



By: *Harvey Morris*

Right-wing Reform UK heads for local poll wins despite internal splits



Upcoming local **elections** will provide the first test of the state of mainstream UK parties since Labour came to power and an opportunity to assess the progress of right-wing challenger Reform.

While regional voting can sometimes reflect public disillusionment with the party in power at Westminster, this time it is the opposition Conservative Party that has most to lose.

After suffering their worst national election defeat in July last year, the Conservatives have been confronting a growing challenge from the insurgent Reform UK, which seeks to replace them as the main party of the right.

The results are likely to underline the political divisions and widespread public discontent that were already apparent when Labour won its landslide parliamentary victory on the strength of a third of the popular vote.

Ten months on, the two main parties and Reform are virtually tied in national opinion **polls**. One recent survey suggested Reform could even win the most seats in a hung parliament if a general election were held now.

The actual date, however, is likely sometime in 2029. That means Reform has four years in which to come up with some positive policies, as well as heal its own internal rifts, if it is to fulfil the promise of the current polls.

Reform won more than 14 per cent of the national vote at the general election, which translated into five seats in the House of Commons, including the election of party leader Nigel Farage.

A split vote on the right

The regional voting for councils and mayors on May 1 is concentrated in central and southern England, where the Conservatives dominated at the last elections there in 2021, securing control of 19 of 23 local authorities. Local elections in various regions and cities are held at different times.

Although Labour and its leader, Keir Starmer, have lost some of the support that carried them to office in 2024, a split vote on the right could at least minimise losses in some local polls or even help them where the choice is tight.

Smaller parties, including the centrist Liberal Democrats and the Greens, also hope to exploit the current political mood to boost their local representation.

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Labour's main challenge will be to retain the parliamentary seat of Runcorn and Helsby in a separate by-election on the same day. Reform came a poor second in the northwestern constituency last year but has hopes of capturing it after its Labour MP, Mike Amesbury, stood down after assaulting a constituent.

Whichever way that contest turns out, it looks inevitable that Farage's Reform will make significant gains at the municipal level with its candidates, including defectors from the Conservative Party, elected as councillors and mayors.

Impact of Faragism

At that point, it will have to prove that it is a party of government and not merely a protest movement. Reform has been prominent in criticising the poor state of the nation's roads, for example, but will it do any better than its rivals at filling in the potholes?

As a founder of the UK Independence Party in the 1990s, Farage came to prominence as a single-issue politician dedicated to the ultimately successful campaign to withdraw the UK from the European Union. Although he was repeatedly elected to the European Parliament, he only made it to Westminster in

2024.

Via UKIP, then the Brexit Party and now Reform, Farage has pursued a vigorous anti-immigration line that played a role in the 2016 Brexit referendum vote.

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One impact of Faragism has been to push the Conservative Party to the right. Over a decade, the predominance of centre-right, pro-European and 'One Nation' Conservatives has been eclipsed. Farage even mischievously **toyed** with the idea that he might one day lead the party of which he was once a member.

Reform's first year in parliament has hardly been a happy one. Internal criticism of Farage has focussed on his allegedly autocratic style, with fellow Reform MP Rupert Lowe accusing him in March of acting like a "messiah" who had to learn how to delegate.

Lowe was **suspended** from the party days later for alleged bullying and threats against party members, allegations for which he is now suing Farage.

A poisoned chalice

Underlying these internal squabbles is the charge, by Lowe and others, that Farage is simply not right-wing enough. The former Reform deputy leader Ben Habib has even **quit** the party to promote a new Integrity Party that would be to the right of Reform.

Habib had previously revealed plans to establish a US-style Political Action Committee (PAC) to raise money to unite the right, arguing in January that "What the people of this country want is what Trump is doing."



Farage's own relationship with Donald Trump's inner circle is on the wane - Elon Musk

He suggested a number of unnamed high-profile figures, including influential Americans, had expressed an interest in getting involved.

Farage's own relationship with Donald Trump's inner circle is meanwhile on the wane, with Elon Musk **suggesting** at the turn of the year that Farage "doesn't have what it takes" to lead Reform and subsequently expressing support for Rupert Lowe.

Although Reform appears to be suffering from the splittism that afflicts many insurgent movements, that might not filter down to the many disgruntled voters who see a chance to punish the main parties on 1 May.

At a local level, the public's attention is firmly fixed on the cost of living and the provision of public services, including health care. The Conservatives will lose seats after reaching an electoral high point in 2021.

Inevitable wins for Reform may turn out to be something of a poisoned chalice if its bickering leadership is subsequently exposed as unfit to be even the party of local government when it comes to filling those potholes.