

LSE – POAL Event “The 2026 Elections: An afternoon of analysis, insight and debate on the 2026 elections”

This event brought together leading political scientists, election analysts and campaign experts to examine the latest electoral results and what they revealed about the future of British politics. Through a series of presentations and panel discussions, speakers explored voting patterns across Wales, Scotland, London and the rest of England, alongside analysis of the Gorton and Denton by-election, highlighting the key trends that emerged across Britain.

Expert contributions also examined how the campaigns were fought, the role of tactical voting, the influence of traditional and digital media, and the accuracy of pre-election polling. The discussions also considered the wider implications for local, regional and national politics, and what the results could mean for the political landscape leading up to the next General Election.

Prof Rob Ford – The Significance of the Gorton and Denton By-Election

Rob Ford started off the event focusing on the election which acted as a precursor to the dramatic results in May – the Gorton and Denton by-election which took place in an area of Manchester which has safely returned Labour MPs for decades but saw a big drop in the Labour vote in 2024 indicating some growing weakness. The subsequent Green win in the by-election and Reform’s increase highlighted both sides of Labour’s fraying coalition with the Manchester wards being won by the Greens and the Tameside wards being won by Reform. This by-election was not a fluke as a very similar result was seen at the local elections in the wards that make up the constituency.

Prof Rob Johns - Independence, Identity and Electoral Change in Scotland

Rob Johns discussed the Scottish Parliament election, highlighting how the question of independence still drives about 90% of the lines along which people vote, though this is not always framed explicitly, instead being done through the proxy of being pro or anti-SNP. It seemed by 2024 that the SNP government could be in danger with Scottish Labour polling competitively with them, but Labour’s vote collapsed after the 2024 general election. Despite most people still saying that they vote mostly on Scottish issues, this did somewhat betray the fact that UK-wide politics does still impact how people vote in the Scottish Parliament.

Dr Jac Larner – Tactical Voting, National Identity and Electoral Change in Wales

Jac Larner went through the situation in Wales and what happened in the Senedd election where support for Welsh Labour, until now one of the most successful political parties in a democratic country, completely collapsed. Labour became the victim of tactical voting, with Plaid Cymru being seen by most voters as the party best placed to stop Reform. Labour to Plaid Cymru switchers did also feel that Plaid would stand up for Wales more, an important sentiment in a country where Welsh-only identity is growing and where left-right polarisation is increasing along national identity lines (Welsh nationals are more left-wing, British nationals are more right-wing).

Prof Tony Travers – Stability and Change in the Capital’s Party System

Tony Travers outlined the state of the parties in London following the local elections in the capital where it was Labour's worst result since 2006, though still much better than their low point of 1968. Also notable was that the result was more fragmented than ever with Reform winning Havering, the Greens winning three councils, and many going into no overall control. Despite this, London is the English region which most still resembles the old party system with Labour, Conservatives, and Liberal Democrats winning over three quarters of the seats.

Dr Hannah Bunting - England's Fragmented Electoral Landscape

Hannah Bunting detailed the breakdown of the results in the rest of England where Reform took more seats from Labour than the Conservatives, but as a proportion of the seats that those parties were defending, they won a higher proportion of seats being defended by the Conservatives. A big change in recent local elections is the decline in the average winning party vote share, which this year now stands at 40.8% (this is even lower in areas won by Labour), which is an expected outcome when you have an increase in the effective number of electoral parties (ENEP). Turnout also increased in this election, with it increasing by the most in areas won by Reform and by the least in areas won by Labour.

Prof John Curtice – Lessons to be Learnt from the 2026 Local Elections

John Curtice went through the overall picture of what the results show about the state of the country's politics with one of the headline changes being that across Britain the ENEP has been increasing at successive elections and the combined Labour and Conservative vote is declining sharply. We also see that Brexit still matters when it comes to how people vote with the rise in Reform's vote coming overwhelmingly from areas which voted for Leave in the referendum while the opposite is true for the Green Party. There also may be a phenomenon of Labour losing more seats to Reform but more votes to the Greens — the increase in Reform's vote is positively correlated with the decline in the Conservative vote but not with the decline in Labour's vote.

Roundtables

Polls and the Media — Will Jennings, Scarlett Maguire, Matilda Martin, Tony Travers (Chair)

The panel discussed the large increase in the use of MRP polls and there was some scepticism of how useful they are in such a fragmented and unpredictable political environment, particularly given that they can lead to overconfident narratives about what will happen. Polls showed that voters largely agreed with Starmer's position on the Iran War and Labour tried to run on this but voters didn't reward them — many Reform and Green voters say they aren't willing to go back to the old parties. So while there is a danger for Reform of losing support if they lose their anti-establishment image, but it won't necessarily go back to the Conservatives, it may just beget more fragmentation.

Campaigning and tactical voting — Stephen Fischer, Florian Foos, Miriam Sorace, Sara Hobolt (Chair)

The panel discussed how campaigning can make a difference at the margins, but it won't stop a big shift in how the public vote as seen in the elections. Reform were spending a lot on Meta on targeted ads, while Conservatives and Greens focus on bigger more national policy issues, LibDems focused on local issues and Labour focused on being the tactical anti-Reform vote. While in 2024 there was a lot of tactical voting between Labour and LibDem voters, it's harder to do this in the current environment with more fragmentation and the top two parties in a given area being in flux.

What next for the parties — Tim Bale , Sara Hobolt, Will Jennings, Tony Travers (Chair)

The panel discussed how current voting intentions in the UK are not strange for a West European country, but they are for a first past the post system. Given that the Conservatives and Reform have rather similar platforms at the moment and that it's easier to see them than the left-of-centre doing some kind of deal to maximise their vote efficiency at the next election. Meanwhile for Labour, they won't succeed if they try to just find a middle ground between the Greens and Reform that most voters will see as inauthentic — they need to have a clearer definition of their purpose.