
England and Wales: An overview of the Conservative Party crisis ahead of the local elections on 2 June

The local elections in the UK are especially important as they will be held not long before the general election, which could be in four, five, six months' time, or even in the autumn, and this means that voters will see the result as a litmus test for understanding the situation of the various political parties, the Conservatives, Labour, the Liberals and the Greens, as well as the far-right Reform, and for understanding where public opinion is leaning", said Tony Travers, Professor of Politics at the London School of Economics, commenting to SIR on the upcoming elections of 2 May, when British citizens will be called to elect more than 2,600 local and county councillors and 10 combined authority or metropolitan mayors in 107 out of 317 local authorities, representing one third of the total number of seats available. Voters will also elect the mayors of London, Liverpool and York and members of the Greater London Assembly. Across England and Wales, voters will elect 37 Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) - responsible for overseeing the police force in general - while a by-election will be held in Blackpool, a seaside resort on the northwest coast of England, to replace Conservative MP Scott Benton who had to resign over a corruption scandal. Eligible voters - those aged 18 or over and who are British, Commonwealth or EU citizens - will go to the polls between 7am and 10pm to vote on waste management, parks and town planning, school maintenance, libraries and schools, and local government areas of responsibility. Tony Travers answered questions from journalists at the London School of Economics, where he and his colleague Sara Hobolt, Professor of European Institutions at the same university, were holding a meeting with the foreign press. "The Tories will undoubtedly lose seats, while Labour and the Liberal Democrats will increase theirs," Travers explained. "Moreover, the big unknown is the size of the ruling party's losses and the opposition's gains. At the moment, the election is likely to go badly for the Conservatives, but not catastrophically. Should they suffer heavy losses, it is possible that the party may decide to replace its leader and British Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, in order to avoid a crushing defeat in the next general election. Absurd as it may sound, after Theresa May, Boris Johnson and Liz Truss, Tory MPs are desperate and ready to do whatever it takes to avoid losing the next general election, with the latest polls showing Labour with a twenty-plus point lead over the Tories." Labour is also projected to win in London, whose mayor, Sadiq Khan, is set to become the first mayor to be elected three times in a row, despite losing support for his decision to introduce the world's largest limited traffic zone (ULEZ). This innovation was unpopular with Londoners, since it imposed a daily charge of around €15 on vehicles not meeting the lowest CO2 emission standards for access to the capital's large urban area. "Tory rival Susan Hall is less well-known, but the incumbent mayor could win by a very narrow margin. Many voters could decide to vote Liberal Democrat, Green or not vote at all. Currently, 52% of Londoners say they disapprove of Khan's administration," notes Sara Hobolt. What role is Brexit - the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union, which a majority of British citizens voted for in 2016 - playing in this general election? For Hobolt, the issue had never been sidelined in British political debate as it is now: "Neither of the two main parties wants to discuss this issue, even though a majority of voters now want to re-enter Europe. The Tories argue that Brexit is a done deal, while Labour, in order to win the next general election, needs to win back the seats that used to belong to them and that went to the Tories in 2019 precisely because voters wanted to leave the EU. That is why they avoid answering questions about the single market and the customs union," the expert said. "But - she added - if Labour wins the next general election, as the polls suggest it will, will Britain's return to the EU be back on the table? It's hard to say. For sure, there will not be another referendum, but there will be a majority of very pro-European MPs and voters, with none of the divisions that exist on this issue within the Conservative Party, which also has a distinctly Eurosceptic extremist wing".

