



## Labour's Electoral Underperformance

### Opens the Way for a New Scottish Independence Campaign

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On 6 May, a series of council, mayoral, Scottish, and Welsh parliamentary elections took place, as well as the House of Commons by-election in Hartlepool. Campaigning covered all constituent parts of Great Britain. The elections provided the first test of support for political forces after the outbreak of the pandemic and Brexit. The clear victory of the Conservatives in England and the nationalists in Scotland seems to confirm electoral shifts occurring since 2016 and the slim prospects for the return of Labour—until recently the largest party with strong footholds in all parts of Great Britain - to power within the next decade.

#### What were the election results in England?

The largest local-government campaign in about 50 years covered almost all of England. In total, the elections tallied about 4,800 posts on 143 councils, 13 metropolitan mayors (including London and Manchester), 35 police and crime commissioners, and the House of Commons constituency of Hartlepool. The Conservatives increased the number of councillors by 11%, of controlled councils by 26%, and won the Hartlepool seat (for the first time since 1959). The Labour Party, in turn, suffered losses on a similar scale, but maintained support in the metropolitan areas. Labour, however, failed to win back from the Tories the mayorships of the (post) industrial metropolitan areas of Birmingham and Tees Valley. On the Left, the Green Party of England and Wales gained 85 additional councillors, while the Liberal Democrats' position was unchanged.

#### How was the competition between unionists and nationalists in Scotland and Wales?

The elections to the Scottish and Welsh parliaments established [under devolution](#) were held on the basis of the mixed electoral law (first past the post/regional-list based proportional representation), designed to make winning a single-party majority difficult. The results confirmed the success of the ruling parties: Labour in Wales (30 out of

60 seats / 39% of the vote) and the Scottish National Party (SNP) in Scotland (64 out of 129 seats / 47%). In Wales, the unionist camp jointly dominated the elections (Labour, Tories and the Liberal Democrats won a total of 7 additional seats / 65%), the nationalists from Plaid Cymru won an additional seat (and 20% of the votes) as well as became [the official opposition](#). In Scotland, the nationalist camp (SNP and Scottish Greens) won 72 seats and 48% of the votes in total. The Tories remained the strongest unionist party and the main opposition one (30 seats, 23% of the vote).

#### What are the consequences of the elections for the UK's political scene?

On 6 May, the outflow of voters in the (post) industrial areas from the Labour Party, via UKIP/Brexit Parties, to the Tories, [observed since the 2016 EU referendum](#), seems to be confirmed. This trend was behind Prime Minister Boris Johnson's victory in the December 2019 [House of Commons elections](#). The 6 May votes also highlighted the relative strength of the Liberal Democrats (no losses) and the Green Party of England and Wales (85 additional council seats), which have been competing since [the 2019 European elections](#) with Labour for domination of the centre-left. The key observation is the progressive loss by the Labour Party of its basis for rebuilding its electoral support (repeat losses in its historic heartlands, e.g.,

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Hartlepool, Tees Valley, Birmingham). Since the 1980s, Labour has been the leading party with a strong presence in all constituent parts of Great Britain. However, Labour's permanent weakness since 2015 makes it unable to compete effectively with the SNP for the votes of the overwhelmingly left-leaning Scots.

## **What does the victory of the Scottish nationalists mean for UK politics?**

The SNP will remain in power for a fourth term, although—since the nationalists obtained a majority mandate for the [independence referendum](#) jointly—the parliamentary coalition of the SNP and the Greens may develop into a government one. According to the prevailing interpretation of the UK constitutional law, the referendum requires the consent of the UK authorities, which Johnson indicated would deny it. However, given the current focus of voters on the socio-economic impact of the pandemic, the new Scottish parliament is likely to pass a referendum act and then defend its legality before Scottish courts and the UK Supreme Court. The unionists, however, will boycott such a referendum while the Johnson government wants to

launch an investment programme under the UK flag aimed directly at Scottish local governments, companies, and social organisations.

## **What do the elections mean for EU-British relations?**

Labour seems unable to regain power in the next House of Commons election in 2023 or 2024, given the need to gain 30% more votes than it did on 6 May and 80-100 seats in the strongly Leave-voting parts of the country. Consequently, from the EU's perspective the Tories will remain the only feasible negotiation partner until the end of the decade. The key theme of the independence campaign in Scotland will be its potential EU membership, for which support—although high—is often based on unrealistic expectations (e.g., maintaining the British pound as a currency and an “invisible border” with England after EU accession). Due to the importance of [NATO critical infrastructure in Scotland](#) (e.g., air and nuclear bases), Alliance states should analyse the consequences of that country's independence for their security.