

Johnson survives poor showing in UK local elections but urgently needs to come up with better answers on the cost of living

EGA Briefing

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Tories punished but Labour's underwhelming performance and 'Beergate' keep pressure off Johnson

The dust has settled on last week's UK elections – local elections in England, Scotland and Wales plus elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly – allowing us to take a more considered view of the political landscape. The Conservatives took a beating over the cost-of-living crisis – set to get only worse with the Bank of England forecasting that the UK will enter recession this year with inflation peaking at 10% – as well as the ongoing reputational damage to Prime Minister Boris Johnson over Covid lockdown-flouting parties in No 10 Downing Street. In total, the Conservatives lost one-in-four of their council seats with particularly heavy losses in Scotland and Wales.

However, Labour's own performance was patchy and underwhelming, including in the totemic 'Red Wall' seats in the Midlands and North of England lost in the 2019 General Election. The party only increased its share of English council seats by 1%. Keir Starmer is also facing his own version of Partygate after Durham Police announced they would re-open an investigation into potential breaches of Covid regulations by the Labour leader and his team during a campaign event last year (dubbed Beergate). Savvy expectations management, favourable sequencing of the results and the surprise announcement by Durham Police have all taken the immediate pressure off Boris Johnson with many commentators again emphasising his remarkable survival skills – at the start of the year many believed a fine for lockdown breaches and poor local election results would trigger a vote of confidence among Tory MPs.

Labour do not need to win outright for Johnson and the Conservatives to lose

However, Johnson's position remains perilous, with mounting dissatisfaction with his government. While Labour did not romp home, it is important to remember these seats were last contested in 2018, before the party's catastrophic collapse in 2019, so even standing broadly still in the 'Red Wall' compared to 2018 is evidence of a partial recovery. Labour had a good night in London, winning flagship councils like Westminster and Wandsworth the Conservatives had retained even under the height of Tony Blair's popularity. They also smashed the Conservatives in Wales and leapfrogged them to come second in Scotland. Moreover, while the Tory-Labour battle remains paramount, in many areas the Conservatives face a different challenger – be that the Liberal Democrats, the Scottish National Party, or in some cases even the Green Party. All these parties enjoyed success at the Conservatives' expense in these elections with the Liberal Democrats taking dozens of seats in the prosperous London commuter belt.

We should always be careful not to overinterpret local election results – governments have frequently taken a hammering before bouncing back and winning the subsequent General Election. Indeed, this is what Johnson and his team are banking on. That said, they do offer an advance glimpse into structural shifts in voter behaviour, and there is clear evidence of Labour staunching some of the bleeding in its heartland areas while many of the Conservatives' own heartlands are looking increasingly vulnerable due to political realignment, tactical voting and demographic shifts.

It is said that generals always fight the last war, and it is similar with politicians and commentators. The 2019 election was dominated by the dramatic collapse of the Red Wall but Labour doesn't need to win back all of those seats to get back into government. Some of those seats are likely to be gone for the foreseeable future but if Labour can win back a good chunk of them while also taking some seats in and around London and in Wales – with the Liberal Democrats and the SNP also winning some of their head-to-head contests with the Conservatives – collectively they can deprive Johnson of his majority. Labour will want an overall majority of their own but that is a high bar to clear while the SNP continue to dominate north of the border – they would need a swing of around 10 percentage points compared to 2019 – and in the event of a hung parliament they will be better placed to work with the other opposition parties. In short, Labour might not yet be on track to winning the next general election, but the Conservatives could be on track to losing it.

Beergate may not be a silver bullet as recession, job losses and cost-of-living crisis loom

The government will be hoping that Beergate, itself a reminder of the effectiveness and ruthlessness of the Conservative media ecosystem, will hobble Starmer and Labour. Their best-case scenario is that Starmer is fined for the Durham event but refuses to resign despite having called on Johnson and Chancellor Rishi Sunak to do so after they were fined for the 'birthday party' event. Starmer has pitched himself as honest and principled in contrast to Johnson, so refusing to resign could expose him as shallow and opportunistic. However, this strategy assumes that voters will not distinguish between a single event and the succession of rule breaches confirmed to have taken place in Number 10 over a prolonged period. Johnson could well receive additional fines, and when the Sue Gray report is finally published it will likely contain excruciating details of repeated offences and the culture of permissiveness at the very top. Finally, if Starmer is fined, he could take a principled position by resigning, thereby putting pressure on Conservative MPs to justify why the leader of the opposition should resign over Covid rule-breaking but not the PM who set the rules.

Even if the situation with Starmer ends up costing Labour, it may not even matter hugely if the Government is unable to get a grip on the looming economic crisis. Basic household essentials like food and energy are set to increase further, rising interest rates mean mortgages are likely to go up for the first time in over a decade, while unemployment is also set to rise. These issues will dominate the political agenda in the coming months. If the economy is voters' No 1 priority, their No 2 priority is healthcare, and there is no respite for the Government on this front either with the National Health Service struggling to get back on its feet post-pandemic. Waiting times for both emergency and regular treatments are at record levels, promoting growing numbers of Britons to pay for private medical treatment.

The problem is that the Government and wider Conservative Party are divided on how to tackle this situation and there are no easy choices. For example, a tax hike to stabilise the NHS and address high social care costs will further hit household incomes. There is also disagreement over other key issues, with some blaming the poor election results in part on the lack of new homes – with younger voters unable to get on the housing ladder trapped in expensive rented accommodation – while others believe too much development contributed to the electoral backlash. Equally, the Government's much heralded 'levelling up' agenda to address regional inequalities is struggling to make headway.

The Government also appears torn on how to proceed on the Northern Ireland Protocol. UK-EU negotiations on reducing trade friction between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK have made little progress in recent months. A confrontational gambit such as tabling legislation giving the Government the unilateral ability to amend the Protocol would be popular with some of its core supporters but could risk a wider UK-EU trade conflict and the fracturing of Western unity vis-à-vis Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The situation is further complicated by the fact parties that broadly support the Protocol won a majority in Northern Ireland's Assembly – with Sinn Fein topping the poll in a historic first – but the unionist parties which oppose the Protocol have said they will not join the Northern Ireland Executive unless it is scrapped. Either way, Northern Ireland is yet another thorny issue the Government will have to grapple with.

The Conservative Party has been in power for twelve years and despite its huge majority it is struggling to enact any transformative policies. Bereft of fresh ideas amid the increasingly grim economic picture it is easy to see the attraction of Beergate as it shifts the focus of hostile scrutiny onto the opposition. However, more astute Conservatives are warning

this is comfort-zone politics and that the government needs to urgently focus on measures that will help ordinary people or else it will continue to shed support and a change of government will become increasingly plausible.

Full results

UK Local Elections

Party	English council seats	Scottish council seats	Welsh council seats	Total council seats	Change
Labour	2,265 (+22)	282 (+20)	526 (+66)	3,073 (+110)	3.7%
Conservative	1,075 (-338)	214 (-63)	111 (-86)	1,400 (-487)	-25.8%
Liberal Democrat	712 (+192)	87 (+20)	69 (+10)	868 (+222)	34.4%
Green	116 (+63)	35 (+16)	8 (+8)	159 (+87)	120.8%
Scottish National Party	N/A	453 (+22)	N/A	453 (+22)	5.1%
Plaid Cymru	N/A	N/A	202 (-6)	202 (-6)	-2.9%
Independents and Others	222 (+59)	152 (-15)	316 (+8)	690 (+52)	8.2%

Northern Ireland Assembly Elections

Party	1st preference votes	Seats	Designation	Stance on NIP
Sinn Fein	29% (+1.1%)	27 (NC)	Nationalist	Pro-Protocol
SDLP	9.1% (-2.9%)	8 (-4)	Nationalist	Pro-Protocol
Alliance	13.5% (4.5%)	17 (+9)	Other	Pro-Protocol
UUP	11.2% (-1.7%)	9 (-1)	Unionist	Anti-Protocol
DUP	21.3% (-6.7%)	25 (-3)	Unionist	Anti-Protocol
TUV	7.6% (+5.1%)	1 (NC)	Unionist	Anti-Protocol
Others	7.2% (N/A)	3 (-1)	Mixed	Mixed

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