is a record of Starmer engaging with the community at eye-level, embracing voters, laughing with them, and attentively listening. Such posts portray Starmer as an empathetic leader who cares about citizens’ concerns and well-being, invoking stereotypically feminine associations with an ideal political leader during times of social welfare crises.

Starmer did not present the ‘normal people’ image quite like Ed Davey did, yet he had his own interpretation of the strategy, tailored to a primarily female and younger audience. In June, he attended Taylor Swift’s The Eras Tour with his wife and subsequently built on associated imagery, for instance posting an image of a ‘Vote Labour’ friendship bracelet, perhaps hoping to further engage this key demographic of young women voters. While the connection between Swift and the friendship bracelet may not be clear for those who are not fans of the singer (fans began trading friendship bracelets at The Eras Tour based on a line in Swift’s song ‘You’re on Your Own, Kid’), a friendship bracelet also invokes other memories and emotions related to community, further strengthening Starmer’s image of an empathetic, community-focused political leader.

There are many factors that played a role in this election, but gendered perceptions of political leadership remain relevant for voting behaviour. While campaign images such as those shared by Ed Davey may simply provide comic relief during a serious political time, campaign imagery offers substantial opportunities for candidates to reach specific voter groups and present themselves as the ideal candidate through subtle, visual cues. Whereas Sunak missed several opportunities to do so, Starmer’s posts on social media suggested a keen awareness and understanding of this key campaign strategy.

Weeping in Wetherspoons: generative AI and the right/left image battle on X

Note: Some of the images linked in this text feature offensive racial and gendered representations. The ephemeral and reputational nature of X inevitably means that images will be removed, accounts suspended, and links may become redundant.

This was the first generative AI election in the UK and one marked by the use of tools such as Open AI's GTP-4 which allows users to create "exceptionally accurate images". The election saw the first official AI candidate, AI Steve and was foreshadowed by fears of widespread disinformation through deepfakes in the press. CETaS (Centre for Emerging Technology and Security) produced a briefing paper and the Electoral Commission issued advice for voters on the threats of generative AI saying, "We encourage all voters to think critically about what you see and hear in this campaign".

Whilst these threats failed to materialise, there were limited incidents such as attempts to discredit Wes Streeting over Gaza and Diane Abbott. The major parties eschewed the wider use of AI tools and stuck to traditional approaches to digital photo editing, for example in the Labour Don't wake up with 5 more years of the Tories campaign. Satirical images remained fixed within established traditions such as photomontage as exemplified by coldwarsteve. Yet there was a discernible nervousness by platforms about the potential of AI images to go unrecognised. An AI-tagged post linking Nigel Farage with Vladimir Putin on Facebook spurred a discussion between two users about how the platform had incorrectly flagged Cold War Steve's work as AI generated.

One of the low points for the Conservative campaign, and the subject of the first social media-pile-on was Sunak's early departure from the D-Day commemorations on 6th June. Far right activist Tommy Robinson marked the anniversary with a generated image showing troops storming the beaches under the title "We will remember them". Unfortunately, the image showed troops storming into the sea with a resulting backlash and a community notice explaining that it was an AI image showing troops retreating at Dunkirk.

Another constant feature of rightist posts was the mobilisation of nationalistic signifiers and widespread use of Lions and Union Jacks to create a series of Narniaesque images by supporters of Reform UK. A common trope was the representation of Nigel Farage surrounded by a pride of union jack bedecked lions. One independent candidate, standing in Wavertree, generated fantasy images to portray the sitting Labour MP as a witch with a frog as a familiar in a series of episodes about their quest for power. Again, this type of image was contested, with a post asking "AI to show me Britain in 2025. Scary".

Islamophobic tropes were particularly prevalent in the far right's campaigning and constructed around building fears of invasion, occupation and replacement. The GB News reporter Darren Grimes regularly turned to AI generated images to push phobic images of Muslims and trans people as part of the culture wars. His posts attack migrants and their perceived enablers but generate critical and pointed responses. His use of an image to mimic an official Labour Party ad under the title How has the Labour Party changed? is photo-realistic but again largely countered and its status contested.

Among the counter-narratives developed by the left was a focus on the far-right bogey figure of the so-called 'Gammon'- the sunburned, overweight beer swilling white male. This archetypal and pejorative image features two weeping men in Wetherspoons and appeared in support to a stream from Anti-Brexit Campaigner Steve Bray who was harassed whilst demonstrating in Jacob Rees Mogg's constituency. There were many variants on this figure, all drawing on notions of inadequacy, racism and misogyny.

These brief examples illustrate the use of generative AI images outside of the main parties on X and identify some emergent practices, including the use of national and nationalistic signifiers, historical and literary references, user critiques of AI and the counter use of generative images. As post-election stories emerge, such as allegations that Reform UK fielded an AI generated candidate, we need to recognise the longer term impacts of these tools that have accelerated processes to produce 'political' images. The rapidity of responses and use of visual posts is noticeable, as are the critical discussions between posters about AI and its implications.

Underlaying this is the implicit need to recognise that data bias is inbuilt into AI foundational models, meaning images have an implicit white western perspective and ignore the global majority. These tools are predisposed to reflect colonising attitudes, and exposing and countering these factors is now an ongoing concern in broader contexts . The introduction of generative AI tools has significantly lowered the bar for rapid image generation and the production of fake, propagandist, and 'satirical' images. The potential for misrepresentation is evident and as states mobilize future responses the election has shown the need for awareness and ongoing scrutiny.

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An entertaining election? Popular culture as politics

Prof John Street

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The 2010 election was labelled 'The X-Factor Election' by Martin Harrison. It was then that TV debates were introduced and when Labour recruited the former stars of *Dr Who* in a failed attempt to rebuff the Tory Daleks. Much has changed since then, but popular culture is still a prominent feature of UK campaigns. Indeed, the 2024 version has sometimes resembled a cross between *The Traitors* and a day out at Thorpe Park.

Suella Braverman revealed her treachery in the last days of the campaign by writing in the *Daily Telegraph*, 'it's over, we failed.' Meanwhile, Ed Davey took part in a Zumba class, fell off a paddle board, tried to master the hula-hoop, rode a rollercoaster and shouted 'do something you've never done - vote Liberal Democrat' as he bungee jumped.

Labour's campaign was dour by comparison. There was relatively little sign of the celebrities from Britpop that adorned Tony Blair's victory march in 1997. The Union Jack featured - as it had in New Labour's iconography – but it was more Rule Britannia than Cool Britannia.

Starmer opted for *Sunday Brunch*, rather than *Loose Women*, whose presenters unnerved both Nigel Farage and Rishi Sunak. He did not reply to the *Radio Times* when it asked leading politicians about their favourite TV programmes (Sunak: *Bridgerton;* Farage: *Baby Reindeer*; Davey: *Operation Ouch* and *Horrible Histories*). Starmer wouldn't even play ball with the *Guardian*'s 'quick fire questions'. His rare close encounter with a celebrity was a very stilted conversation with former footballer Gary Neville as the two strolled through the Lake District. At Labour's manifesto launch, a party representative announced: 'If you want entertainment, go to the cinema.'

Sunak's campaign also favoured earnestness, but it seemed to deliver the cringe-making entertainment of a hopeless act trying to win over the judges on *Britain's got Talent.* Drenched by the rain and drowned out by D:Ream's 'Things Can Only Get Better', Sunak was, in the words of Ian Martin, a scriptwriter for the *Thick of It,* the hapless figure of popular culture: "He's Mr Bean. He's Michael Crawford in Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em. He's Peter Sellars in the Pink Panther". He delivered the punchline to his political comedy sketch when, scrambling to think of what he was denied in his formative years, he named Sky TV.

Other encounters with popular culture included Farage sparring at a boxing club, and borrowing Taylor Swift's 'Antihero' and Eminem's 'Without Me' ('Cause we need a little controversy…') for his rallies. And there was Braverman's TikTok dance routine to the sound of Ida Corr's 'Let me think about it'. (Lyrics: 'I'll make you feel like, heaven is near') and Dawn Butler rapping over So Solid Crew's '21 Seconds to go', changing the words to '21 Days to Go'.

Much of this may seem trivial, laughable or demeaning, but there are serious aspects to it too. Popular culture offers a form of political language. Tastes and pleasures serve as signals of representativeness. Further, embracing popular culture, as the Liberal Democrats did, is to adopt one political strategy, just as avoiding it, as Labour did, is to adopt another.

The reporting of campaigns also draws upon popular culture. The familiar complaint is that the media treat politics as a horse race. This may be true, but they also treat it as a soap opera or a reality show, as a mundane struggle for meaningless victories. Neither analogy serves the voters or the democratic process. Did the use of *Gogglebox* to enliven Channel 4's coverage of election night add enlightenment or entertainment?

But insofar as popular culture becomes the means or the metaphor, it makes new demands of politicians. Election campaigns, to the extent that they are media events, require media skills. Richard Osman, who is a television producer as well as author and presenter, commented after the first of the seven-person debates that, based on their ability to perform and to engage an audience, only three of the participants would deserve to be re-booked for a second episode (Farage, the Scottish National Party's Stephen Flynn, and Daisy Cooper of the Liberal Democrats).

Finally, popular culture matters politically because of the changing media landscape. As Stephen Bush of the *Financial Times* pointed out, Davey's relentless pursuit of fun photo opportunities secured a place on the front page of local and national papers, it also got him interviews on local radio and on LBC, with the latter maximising his chance "of getting a clip on one of the many music stations that Global, LBC's parent company, also runs: Smooth, Heart, Classic FM, Capital".

Starmer may claim that Labour is about policy, not performance. But to campaign is to perform. Not all political performances borrow directly popular culture. However, to the extent that they do - how and why they use the stars, styles, skills and sites of that culture – can matter to their success (or failure) as political communication, as the Liberal Democrats have shown.

Changing key, but keeping time: the music of Election 2024

For a general election where the result appeared to be a foregone conclusion in favour of 'Change', there was a strong element of continuity to its use of music.

There were echoes of the musical past from the outset. Anti-Brexit campaigner Steve Bray blasted out D:Ream's 'Things Can Only Get Better' from a portable stereo to disrupt Rishi Sunak's announcement of the election, a reminder of Tony Blair's 1997 landslide, sending the song back up the charts.

There were, of course, important differences between 1997 and 2024 – the state of the economy most obviously, but also the mood of the electorate. Indeed, a sense of scepticism was echoed by D:Ream, who said they didn't want any part of the campaign this time, and disavowed any future political uses of their hit. The headline of the band's appearance at Glastonbury was, instead, an old-fashioned staple of band politics – the temporary reunion – as they were joined by famous ex-keyboardist Professor Brian Cox. Neither was there a repeat of the partisan football chanting that greeted Jeremy Corbyn in 2017, the festival acting as a barometer of a more uncertain approach in 2024 from its younger (and left leaning) demographic.

Party events nevertheless provided some opportunities for the parties to provide an element of popular cultural sheen to their campaigning and – denied the use of D:Ream – Labour still stuck with house music using 2022's 'Better Times' by Låpsley and KC Lights as entrance music for a major campaign speech, to approval from the singer, Holly Fletcher, who noted her support for the party.

Other musicians' endorsements, now a standing item in election campaigns, generally skewed towards Labour, including Guy Garvey, Beverley Knight, Ed Sheeran, and Elton John, who promoted Labour's plans for culture. Massive Attack, meanwhile, backed the Greens with Holly Valance coming out for Reform.

It was an election where the most pointed challenges to Labour came not nationally, but locally, from independent or fringe-party candidates focused on specific issues – mostly the conflict in the Middle East. This was echoed amongst the heavy hitters weighing into the campaign. Ex-Pink Floyd frontman Roger Waters threw himself behind Craig Murray's campaign in Blackburn, where he was standing for George Galloway's Workers Party of Great Britain on a pro-Palestine ticket, and independents like Andrew Feinstein who challenged Keir Starmer in the Holborn and St. Pancras constituency. Waters welcomed the further support of Eric Clapton – "El, my dear friend we stand together. Love you brother" – though neither Waters nor Clapton has an untainted record in progressive politics. Another issue-focused rocker was Brian May, with animal rights and opposition to hunting driving his intervention, this time in support of Labour.

Breakthrough musical moments also evidenced the continuing trajectory of individual candidates making use of the increased affordances of social media, and lower-cost production technology. Brent Labour MP Dawn Butler's pastiche/cover of So Solid Crew's '21 Seconds', twenty-one days out from polling day, was a salient example of this although its perceived effectiveness depended very much on the existing predilections of viewers. Respondents to *The Daily Telegraph* deemed it "beyond embarrassing" while those for *The Daily Mirror* found it "hilarious" and "brilliant".

Nigel Farage's re-entry to frontline electoral politics was given a push by his presence on TikTok, his personal account outperforming those of the major parties, with the use of TikTok, and social media across the board, also meaning that the overall soundtrack was widely varied, enhancing the wider use of meme culture in the musical components of the campaign, rather than standout anthems. The major parties, for instance, used snippets of music for comedic effect. Labour deployed a slurred rendition of Grieg's 'Peer Gynt' to represent Conservative dysfunction, the tune becoming clear on the appearance of the 'Change' logo. A Tory video, meanwhile, deployed hot jazz behind a roulette wheel to urge voters not to bet on Labour, also with a 'mangled-tape' effect at the end. (In part of a generally maladroit campaign, they launched this just after a major gambling scandal broke around Conservative staff betting on the election date). Meme culture, also a standing fixture now, found its way into the campaign, with 'lo-fi swinneywave beats' from the SNP, and an hour long YouTube animated loop from the Conservatives warning about Labour tax plans to a dance music beat.

Amongst this plethora, the mainstream broadcast messaging from the parties themselves continued the trend of recent years towards smoothly integrated, but musically indistinct, soundtracks to the Party Election Broadcasts. This was advertising music and underscore, as opposed to a central part of the message. In fact, the most notable sonic feature in any of the broadcasts was Reform's choice to use complete silence for one of theirs.

The general musical tone, then, was characterised by variety – especially across individual candidates, and social media – but a lack of a cohesive theme from any of the parties. With the electorate's choice seemingly in the bag, it was more a case of background music than theme song.

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Truth or dare: the political veracity game

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Elections bring increased attention to ideas of political truthfulness and the many and varied manifestation of its absence, as previous publications in this series have discussed. Certainly, the scale of 'non-truthfulness' in public circulation, ranging from the slippery to the downright deranged, is seeing a continuing increase due principally to online flows and their permeation of traditional media, at the same time as politicians expand their own already extensive repertoire of dishonesty. In this election, things got off sharply and early, with Sunak's claim concerning the "independently assessed" £2,000 annual tax rise to follow from a Labour victory and the charge of lying which this claim generated. The tax rise became one of the principal themes of his campaign, returned to emphatically in the final debate.

Complicating the issue of truthfulness is the fact that elections are at their very core festivals of distortion, in which the players strategically mis-represent opposing political accounts and national narratives in the projection of their own. In this exchange, the Conservative Party is of course greatly helped by the huge and growing imbalance in the political allegiances of UK media, including the new talk-radio and TV companies, together with the alignments of elite political commentators. This is already showing its post-electoral continuation in the range of vigorously negative coverage of the new Labour government's people and policies.

However, moving beyond generalized distortion into making statistical claims which are then widely judged to be untrue is a 'tactical dare' that carries the possibility of damaging your opponents but also the risk of being positioned in public space as a liar, thereby potentially forfeiting the advantages that can accrue to the quieter forms of dishonesty. One might have thought that Boris Johnson provided ample warning against taking this risk.

Sunak's tax claims hit trouble straightaway, their false or misleading nature being confirmed both by the UK statistical watchdog (OSR) and the BBC's Verify team among other bodies. In addition, the Permanent Secretary to the Treasury had sent a note of caution along with the figures, confirming that the assessment was not (as Sunak subsequently claimed) independent but was based on data supplied to the Treasury from Government and Conservative Party sources. The Conservative push-back contested these evaluations, albeit with rather nervous bluster. However, one strand of commentary, harking back to the Brexit campaign, pointed to the way in which figures given prominence but then widely shown to be false could still exert a framing influence on public perception. The details of disproof could become secondary at best alongside the impact of the publicity given to the initial claim. Ivor Gaber called this 'strategic lying' in the 2019 election study of this series, describing a practice in which provoking a charge of falsehood was calculated-in from the start.

The practice of vigorously 'gaming' falsehoods with a sense of indifference as to subsequent disproof is far more direct in its implications for information flow and democracy than the continuing strand of abstract speculation about how we can know what is true anyway. Trump has, of course, carried it to new levels of effectiveness.

Following Sunak's early claims about the £2,000, the press generated a running theme of disclosures and shock revelations ("bombshells") concerning tax. Its distortive calculations of benefits and losses, of private and public impacts, was only marginally countered by other inputs. As in previous elections, the level of fear factor put to work here was pushed to its highest.

Of course, this year the veracity game was given a new dynamic by the late entry of Nigel Farage as the new leader of Reform UK. His self-consciously Trumpist approach to facts initially enjoyed the latitude it has regularly been given by the media before more negative coverage was generated by his comments on Ukraine and the remarks of some of his followers. His ambition to build a new party of the Right from his five-seat success (based on a share of the popular vote instrumental to the scale of Labour's victory!) is likely to bring further waves of deception and distraction. This will be generated from a full-on populist position aided by that under-regulated propaganda agency, GB News.

Elections are, of course, special periods of political communication, but they alert us to wider issues concerning civic health. They do this as strategic falsehoods backed by corporate and often international interests become ever more deeply woven into a volatile political culture.

Among the many things that emerge from this election is further confirmation that a stronger input of public service media flows is vital to counter further degradation of the range and quality of public knowledge about the true condition of the UK and the real options for its future.

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The Prime Minister Rishi Sunak delivers an address outside of Number 10 announcing a General Election on July 4th. Picture by Edward Massey / CCHQ

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Keir Starmer, leader of the Labour Party, meets with Volodymyr Zelenskyy, President of Ukraine, in the margins of the international D-Day celebrations on Omaha Breach, Normandy, France.

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Keir Starmer, leader of the Labour Party, Angela Rayner, deputy leader of the Labour Party, and Sadiq Khan, Mayor of London, at a housing development in Brent Cross, North West London, as the Labour Party promises a permanent mortgage guarantee scheme to get 80,000 young people on the housing ladder over the next five years.

Section 6:
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Rachel Reeves at Leeds West and Pudsey count.
Picture by: Emma Jackson, University of Leeds student

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Ed Davey and Chris Coghlan, parliamentary candidate for Dorking & Horley, at the finish line during pedal go-karts race at Bocketts Farm in Dorking, Surrey, during the leader's tour.
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Keir Starmer, leader of the Labour Party, and Angela Rayner, deputy leader of the Labour Party, on the first day of General Election campaigning at Gillingham Football Club, Kent.

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