



# 2024 UK General Election: Conservative defeat and the fragmentation of British politics

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[Abstract] The 2024 United Kingdom (UK) General Election has been described as the most fragmented and disproportionate in the country's long-standing democratic history. Traditionally regarded as a classic example of a two-party system, the UK's political landscape now exhibits growing volatility, with class-based loyalties eroding and new political actors emerging. This paper offers initial insights into this dynamic moment by examining the key campaign themes and outcomes of the 2024 General Election. Taking the magnitude of the Conservative Party's defeat as one of the defining features of the election—and a key signal of advancing party-system fragmentation—we employ multivariate statistical models to explore initial associations between the loss of Conservative support and a range of political and sociodemographic indicators at the constituency level. The findings highlight two main themes: the intensification of political volatility and the enduring impact of Brexit, which continues to shape political competition through deep-seated demographic and value-based divisions.

[Keywords] UK politics, party-system change, 2024 General Election, electoral volatility, Brexit.

[Título] Elecciones generales del Reino Unido 2024: la derrota del Partido Conservador y la creciente fragmentación de la política británica

[Resumen] Las elecciones generales del Reino Unido de 2024 han sido caracterizadas como las más fragmentadas y desproporcionadas en la larga historia democrática del país. El panorama político británico, considerado un ejemplo clásico de sistema bipartidista, hoy muestra creciente volatilidad, la erosión de lealtades de clase y la aparición de nuevos actores políticos. Este artículo busca ofrecer una primera aproximación a este momento dinámico al examinar los principales temas de la campaña y los resultados de las elecciones generales de 2024. Para lograrlo, tomamos la magnitud de la derrota del Partido Conservador como una de las características principales de los comicios —y evidencia importante de la creciente fragmentación del sistema de partidos—, y empleamos modelos estadísticos

multivariados para explorar asociaciones iniciales entre la pérdida de apoyo partidario e indicadores políticos y sociodemográficos a nivel de circunscripciones parlamentarias. Los resultados destacan dos temas principales: la intensificación de la volatilidad política y el impacto persistente del Brexit, que continúa configurando la competencia política a través de divisiones demográficas y de valores de gran profundidad.

[Palabras clave] Política del Reino Unido, cambio del sistema de partidos, elecciones generales 2024, fragmentación electoral, Brexit.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The 2024 United Kingdom (UK) General Election has been described as one of the most fragmented and disproportionate in the country's long-standing, institutionally entrenched democratic system (HEATH *ET AL.* 2024; PROSSER 2025). Although the UK has traditionally been regarded in the comparative politics literature as a classic example of a two-party system, recent empirical evidence indicates a significant transformation of its political landscape, marked by the progressive erosion of class-based loyalties and the emergence of new political actors.

This paper provides initial insights into this ongoing political change. The analysis begins by examining the institutional setting, outlining the core features of the electoral system and key political actors. The second section details the main themes of the campaign and the principal results of the 2024 General Election. Third, treating the Conservative collapse as one of the defining features of the electoral cycle—and a key indicator of advancing party-system fragmentation—we employ multivariate statistical models to explore potential associations between the loss of party support and a range of political and sociodemographic indicators at the constituency level. The paper concludes with a discussion of the findings and their broader implications.

We highlight two main themes. First, the identifiable pattern of increasing political volatility, evidenced by the widening gap between votes and seats for the two traditional parties in general elections, as well as the collapse of the Conservatives. Second, the enduring impact of Brexit on British politics, whose legacy now manifests less in explicit policy debates over the UK–European Union (EU) relationship and more in modern demographic and value-based alignments that structure contemporary political competition.

## 2. INSTITUTIONAL SETTING

The UK is perhaps the most emblematic example of a single-member plurality (SMP) electoral system, more commonly known as first-past-the-post. This system is defined by its majoritarian, “winner-takes-all” nature. The country is divided into 650 single-member parliamentary constituencies (electoral districts), each electing one Member of Parliament (MP).<sup>1</sup> Voters in each

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1 United Kingdom. Parliamentary Constituencies Act 2020, section 5. December 14, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3JVJC3y>

constituency cast a single ballot for their preferred candidate, and the individual with the largest share of votes wins the seat, often without obtaining an absolute majority. The party that secures a majority of seats in the House of Commons is subsequently invited to form the government. Although alternative electoral systems are employed in the country—with six others used for devolved assemblies, regional authorities, and the European Parliament prior to Brexit—this institutional diversity has not translated into reforms at the national level, where the SMP remains firmly entrenched at Westminster (LUNDBERG 2018).

This institutional framework is designed to yield a strong yet accountable party government. By rewarding the winning party with a surplus of seats, the electoral system inherently favours larger, established political organisations, thereby producing majoritarian governments (DUVERGER 1954). This, in turn, enables the executive to implement its legislative agenda with limited need for post-election bargaining (CURTICE & STEED 1982).<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the system is intended to ensure governmental accountability: at the end of a parliamentary term, a relatively small swing in the popular vote may be enough to oust the incumbent in favour of the opposition (NORRIS 1995). The system therefore seeks to combine the stability of single-party government with mechanisms of democratic accountability.

The classification of the UK's party system has been a persistent subject of discussion within comparative politics, particularly in recent decades. Moreover, a critical consideration in this debate is the multi-level nature of the state, which sustains several different party systems across regions and levels of political jurisdiction; thus, any assumption of a uniform party system dynamics is potentially misleading (WEBB 2001). At the national level, seminal studies in political science have historically characterized the UK as a classic case of two-partyism (DUVERGER 1954; SARTORI 1976), defined by the dominance of electoral politics and the alternation of government between the Conservative Party and the Labour Party in Westminster.

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2 This institutional arrangement also reflects one aspect of Schumpeter's definition of democracy, which emphasises the democratic method as an institutional arrangement through which "people [...] produce a government" (SCHUMPETER 1942, 250). In this sense, SMP electoral system aligns with a conception of the political regime centred on competitive elections and government formation. For a more detailed discussion, see Curtice & Steed (1982).

This two-party structure was particularly salient between 1945 and 1970, during which the two main political forces dominated general elections as the only viable parties of government. Throughout this era, Conservatives and Labour combined averaged 91% of the total vote across elections (QUINN 2013, 83). The stability of this system resulted from the SMP institutional arrangement in tandem with a strong social class division: a majority of working-class electors supported Labour, while most middle-class voters supported the Conservatives—an alignment continually reinforced through socialisation (LYNCH & GARNER 2005). From the 1980s until the early 2000s, the system evolved into one of “alternating predominance”, characterized by a widening vote-share gap between the winning party and its rival. During this phase, although Conservatives and Labour largely remained as the two dominant political forces, the periods of dominance by one or the other became more prolonged, and overall competition substantially weakened (QUINN 2013).

In more recent years, however, attention has shifted to increasing signs of party system fragmentation. After the 2010 victory of the first peacetime coalition government since the 1930s—between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democratic Party—the 2015 General Election was one of the most volatile in recent history. This election was marked by high levels of fragmentation, a phenomenon driven by the long-term decline in support for the two major parties (CURTIS 2010), and the concurrent rise of parties such as the Scottish National Party (SNP) and the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) (GREEN & PROSSER 2016). Although the 2017 General Election appeared temporarily to halt this movement towards multi-party politics (PROSSER 2018), the resurgence of Labour and Conservatives was largely a by-product of Brexit and the collapse of UKIP (MELLON *ET AL.* 2018). As detailed in the next section, the trend of declining support for the traditional government parties and increasing fragmentation persisted, culminating in the most fragmented party system to date in the 2024 General Election.

### 3. THE 2024 GENERAL ELECTION

The election was called on 22 May to take place on 4 July. Setting out his terms for the campaign, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak declared, “Now is the moment for Britain to choose its future,” framing the election as an explicitly two-horse race between himself and the Leader of the Opposition, Labour’s Keir Starmer

(BBC NEWS 2024a). Sunak appealed for trust in his continued leadership by highlighting geopolitical uncertainty and the government's record of strong economic performance. In his response, Starmer criticised the Conservative record in government, setting out his priorities to “reset both our economy and our politics” with a “new spirit of service” (BBC NEWS 2024a). Across the country, opinion polls painted a bleak picture for the Conservatives, with experts widely anticipating a comfortable Labour victory (STEWART & MASON 2024).

Pre-election polling identified three core voter priorities: the economy, health (primarily concerning the National Health Service – NHS), and immigration (ADLER 2024). The Conservatives centred their manifesto on the first, claiming a stellar record of reducing inflation and increasing wages, and arguing that its plan could deliver economic results for working people (CONSERVATIVE PARTY 2024). By contrast, Labour focused its platform on the second priority, portraying a story of a crumbling state after 14 years of Conservative rule, with the NHS as a central symbol of this neglect. Its pledges included millions of additional doctors' appointments, more teachers, and the nationalisation of the energy and rail sectors (LABOUR PARTY 2024). The third priority, asylum and immigration, was predominantly championed by the insurgent party, Nigel Farage's Reform UK. Its “Contract with You”, a document presented in place of a traditional manifesto, committed to drastic reductions in all immigration categories and stricter asylum regulations, proposing to achieve this by withdrawing from the European Convention on Human Rights (REFORM UK 2024).

FIGURE 1

Conservative seats lost in the 2024 General Election by winning party



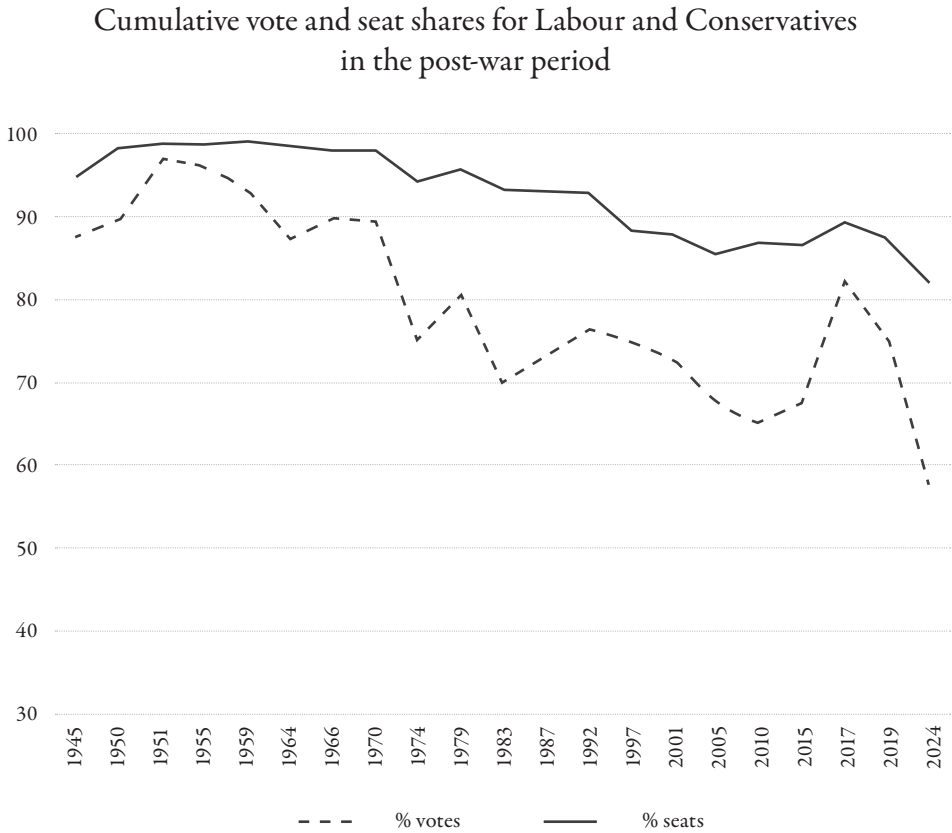
Source: Own elaboration based on Benites & Unsworth (2025)

The defining outcome of polling day was the decimation of Conservative representation in the House of Commons. The party suffered a dramatic collapse, falling from 365 seats in 2019 to just 121 in 2024, while its vote share plummeted to a historic low of 24%—a loss of approximately seven million votes from the previous general election. This was the worst general election result in both seats and vote share in the 190-year history of the Conservative Party (PROSSER 2025). Figure 1 highlights every one of the 244 seats lost by winning party. The map shows that the anti-Conservative swing was geographically widespread, affecting both rural and urban constituencies from the South West to the Scottish border. Within this realignment, three distinct groups of constituencies are particularly noteworthy.

First, in the North of England, the so-called “red wall” seats—traditionally Labour strongholds due to their industrial past that were captured by Boris Johnson’s Conservatives in 2019 (FIELDHOUSE & BAILEY 2023)—returned almost unanimously to Labour in 2024, with Reform UK frequently emerging as a runner-up. Second, the South West and the Home Counties (the rural areas surrounding London) swung dramatically away from the Conservatives, a trend successfully exploited by the Liberal Democrats in their targeted campaign. Third, Conservative Party representation was virtually eliminated from the capital, with the loss of a handful of symbolically significant seats in London. The election revealed a broad dissent, as the Conservative Party lost support across diverse demographics, from wealthy Londoners and libertarian farmers to the descendants of coal miners.

On the other hand, the election delivered a historic victory for the Labour Party, which secured 411 seats—209 more than in 2019 and their third-largest parliamentary majority in history. Remarkably, this landslide was accomplished with a modest increase in popular support, rising only from 32.1% to 33.7% of the vote. In absolute terms, Labour received half a million fewer votes in 2024 than in 2019 (CRACKNELL *ET AL.* 2024).

FIGURE 2



Source: Own elaboration based on Quinn (2023) and Cracknell *et al.* (2024)

The 2024 contest, however, also produced the most fragmented party system in British history, resulting in its most disproportionate electoral outcome (PROSSER 2025). As Figure 2 illustrates, the combined vote share for both Labour and Conservatives fell to an historic low. Concurrently, smaller parties—notably Reform UK and the Green Party—achieved record-breaking vote shares; collectively they secured 20% of the total vote but obtained only nine seats (STEWART 2024). The gap between the vote shares of Labour and Conservatives and the proportion of seats they obtained in Parliament was the

largest in history: collectively they won 82% of the seats with only 57% of the total vote. This disparity marks the 2024 election as the most disproportionate in British democracy.

FIGURE 3

Electoral participation in the 2024 General Election



Source: Own elaboration based on Benites & Unsworth (2025)

Figure 3 shows a further theme emerging from this election: a remarkable nationwide decline in voter turnout. This trend was nearly universal, with only three constituencies out of 650 registering a marginal increase in turnout, while all the others experienced declines, in many cases substantial ones. The most severe drops, approaching 19 percentage points, were concentrated in Labour-held urban areas within major cities such as London, Leeds, and Manchester: 19 of the 20 lowest-turnout seats were won by Labour (STURGE 2024). This correlation aligns with the established research showing that constituencies with younger, poorer, and more ethnically diverse demographics—core Labour voting blocs—historically exhibit lower turnout rates (LEDGERWOOD & LALLY 2024). This decline could also suggest apathy and disengagement among certain voter groups stemming from either a lack of trust in parliamentarians or the absence of a compelling vision from them (PRENTICE 2025).

This turnout pattern is intrinsically linked to a broader concern in contemporary research: the escalation of political inequality in the UK. Empirical studies indicate the emergence of systematic disparities in citizens' capacity to influence the political process (ANSELL & GINGRICH 2022; PATEL 2023), creating a dynamic where the affluent "haves" exert significantly more influence than the disadvantaged "have-nots" (PATEL & VALGARDSSON 2024). Declining turnout in socioeconomically disadvantaged constituencies functions both as a symptom and a cause for these inequalities. This raises important questions about whose voices are effectively represented in the British political arena and whose are marginalized or absent.

#### 4. EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

The historic Conservative defeat represents a defining feature of the 2024 electoral contest and a critical signal of party-system fragmentation. To understand the drivers of this outcome, this section analyses the demographic, cultural, and political factors associated with the largest Conservative vote swings and the sources of electoral decline. We employ Ordinary Least Squares (OLS), with the outcome variable defined as the difference in Conservative vote share between the 2019 and 2024 general elections.<sup>3</sup> This measure captures the

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3 The dependent variable was operationalized by calculating the difference between the Conservative vote share in 2024 and in 2019. Positive values indicate a gain in vote share between the two elections, whereas negative values indicate a loss.

magnitude of electoral loss in each constituency, providing a more dynamic assessment as opposed to a solely cross-sectional analysis.

The independent variables were drawn from multiple sources to test. A first set of sociodemographic indicators—including age structure, educational attainment, religion, and place of birth—was obtained from the 2021 Census at the constituency level to assess potential associations with Conservative vote losses.<sup>4</sup> We also incorporated a key political indicator, the percentage of Leave votes in the 2016 Brexit referendum, as prior research establishes its connection to processes of electoral realignment and the reshaping of Britain's political geography (FIELDHOUSE & BAILEY 2023; FIELDHOUSE *ET AL.* 2023). Lastly, the Conservative vote share from the 2019 election is included as a baseline control variable. This allows the models to capture variation in vote change, while accounting for differences in starting levels of party support across constituencies.<sup>5</sup> All variables are scaled to range from 0 to 1.

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4 Data from the 2021 Census, aggregated to the parliamentary constituency level, was obtained from the House of Commons Library.

5 Due to the new constituency configuration established in 2023, the analysis required notional results for both the 2019 Conservative vote share and the 2016 EU referendum to ensure data compatibility with the new constituencies. These data were sourced from the British Election Study 2019–2026 (PERRETT *ET AL.* 2025). For a comprehensive account of the methodological approach to generating such notional estimates, see Hanretty (2017).

TABLE 1

Conservatives Vote Change and Constituency Characteristics

|                                                 | Demography & Education (1) | Culture & Brexit (2) |
|-------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------|
| (Intercept)                                     | 0.089***<br>(0.014)        | 0.100***<br>(0.018)  |
| % 2019 Vote share                               | -0.443***<br>(0.011)       | -0.324***<br>(0.012) |
| % aged 18–24                                    | -0.176**<br>(0.054)        | -                    |
| % aged 65+                                      | -0.089*<br>(0.041)         | -                    |
| % with no qualifications                        | -0.372***<br>(0.038)       | -                    |
| % born outside the UK                           | -                          | 0.018<br>(0.020)     |
| % Leave vote                                    | -                          | -0.220***<br>(0.019) |
| % with no religion                              | -                          | -0.133***<br>(0.023) |
| Observations                                    | 650                        | 632                  |
| Adjusted R2                                     | 0.773                      | 0.779                |
| RMSE                                            | 0.04                       | 0.04                 |
| p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001 |                            |                      |

Source: Own elaboration based on Benites & Unsworth (2025)

Table 1 presents the results of the OLS models. The first model examines the association between the sociodemographic composition of constituencies and the magnitude of Conservative vote loss, while the second assesses the role of cultural division and Brexit realignment in shaping the party’s electoral decline in 2024.

Both models demonstrate considerable explanatory power, each accounting for roughly 80% of the variance in the change in Conservative support. As anticipated, the party's baseline support in 2019 emerges as a key predictor and exhibits a negative relationship with subsequent performance. This indicates that constituencies with stronger Conservative support in 2019 tended to experience larger declines in 2024. Holding all other variables constant, a 10-percentage-point increase in Conservative vote share in 2019 is associated with approximately a 5-percentage-point larger decline in support between 2019 and 2024. This pattern is consistent with both regression-to-the-mean dynamics and the greater potential for vote losses from a higher baseline.

Regarding sociodemographic composition of constituencies as factors, both age and education emerge as important predictors, albeit with notable distinctions. Educational attainment demonstrates a strong negative association with the change in Conservative support: a 10-percentage-point increase in the proportion of residents without formal qualifications corresponds to an approximately a 4-percentage-point larger decline in Conservative vote share between 2019 and 2024. Age is also a significant factor, particularly among younger populations. Holding all other variables constant, a 10-percentage-point increase in the proportion of residents aged 18–24 is associated with a roughly 2-percentage-point larger decline in Conservative support. The corresponding effect for the population aged 65 and over is more a modest a 1-percentage-point larger decline.

Analysis of the cultural and political indicators from the second model reveals important patterns related to Brexit realignment and cultural change. First, the share of residents born outside the UK shows no statistically significant association with Conservative vote losses after controlling for other factors. In contrast, the legacy of the Brexit referendum remains a powerful predictor: a 10-percentage-point increase in the Leave vote share referendum is associated with a roughly 2-percentage-point larger decline in Conservative support, despite both major parties advocating to remain outside the EU. Furthermore, secularisation appears relevant, as a 10-percentage-point increase in the proportion of residents with no religious affiliation is associated with an approximately 1.3-percentage-point larger decline in Conservative vote share, suggesting that more secular constituencies were more likely to withdraw their support from the party in 2024.

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

On the surface, the Conservative defeat could be interpreted as a routine—and perhaps healthy—alternation of power inherent in a democratic system. After almost 15 years in government under five prime ministers, the incumbents were removed from office amid social discontent fuelled by inflationary pressures and allegations of misconduct during the pandemic. Such an interpretation, however, fails to capture the exceptional nature of the 2024 election result. The magnitude of the Conservative defeat was historically unprecedented (PROSSER 2025), suggesting it should be understood not as a routine electoral swing, but a manifestation of a deeper, structural shift within British politics.

While the first-past-the-post electoral system continues to produce majoritarian outcomes by concentrating power in the winning party, it may mask growing fragmentation within the political system. As previously demonstrated, the disjuncture between the vote share and seat allocation for the two major parties is widening, and the pathways of vote transfers no longer correlates with seat changes. A clear illustration of this disconnect is that while Labour gained 72% of the seats lost by the Conservatives, 24% went to the Liberal Democrats and only 5% to Reform UK. Yet voting behaviour tells a different story: among those who supported the Conservatives in 2019, only 10% switched to Labour in 2024, 6% to the Liberal Democrats, and a striking 27% voted for Reform UK (HEATH *ET AL.* 2024; PROSSER 2025).

This realignment is further evidenced in opinion polls. Recent estimates suggest that if a general election were held in 2025, Reform UK would secure 34% of the vote—placing it 12 points ahead of Labour and 20 ahead of Conservatives. This would represent an unprecedented historical moment where a challenger party outperforms all established rivals (HEATH *ET AL.* 2024). Reform UK demonstrates remarkable persistence successfully retaining nine in ten of its 2024 voters while also attracting support from the two traditional political forces. Conversely, both Labour and Conservatives are projected at historic lows in voting intention (SKINNER 2025). Collectively, these patterns depict an increasingly fragmented and fluid political landscape, one in which the dominance of the two-party system can no longer be taken for granted.

Within this broader context of shifting party competition, Brexit has crystallised into a stable axis of political alignment that continues to shape electoral behaviour in the UK. Superficially, a quasi-consensus appears to have emerged, as Labour, the Conservatives, and Reform UK all officially oppose re-joining the European Union (LABOUR PARTY 2024; CONSERVATIVE AND UNIONIST PARTY 2024; REFORM UK 2024)—jointly representing of 71.7% of the electorate (BBC NEWS 2024b). Furthermore, voters ranked concerns around UK–EU relations below issues such as the economy, health, and immigration (ADLER 2024). Despite this surface-level consensus, the empirical analysis suggests that Brexit continues to exert a powerful influence on electoral outcomes.

The enduring legacy of Brexit on British politics is not one of overt policy debates, but one of deep-seated demographic and value-based alignments. Age and education—the key fault lines in the 2016 referendum—remain central predictors of constituency-level results in 2024. Younger, more highly educated voters, who disproportionately supported Remain, have continued to align with left-liberal parties, while older, less-educated groups have continued to favour right-conservative parties. This demographic schism has outlasted the immediate Brexit period and is now embedded in the very structure of electoral competition. Indeed, rather than a simple mapping of Remain voters to Labour and Leave voters to the Conservatives, British politics now appears organised around two broad blocs: a left-liberal bloc (Labour, Liberal Democrats, Greens) and a right-conservative bloc (Conservatives, Reform UK). Vote switching between 2019 and 2024 largely occurred within these blocs, with Eurocentric voters moving from Labour to the Greens and Eurosceptics shifting from the Conservatives to Reform (GRIFFITHS *ET AL.* 2024).

In sum, while the UK party system remains dominated by the two traditional parties, recent developments suggest that the political landscape is opening for once-fringe parties to secure a substantive foothold. The erosion of class-based loyalties has weakened the foundations of the two-party system, with opinion polls now signalling an emerging multi-party structure. Whether this realignment proves a temporary disruption or endures into the next General Election remains to be seen.

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Conflicts of interest:

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Authors contribution:

ALEXANDER BENITES: conceptualization, investigation, methodology, writing (original draft), writing (review & editing).

CHARLIE UNSWORTH: conceptualization, investigation, methodology, writing (original draft), writing (review & editing).

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