



**POLITICAL
INTELLIGENCE**

A guide
to the 2022
Local Elections

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**POLLING
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Introduction

Local elections are due to be held in Scotland, Wales and parts of England including London on May 5, while voters in Northern Ireland are set to elect members of the Northern Ireland Assembly. Although local issues will undoubtedly carry weight in voters' minds, the elections in England are a key mid-term test of Prime Minister Boris Johnson's leadership just weeks after he received a Fixed Penalty Notice for breaking Covid lockdown rules in Number 10 Downing Street. A poor result for the Conservatives could undermine Johnson's reputation as a vote winner and lead more Conservative MPs to call for him to resign. While the prime minister has won praise for the Covid vaccine rollout and his actions on the international stage to support Ukraine, the Conservative government is facing criticism that it has increased taxes and is not doing enough to shield people from the cost-of-living crisis, particularly rising energy bills.

The local elections also promise to be a key test of whether Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer can convert recent opinion poll leads into votes, although **experts say** the opposition party faces a challenge to improve on its strong performance in the last such local elections in 2018. The political environment has changed significantly since then, with different leadership in both the Labour and Conservative party, the Brexit withdrawal agreement, and the Covid crisis.

England will see an "all out" election in London, where all 1,817 council seats across 32 boroughs will be contested, as happens every four years. Outside the capital, a further 2,583 seats across 114 councils and 7 mayoralities are up for election.

Scotland will hold elections for all 1,226 seats across its 32 councils, while in Wales all 1,234 seats in its 22 councils are up for grabs. This will be the first time 16 and 17-year-olds will be able to take part in a local election in Wales after the voting age was lowered in 2020.

The Northern Ireland Assembly elections will see all 90 members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) seats contested using the single transferable vote system, a form of proportional representation that allows voters to rank candidates in order of preference. Polls suggest Irish nationalists Sinn Féin could become the largest party for the first time since the Assembly was formed in 1998. What that might mean for the stability of the on-again-off-again power-sharing Executive with the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) remains to be seen, amid fierce disagreement about the post-Brexit trading arrangement with the rest of the UK known as the Northern Ireland Protocol. Some experts have predicted that growing frustration with Northern Ireland's legislative paralysis could boost support for non-sectarian parties in this election.

Results are expected to come out first in England where many councils start counting votes immediately after polls close. Voters in the devolved nations, where counting usually begins the morning after the election, will generally face a longer wait for councils to declare.

This Dods Political Intelligence briefing provides a brief guide to the elections in England, Scotland, Wales and for the Northern Ireland Assembly, examining the main factors in play, the parties' proposals, and highlighting some of key electoral battlegrounds.

England

The **Conservatives** local election campaign pledges to offer voters better services and more value for money, with Johnson saying at one event in April 2022 that the party filled in “four times as many potholes” as its rivals and that Tory councils charged less. The Conservatives **are focusing** on local issues, arguing for lower council tax and managing council spending responsibly. They have been running targeted Facebook adverts criticising Labour and the Liberal Democrats over ‘council tax waste’.

Opposition parties have focused their campaigns on the cost-of-living crisis. Starmer launched **Labour’s** campaign accusing the Conservatives of a “pathetic” response to the challenge of rising prices, and reiterated the pledge to help with household energy bills by introducing a windfall tax on oil and gas company profits.

Liberal Democrats leader Ed Davey kicked off his party’s campaign calling for a VAT cut to save households £600 on average and criticised the government for raising taxes. The **Green Party** has pledged to tackle the cost of living by providing better insulation for homes to significantly reduce energy bills and emissions. **Reform UK** are not standing many candidates, however party leader Richard Tice has argued the government should cut VAT and scrap renewable energy levies on energy bills.

The last time this set of local councils were contested in 2018 the Conservatives lost a few seats while Labour gained some, and the BBC **calculated** their projected national vote share was equal at 35 percent. This year, although Labour head into the elections with a lead in surveys of voting intentions, the nature of the councils up for election complicates the picture. Most of the seats contested in England are metropolitan boroughs and councils, areas that typically favour Labour. They are also defending more councils overall than the Conservatives - 69 to 47 across the entire UK. This high-water mark may make it hard for the





opposition party to convert recent polling gains to electoral results, or take advantage of weakening approval ratings of the government and prime minister.

An Ipsos poll published in early April showed 56 percent of people polled **believe** the country is heading in the wrong direction – a new high during this Parliament. Approval ratings for Johnson and the Conservative Party have slumped since **last year** when they were being praised for the vaccine rollout. A **survey** has shown the Conservatives are now less trusted on managing taxes, spending, and reducing the cost of living than Labour. However, it remains to be seen if local issues will dictate voting. Council tax is increasing across **over two thirds** of councils in the UK, which could impact how people vote.

Key battlegrounds

Some of the key Conservative vs. Labour battlegrounds will be in the red wall areas in the North and Midlands that switched to the Conservatives to deliver Johnson victory in the 2019 general election. Labour will also be looking to make some gains in in **Bolton** and **Burnley**, where no party has overall control. Elsewhere, keep an eye on **Rossendale** in Lancashire, where Labour only require one more seat to regain a majority.

Tory strategists have reportedly set their sights on taking control of **Sunderland** for the first time in its 48-year history, **briefing** that they expect to take control given Labour have lost seats in the last three cycles.

Newcastle-under-Lyme is expected to be a key Labour target, even though it would require reversing a significant swing towards the Conservative in recent elections. It may be a similar story in **Nuneaton and Bedworth**, one of Labour's notable losses in the 2018 locals and now with a substantial Conservative majority.

In some parts of the South, trends have been more favourable for Labour. In **Worthing** they need only two more seats to gain control and complete a swift turnaround from five years ago when they held no seats on the council. **Southampton** will be also hotly contested, with the Conservatives holding a one-seat majority.

One key Liberal Democrat target will be holding **St Albans**, after they gained the majority last year. In the blue wall, **Woking** could be of interest. The Lib Dems increased their support there significantly last year and need four seat gains to replace the minority Conservative administration. Finally, the Greens gained seats in **Sheffield** last year which helped deprive Labour of a majority and they are expected to extend their recent record of gaining seats in urban areas.



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London

London has returned a majority of Labour councils and councillors in **every election since 2010, which means the** benchmarks for success in the capital are relatively high for Labour and relatively low for the Conservatives. Recent polls suggest Labour has a strong lead over the Conservatives ahead of the May 5th vote, though it remains to be seen if it will be able to top its strong performance of 2018 when it gained 120 council seats and 21 councils, its highest total since 1971.

The Conservatives, under pressure from the *“partygate”* scandal and the rising cost of living, are expected to focus on defending territory, such as the symbolically important council of Wandsworth, a flagship Conservative borough since the 1970s. They may also aim to make headway in Labour areas like Barking and Dagenham which have similar demographics to the areas of the country where Leave performed well in the 2016 EU referendum. For the Conservatives, the polls suggest the party could lose some seats in London although that may not translate to losing control of councils.

For the Liberal Democrat and Green parties, the polling suggests a tight race for third place in the popular vote. However, the Liberal Democrats hold a structural advantage with a base of 154 seats to the Green’s 11. The Lib Dems are expected to focus on holding their councils of Kingston and Richmond which they gained from the Conservatives in 2018.

Key Battlegrounds

Wandsworth, long seen as the flagship Conservative borough in London held by the Tories since 1977, which has **long been framed** by the party and national media as a prime example of Conservative achievements in local government. It is expected to be a similar story in **Westminster**, which the Conservatives held in 2018 despite Labour coming close in the overall vote.

Barnet is another Conservative council where Labour will hope to do better than in 2018 when its significant Jewish community balked at Corbyn-era allegations of antisemitism. The council made headlines in the 2010s for some **controversial cost-cutting measures**.

Croydon is expected to be in contention after the Labour council declared bankruptcy in 2020 **triggering** an internal audit of the administration’s spending decisions. However, the party will be looking to capture the newly created post of Mayor of Croydon, which was created by **a referendum** in October 2021.

Sutton, which has been a Liberal Democrat council since the 1980s, may be up for grabs after a large turnover of councilors this cycle. While **Lambeth** is a solid Labour borough it is one of the few where the Greens are the main opposition and will look to grow their participation.



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Northern Ireland

Voters will be hoping the elections for the Northern Ireland Assembly in Stormont will lead to a more stable period in the province's on-again-off-again power-sharing government so it can tackle the cost-of-living crisis and record NHS waiting lists, but there's little guarantee that will happen. Some polls suggest Sinn Féin, which was closely linked to the Irish Republican Army (IRA) group during the Troubles, could emerge as the largest party for the first time since the devolved government was established in 1998, making it eligible to take the position of First Minister. That may prove unpalatable for the Democratic Unionist Party, which has held the position of First Minister in the Executive since 2007. The DUP has lost support to other unionist parties in recent years over its stance on Brexit and failure to prevent the Northern Ireland Protocol which established a controversial goods trade border between Northern Ireland and the British mainland.

The **DUP** has launched a campaign around a **five-point plan** to fix the NHS, grow the economy, maintain quality of local schools, help working families, and remove the protocol. Recent newspaper reports suggest the UK government is preparing new legislation that would enable ministers to ditch the protocol arrangements, a move driven in part by concerns unionist parties could refuse to join a power-sharing government after the May 5th vote over the Brexit trading arrangements. Among other unionist parties, the **Ulster Unionist Party** has called for the creation of a new Health and Social Care Chief Executive and practical solutions to the protocol issue in their **manifesto**. Polls also suggest the hardline **Traditional Unionist Voice** party may stand to benefit from its opposition of the Good Friday Agreement as they are fiercely anti-protocol and pro-Brexit, which is reflected in their **manifesto**.



Sinn Féin has played down its long-term objective of a united Ireland and focused its campaign on more immediate issues such as the cost-of-living crisis. Party leader **Mary Lou McDonald has called for** additional investment of £1bn to tackle health service waiting lists, an extension of the £200 home heating payment, an additional rates holiday for businesses and a reduced VAT rate for hospitality. Northern Ireland party leader Michelle O'Neill has focused on similar issues while criticising the DUP for triggering the collapse of the Executive in February 2022. Although **Sinn Féin is projected to overtake the DUP**, they are also predicted to lose a marginal percentage of the vote, so the battle for the position of First Minister could hinge on which of the leading parties loses more seats.

The **Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP)**, the third largest party in the Assembly following the last elections, has focused its campaign on tackling the cost of living crisis, with their **manifesto including plans to provide a £200 handout to all households, an extension of the fuel payment scheme and the release of** £300m from the Executive coffers to provide people with emergency support.

Some polls suggest the centrist non-sectarian **Alliance Party** is set to make solid gains off the back of growing frustration at the legislative paralysis in Stormont. The party has focused its campaign on the detriments of the political divide as well as climate change, **proposing an Executive Department for Energy and Climate Change** and pledging to create 50,000 green new jobs by 2030. Polls indicate the Alliance could benefit from a substantial percentage of second preference votes from both the UUP and the SDLP, based on a growing ideological dealignment in Northern Ireland. A strong result for the Alliance could trigger debate about whether the power-sharing system of government requires reform to better represent the range of views of the Northern Irish electorate.

Key battlegrounds

The proportional representation system tends to result in constituency battles for seats being less intense in comparison to areas that adopt the first-past-the-post system. Nevertheless, there are a few key constituencies to keep an eye on.

South Belfast, Northern Ireland's most diverse constituency where in 2017 the five seats were held by different parties, could be the scene for a fierce contest. The SDLP and Alliance are both fielding two candidates to take advantage of transferable votes.

Foyle is a constituency where the DUP's one seat could be vulnerable if the Unionist vote splits in favour of the UUP candidate. Sinn Féin will want to retain their two seats while the SDLP will aim for a third following Colum Eastwood's landslide victory in the 2019 Westminster election.

East Belfast is a battle where Alliance and the DUP are eager to retain their two respective seats. The UUP has decided to run a second candidate against their incumbent Andy Allen, which has been **described as risky**.



By Melissa Dando,
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Scotland

Polls suggest the **Scottish National Party** (SNP) will secure the most seats in the local elections, thereby reinforcing its claim for a fresh referendum on Scottish independence, the chief concern of its supporters. However, in an election video published on 11 April, First Minister Nicola Sturgeon declined to mention Scottish independence after her focus on the issue during the Covid crisis attracted criticism from opposition parties. Instead, the SNP message has focused on the cost-of-living crisis with increases in child benefit and other benefits to contrast with the Conservatives' recent tax rises and cuts to universal credit.

The **Scottish Conservatives**, led by Douglas Ross,

have focused their attacks on the SNP's record in government, arguing that the poor state of Scotland's public services and infrastructure is down to the SNP's fixation on independence. The Scottish Conservative website urges voters to "knock the Nats (Nationalists) down to size" and focuses on local issues such as investment in schools, hospitals, and fixing potholes. The cost-of-living crisis and "partygate" scandal are expected to outweigh any support the Conservatives may have reaped from Johnson's role in the international response to the Ukraine war. Johnson is not a popular figure in Scotland. In the 2021 Holyrood elections he did not

appear at a single Tory campaign event but was a constant presence in the SNP's campaign literature. Ross has publicly supported the prime minister since his "partygate" fine.

Opinion polls this year have shown **Scottish Labour**, led by Anas Sarwar, coming in second and replacing the Conservatives as the main challenger of the SNP. Sarwar has focused his campaign on tackling the cost-of-living crisis and helping the Scottish economy recover from the pandemic, targeting anti-independence swing voters who are disillusioned with Johnson's government. Under Scotland's single transferable vote system of proportional representation in council elections, where voters rank candidates in order of preference, Scottish Labour will need to attract swing unionist votes from the Conservatives and elsewhere. With polling showing preferences are mainly defined by attitudes to the constitution, pro-independence SNP voters are seen as unlikely to lend Scottish Labour candidate a second or third preference, and more likely to prefer to support the Scottish Green Party, the SNP's coalition partner in Holyrood. Sarwar has personally taken a strong pro-UK line and resisted changing policy but allowed council candidates to run who have previously supported independence. If Labour can seize

control of council seats from the Conservatives, it is likely to boost the party's hopes that it can mount a stronger challenge to the SNP at the next general election.

The **Scottish Liberal Democrats** have proposed a "Cost-of-Living Rescue Package" which would include doubling child benefit, a VAT cut of £600 to all households and a "robin hood tax" on energy producers to pay for it. While the **Scottish Greens** have focused their platform on tackling the climate crisis, increasing recycling and active travel across Scotland under the slogan "Think Global, Act Local".

There are a total of 355 council wards in Scotland, and no party is contesting every single one. However, all of the five major Holyrood parties are present in at least two-thirds of wards. After the 2017 elections there were just three councils in Scotland that were under a majority government, all controlled by independents after Labour and the SNP lost the 4 councils they controlled.

Key battlegrounds

Glasgow is likely to be a key prize for Labour after the council was lost dramatically in 2017 after almost 40 years of dominance. The Green party is also hoping to challenge the Conservatives. Whilst a change of control is seen as unlikely, a weaker performance by the Conservatives would confirm a

trend seen since the departure of former Scottish Conservative leader Ruth Davidson.

The SNP majority control of **Dundee** was a symbolic loss in 2017 and closed the gap between Labour and the SNP hegemony which had existed since 2003. If the SNP are successful in regaining a majority in this council, it will be a significant victory for Sturgeon, but with razor thin margins in some crucial wards this will be a tough ask.

Whilst the SNP have consistently been the largest party in **Aberdeen**, support for opposition parties has been volatile. The Conservative position as the largest opposition party is seen as vulnerable. With major SNP gains here appearing unlikely, governance will be determined by the fate of the Conservative-Labour-Independent coalition, which has governed since 2017, despite the ire of the Scottish Labour party. Aberdeen's Labour councillors were all suspended from the party for entering the coalition with the Conservatives in 2017. Labour gains could have interesting repercussions for this coalition.



By Harry Banton,
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Wales

These local elections will be an important gauge of voter sentiment since the 2021 Senedd elections, where Labour fell one seat short of a majority, the Conservatives gained ground, but nationalist Plaid Cymru tread water. Labour may benefit from polling showing satisfaction with First Minister Mark Drakeford's management of the Covid crisis compared to the approach taken in England. The Conservatives may also feel some heat from concerns about the impact of Brexit, with Drakeford saying Wales would be £1bn worse off with the Shared Prosperity Fund, thereby exacerbating the cost of living crisis.

The working agreement between Labour and Plaid is also likely to be a talking point among voters. While all issues outside the Co-operation Agreement will be "handled in the normal course of political engagement", there are major similarities between the Labour and Plaid on key issues. It remains to be seen whether the nationalist party will benefit as Senedd polls suggest, or whether Plaid is punished by voters for entering a coalition despite its assurances that it is not in one.

Procedural changes could also be significant in some areas. With boundary changes, the main council losing out will be Blaenau Gwent which will lose nine councillors. The biggest losers here could be the Independents, who currently hold the council, and Labour who are the second biggest group. Conversely, Vale of Glamorgan is gaining seven seats, which could mean a party wins overall control, with it currently being a Labour/Independent coalition, despite the Conservatives having the most councillors. Similarly, the introduction of younger voters may change the dynamic of the elections, with **polling** from the end of February indicating that Plaid, Green and Labour could gain most from this.

Polls suggest Labour will gain the most councillors in the election, perhaps recovering the 100 they lost in

the 2017 election, and Plaid has also attracted some additional support. Labour **are campaigning** for a “Stronger, Fairer and Greener Wales”, highlighting their work in councils over the last five years and pushing a green agenda on recycling, low carbon housing and planting trees. Plaid **want** to build a “more sustainable, fairer, and forward-looking” Wales, with policies to combat the cost of living crisis and housing, and work on establishing a National Energy Company, Ynni Cymru, as outlined through their Cooperation Agreement with Labour.

The polls suggest the Conservatives, which gained 80 seats in 2017, could come under pressure from difficult national headlines on “*partygate*” and the cost-of-living crisis. The party’s campaign **has focused** on empowering people to work to grow their communities, promoting health, as well as restoring pride, and working towards net zero, making clear to highlight their influence from Westminster to enact change.

The pressure on the Conservatives may give room for the Liberal Democrats and Greens to make some gains. While the Greens are projecting double figures in their number of councillors, the Liberal Democrats are hoping to capitalise on Conservative issues in Westminster. In Cardiff, candidates from the Green Party and Plaid are standing as “**Common Ground Alliance**” candidates, although Labour’s relative strength in the city will make it difficult for the other parties to shift the overall council control.

Key battlegrounds

Despite a **controversy** that 70 councillors have been elected in uncontested seats, there remain several battlegrounds in Wales which could see a change in control. Plaid will be fighting to keep the four councils where it currently governs in coalition, including in **Gwynedd** which is losing six of its seats in boundary changes, and over a third already elected through unelected seats. Plaid will also be hoping for a good result in **Anglesey**, where regaining two seats from Independents would

ensure a majority. A bad night for Plaid could see **Carmarthenshire** become a minority Plaid council or even control of the council shifting.

In **Cardiff** four more seats are up for grabs due to boundary changes, and the agreement between Plaid and the Greens will see a challenge to Labour’s dominance. **Labour** will be looking to return to being the largest party in **Vale of Glamorgan**, which it lost to the Conservatives in 2017. With seven extra seats up for grabs due to boundary reforms, there will be opportunities to capitalise.

The Conservatives will be fighting to hold their only Welsh Council, **Monmouthshire**. Although they have a 15-seat lead over Labour, projected losses and boundary reforms mean this council could return to no overall control. Similarly, the Tories face off against Plaid in **Conwy**, where independent councillors currently support a Conservative majority.



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