

Fragmented and Dealigned: The 2024 British General Election and the Rise of Place-Based Politics

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Abstract

While the outcome of the 2024 British general election signalled a resounding repudiation of the incumbent government—returning a 231-seat swing from the Conservatives to Labour—it did not radically overturn the geography of electoral outcomes in England and Wales. Indeed, demographic predictors of party vote for parliamentary constituencies at the aggregate level mostly represented a continuation of recent trends. With the Conservative Party's vote collapsing most in areas where it started highest—and where the Leave vote had been highest in 2016—Labour secured shock victories in relatively affluent parts of southern England as well as retaking all the 'red wall' constituencies in northern England that it lost in 2019, despite its national vote share only increasing slightly. This represented the other end of the 'realignment' observed in 2019: as the electoral tide went out on the Conservatives, the relative weakening of their support in areas with graduates, middle class professionals and mortgage holders came home to roost. The election exposed a fragmented and marginal map, bequeathing a fragile electoral future, despite the Starmer government's large parliamentary majority.

Keywords: electoral geography, elections, electoral fragmentation, British politics, dealignment, Labour, Conservatives, Reform, demographics, marginality

WHILE THE 2024 British general election marked the end of an era of Conservative rule that had fundamentally reshaped British politics and the British state, it did not wholly reverse patterns of electoral behaviour. In certain respects, the election was a classic valence election, with voters seemingly casting their ballot based on the record of the incumbent, rather than owing to great enthusiasm for any of the alternatives.¹ After fourteen years in office, the Conservative Party was severely punished by the electorate for its conduct and performance on the issues that mattered most to them. Following a 'rally round the flag' at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic in March/April 2020, the government's popularity started

to deteriorate as economic optimism faded after the lifting of pandemic restrictions in summer 2021. It was then badly hit, first by the 'party-gate' scandal under Boris Johnson, which eventually led to his removal by Conservative MPs, prompted by another impropriety scandal. Further damage was inflicted on the Tories by the catastrophic forty-five-day premiership of Johnson's successor, Liz Truss, with her mini-budget wrecking the party's already deteriorating reputation for economic competence. This was compounded by the rising cost of living, struggling public services, anaemic economic growth and a growing sense that the country was on the wrong track. While Brexit had at one time been an electoral elixir for the party, delivering victory in 2019 on back of the pledge to 'get Brexit done', rising legal migration and small boat arrivals had undercut referendum-era promises to 'take back control', leaving the party exposed to the challenge from Reform on its right flank. The growing public view that

¹H. D. Clarke, et al., *Performance Politics and the British Voter*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009; J. Green and W. Jennings, *The Politics of Competence: Parties, Public Opinion and Voters*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017.

the decision to leave the EU had been wrong and was being handled badly dealt a further blow to the Brexit legacy, and seems to have contributed to the further fracturing of Conservative support across the political spectrum.

More widely, the election took place in the context of a mood of deep public distrust in politics and a high level of fatalism about the capacity of government to address major societal, environmental and economic problems. A survey conducted in April 2024 ahead of the election found that 82 per cent of people agreed with the suggestion that government tends to offer 'empty gestures' instead of tackling important problems.² Another YouGov survey found that the number of people saying they 'almost never' trust the British government to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own party had nearly doubled from 26 per cent to 49 per cent between 2019 and 2024.³ That disgruntled mood was reflected in the lack of enthusiasm for Labour and the mobilisation of anti-political sentiment by Reform to secure a record vote for the party compared to its predecessors (UKIP and the Brexit Party).

While the electoral tide went out on the Conservative Party in 2024 to devastating effect, the structural cleavages that underpin the electoral geography of Britain only shifted slightly. This is consistent with the findings of Furlong and Jennings in *The Changing Electoral Map of England and Wales*: that while there are elections at which there are accelerations or decelerations, the electoral geography of England and Wales is (for the most part) characterised by longer-term trajectories.⁴ Importantly, the result of the 2024 general election was largely consistent with the geography of the 2019 'realignment'. At constituency level, demographic predictors of voting did not deviate

radically from previous elections, albeit with some notable variations that point to the changing geographical distribution of Labour and Conservative support and support for challenger parties, notably Reform, the Greens and the Liberal Democrats. The distribution of Labour's vote—or, more specifically, its relative advantage over the Conservatives—did become much more efficient, translating 33.7 per cent of the vote share to over 63 per cent of the seats—contrary to trends over recent elections.

Several features of the political context contributed significantly to patterns of voting. First, the collapse of Conservative support among Leave voters in particular—with many defecting to Nigel Farage's Reform UK—contributed to a pattern of disproportionate swings where the party tended to experience the largest falls in its vote where it had started the highest. This meant that there was a national swing of eleven points from the Conservatives to Labour, even though the latter increased its own vote share by just 1.7 points to 33.7 per cent. The splintering of support on the Leave side of the Brexit divide had devastating consequences for the party, as well as being a significant part of the wider electoral fragmentation that occurred.

Second, Britain's electoral and party system continued to come under extreme pressure at the individual level, owing to the declining partisan loyalties of voters and increased electoral volatility.⁵ This was all compounded by the aforementioned high levels of distrust towards the government and politics more generally. This discontented public mood and a lack of enthusiasm for the two main parties was reflected in the lowest combined share of the national vote for the Conservatives and Labour—57.4 per cent—since 1918, and the return to a long-term trend of electoral fragmentation that was interrupted by Brexit in the 2017 and 2019 general elections.⁶ More and more voters were willing to look beyond

²D. Devine, B. Prosser and G. Stoker, 'British public more fatalistic about home ownership than climate change—new survey', *The Conversation*, 21 June 2024; <https://theconversation.com/british-public-more-fatalistic-about-home-ownership-than-climate-change-new-survey-232674>

³W. Jennings, 'A crisis of trust in our politics spells trouble for the government', *Sky News*, 25 April 2024; <https://news.sky.com/story/a-crisis-of-trust-in-our-politics-spells-trouble-for-the-government-13122344>

⁴J. Furlong and W. Jennings, *The Changing Electoral Map of England and Wales*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2024.

⁵G. Evans and J. Tilley, *The New Politics of Class*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017; E. Fieldhouse, et al., *Electoral Shocks: The Volatile Voter in a Turbulent World*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2020.

⁶D. Sanders, 'The UK's changing party system: the prospects for a party realignment at Westminster', *Journal of the British Academy*, vol. 5, 2017, pp. 91–124.

the main two parties. Interestingly, this did not lead to significant volatility in electoral geography as the effect was at most a slight atrophy of certain long-term trends at the aggregate level.

Third, the election was characterised by a patchwork of electoral competition across Britain that at least in part reflected party control of devolved administrations and longer-term patterns of campaigning and mobilising in certain places. While the Conservatives were the unpopular incumbent in Westminster, the SNP had been in office in Scotland for seventeen years—having been hit first by scandal over the former First Minister Nicola Sturgeon and then the resignation of her successor, First Minister Humza Yousaf—and Labour was the incumbent in Wales, where the First Minister Vaughan Gething was also mired in scandal and the party had been in power for twenty-five years. Reform UK also presented a challenge to the Conservatives and to Labour, especially in former industrial towns in the sorts of places where UKIP had achieved relatively high vote shares in 2015. Meanwhile, the Greens posed a threat to Labour in more cosmopolitan urban areas such as Bristol, with higher numbers of younger people, ethnic minorities and graduates at the same time as seeking to unseat Conservative and Liberal Democrat MPs in some specific seats in more suburban and rural settings. In several urban seats with substantial Muslim communities, Labour faced a challenge to its longstanding dominance from independent candidates and former Labour members/councillors who had defected. Lastly, there is evidence suggestive of tactical voting, or at the very least, strategic non-competition by parties: Labour's vote increased by six points in constituencies where it was in second place to the Conservatives, but was unchanged where the Liberal Democrats were the challenger (with their vote share increasing by nine points in those seats and falling by one point in Labour-Conservative battlegrounds). As such, the electoral map consisted of several different regional and localised contests rather than a national battlefield.

The changing electoral geography of England and Wales

How have the socioeconomic and sociodemographic cleavages that have arguably defined

the past half century of British electoral politics—social class, education, age, deprivation and ethnicity—been reflected in the changing electoral geography of England and Wales? Drawing on harmonised demographic and electoral data over the period between 1979 and 2019, this article extends the analysis of Furlong and Jennings to the 2024 general election. Bivariate correlations are presented to measure the alignment of key sociodemographic cleavages with the geography of party support. While there have undoubtedly been significant electoral shocks during this period, changes in electoral geography have tended to be gradual, marked by periods of acceleration or deceleration, rather than being characterised by outright reversals.

Beginning with social class, there has been a long-term decline in the strength of the positive correlation between the proportion of people in working class jobs (routine and semi-routine occupations) and Labour's vote share, as shown in Figure 1. This matches evidence on trends at the individual level.⁷ Notably, the sharpest fall in this relationship occurred with Tony Blair's 1997 landslide, when the party's electoral coalition widened significantly. Since 2015, the Conservatives had seen an increase in the correlation coefficient to the point that it was marginally positive in 2019. The collapse of the Conservative vote in more working class constituencies in July 2024 led to a drop in the correlation and a return to a weakly negative correspondence between social class and distribution of the party's vote share. Nevertheless, the long-term picture remains one of dealignment—rather than realignment—of class-based differences in electoral geography: an area being heavily working class is not a strong predictor of the Conservative vote share and nor was it in 2019, contrary to what a great deal of commentary would imply.

The reverse of this trend is observed for the relationship between education and the Labour and Conservative vote shares, as shown in Figure 2. In 1979, the number of university graduates in a constituency was strongly negatively correlated with Labour's vote share. This correlation has steadily

⁷Evans and Tilley, *The New Politics of Class*.

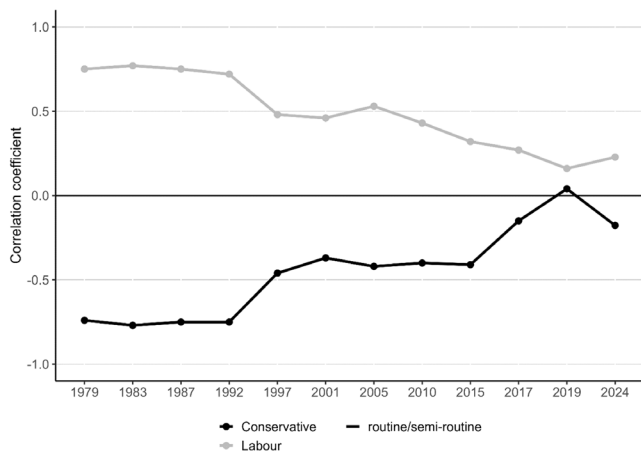


Figure 1: Correlation between working class occupations and party vote share, 1979–2024

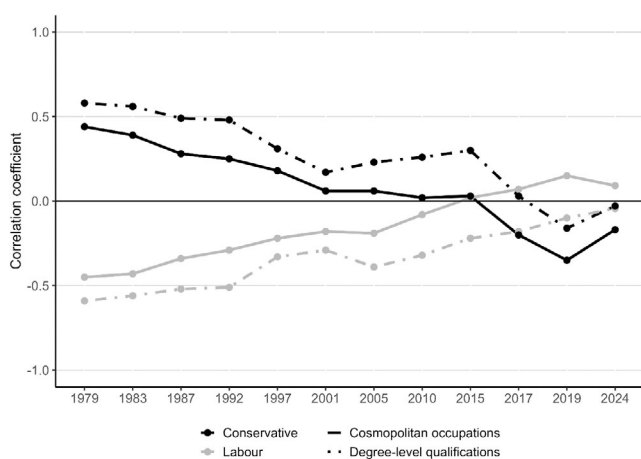


Figure 2: Correlation between degree-level qualifications and party vote share, 1979–2024

weakened over time—approaching zero—while the opposite pattern is observed for the Conservatives. Notably, the sharpest declines in the correlation between education and Conservative support occurred in 1997–2001 and 2017–2019. While education had become a negative predictor of the Conservative vote by 2019, it rebounded slightly in 2024, largely as the party’s gains in areas with lower levels of academic educational attainment at the previous election were reversed (with many of those voters switching to Reform). However, the dealignment of the educational cleavage in British politics remained intact after the general election of July 2024.

There is evidence of a growing age cleavage at the constituency level in British politics—like that identified at the individual level—

which has strengthened since 1997.⁸ This is demonstrated in Figure 3. Labour’s support has decreased in areas with higher proportions of over-65s and increased in those areas with higher proportions of the under-30s since 2010. In 2019, the correlation between Labour’s vote share and the proportion of people under 30 was at its highest level since 1979 (0.64), while the correlation with the proportion aged 65 and over was at its lowest level recorded (-0.65). The vote in 2024 saw a slight reversal of this long-term trend. Indeed, the correlation between the proportion of under-

⁸P. Sturgis and W. Jennings, ‘Was there a “youthquake” in the 2017 general election?’, *Electoral Studies*, vol. 64, 2020, no. 102065.

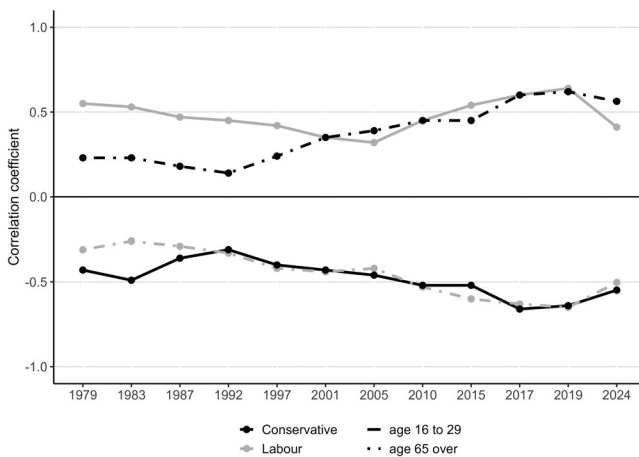


Figure 3: Correlation between age and party vote share, 1979–2024

30s and Labour's vote fell back to the level observed in 2010.

In contrast to the trends described for social class, education and age, the correspondence between levels of socioeconomic deprivation and the Labour and Conservative vote shares has remained relatively stable over the forty-five-year period between 1979 and 2024. Furlong finds that such socioeconomic 'left-behindedness' has been a much more consistent predictor of Labour's vote than demographic left-behindedness characterised by working class populations and employment in former industries.⁹ Poor health declined slightly as a predictor of Labour's vote share in 2024—as shown in Figure 4 below—while there was a slight decline in the correlations for deprivation, social renting and unemployment. This is likely a reflection of the slight weakening of Labour's vote in more deprived urban centres at the same time as the party extending its support into some more predominantly middle class Conservative heartlands.

Lastly, since 1979 there has been a growing positive correspondence between ethnic diversity and Labour vote share and an increasingly negative correspondence with the Conservative vote share, as shown in Figure 5. This long-term divergence contracted notably in 2024, with the correlation coefficient for Labour decreasing from 0.59 to 0.34 and increasing for the Conservatives from -0.54 to

-0.37. In the former case, this partly reflects the challenge that Labour faced from the Greens and independents in its urban, cosmopolitan strongholds, but also that the party did relatively better in areas with higher proportions of people identifying as white British.

Places where the parties under- or over-perform

One of the puzzles of electoral geography is the places where voters do not follow faithfully the script set by their social and economic profile. Ahead of the 2019 general election, the 'red wall' concept introduced by James Kanagasooriam suggested that there were areas where Labour's vote was higher than implied by sociodemographics alone.¹⁰ Many of these constituencies across northern England and the Midlands fell to the Conservatives in 2019 as party loyalties weakened over Brexit. Yet, even within the so-called red wall, for example, the 'over-performance' has never been spatially even. In other words, there are some constituencies and clusters of constituencies where Labour has over-performed and others where it has not. In either case, the areas of Labour over-performance have shifted over time, notably since 1979 from the former coalfields of Yorkshire, the Midlands, Northeast England and South Wales to Merseyside and other parts of the Northwest.

⁹J. Furlong, 'The changing electoral geography of England and Wales: varieties of "left-behindedness"', *Political Geography*, vol. 75, 2019, no. 102061.

¹⁰J. Kanagasooriam and E. Simon, 'Red wall: the definitive description', *Political Insight*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2021, pp. 8–11.

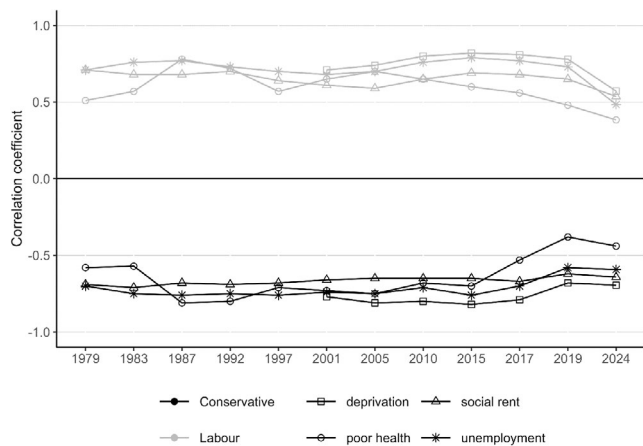


Figure 4: Correlation between deprivation and party vote share, 1979–2024

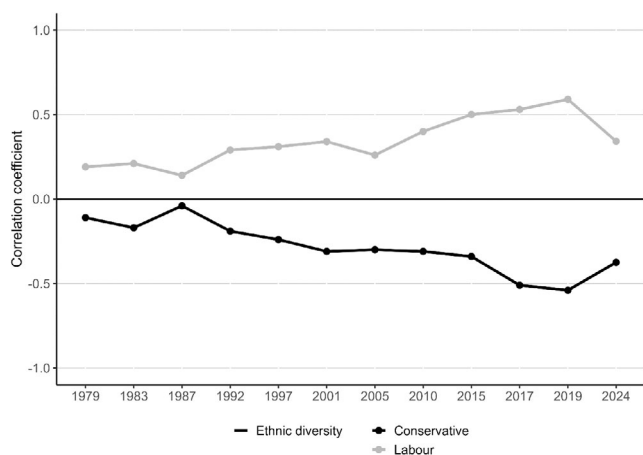


Figure 5: Correlation between ethnic minority and party vote share, 1979–2024

There continue to be places in England and Wales that defy predictions based on their socio-demographic composition. Using a spatial analytical approach known as ‘local indicators of spatial association’ (LISA), there are areas where there was statistically significant spatial clustering of Labour and the Conservatives over- and under-performing their vote share predicted by models—that is, residuals estimated based on a multivariate linear regression of Labour and Conservative vote shares on a range of sociodemographic predictors such as age, social class, education, and so on. Figures 6 and 7 show maps for the 2019 and 2024 general elections to enable comparison of these two very different electoral contexts. Constituencies with ‘high-high’ values are those that have a high value of the residual and whose neighbours also have a high value; constituencies with ‘low-low’ values are those

that share low values with their neighbours. For example, for the Conservative residual maps, if a constituency has a high-high value, both it and its neighbours have high positive residuals from the Conservative vote model, meaning these are areas where the party’s vote is higher than would be predicted based on sociodemographics. There are also two types of spatial outliers. ‘High-low’ are constituencies with high values of the residual surrounded by neighbouring constituencies with low values (places where there is over-performance in a sea of under-performance, for example); ‘low-high’ indicate the opposite (under-performance surrounded by over-performance).

For Labour, its cluster of over-performance in 2024 overlapped substantially with that observed in 2019, covering substantial areas across northern England, including large parts

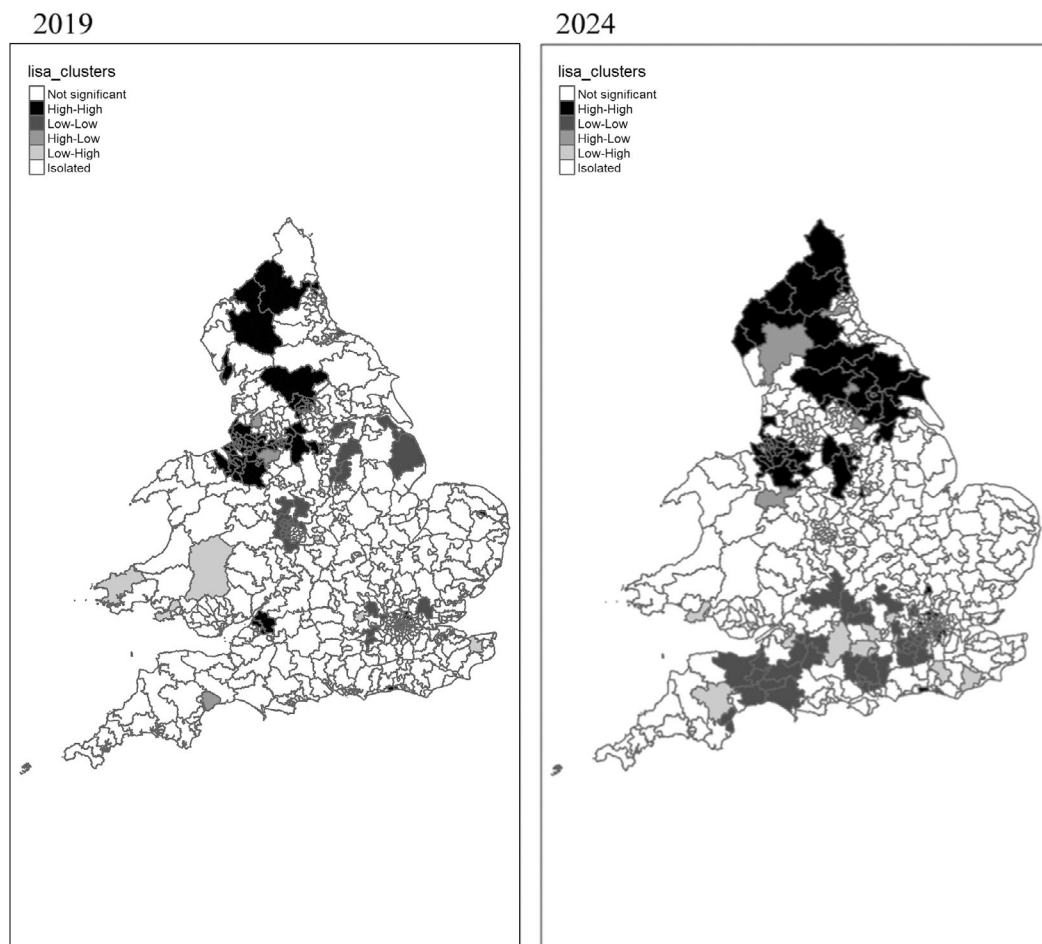


Figure 6: LISA cluster map showing statistically significant clustering of standardised residuals (under- and over-performance) from the 2019 and 2024 models predicting Labour vote share

of Merseyside, Manchester and parts of Yorkshire in and around the Pennines. Notably in 2024, the party's strong electoral showing spread to include rural parts of the far north of England—as far north as Hexham and North Northumberland, seats it won for the first time ever in 2024. New 'low-low' clusters appeared in southern England in 2024, reaching from the southwestern edge of London across to Devon. These tended to be in areas where the Liberal Democrats were the main challenger to the Conservatives—and often had historical campaigning roots in constituencies—and where the anti-Conservative vote seems to have aligned behind the former, thus depressing Labour's vote share below the level predicted.

For the Conservatives, their 2024 vote share exceeded model predictions in a cluster of constituencies to the north of Birmingham, around towns and cities such as Walsall, Wolverhampton, Stafford and Stoke-on-Trent, as well as on Teesside (see Figure 7). In both general elections, there was a significant clustering of 'high-high' values across Lincolnshire—an area where the Conservative Party's vote share has historically tended to be substantially above that predicted by sociodemographics—though the geographical area of over-performance contracted slightly.¹¹ Even in an election where the party suffered extensive

¹¹Furlong and Jennings, *The Changing Electoral Map*.

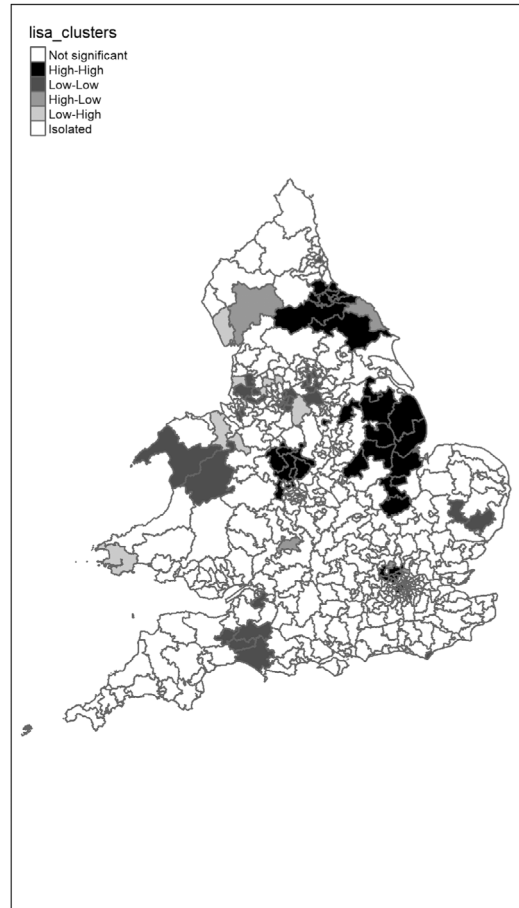
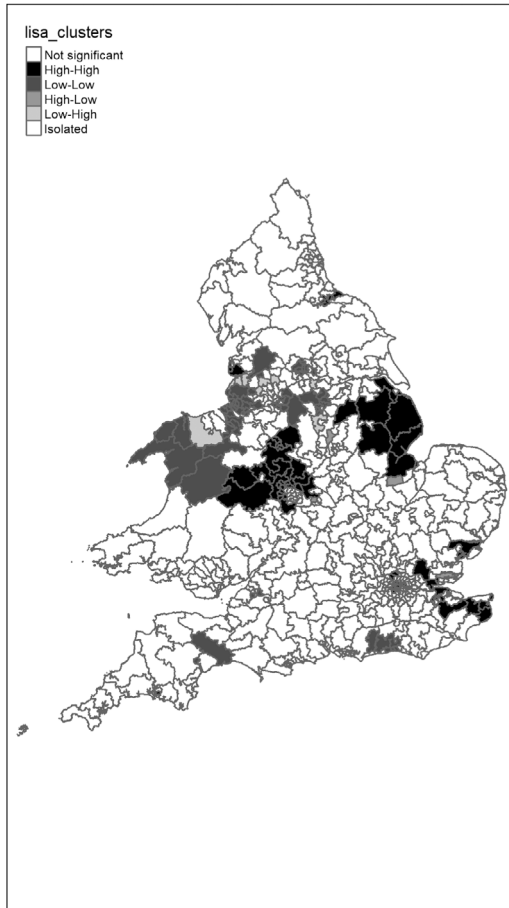


Figure 7: LISA cluster map showing statistically significant clustering of standardised residuals (under- and over-performance) from the 2019 and 2024 models predicting Conservative vote share

losses, its areas of relative over-performance remained largely consistent with those observed at the previous general election.

A fragmented electoral map

Based on the evidence presented above, the underlying geography of Conservative and Labour electoral support might—despite the large swing against the government—appear to have remained largely stable between 2019 and 2024, reflecting long-term trends in the correspondence between the sociodemographic composition of places and party vote share. Similarly, the geographical pattern of under- and over-performance against

predictions was characterised by relative continuity, despite the very different outcomes of the two elections. The most notable shift in electoral geography at the 2024 general election arguably relates to the increased fragmentation of electoral competition.

The ‘effective number of electoral parties’ (ENP) is a well-established measure of electoral fragmentation.¹² It is calculated as the sum of the squared fraction of votes (V) for each party i , divided by one. That is,

¹²M. Laakso and R. Taagepera, “Effective” number of parties: a measure with application to West Europe’, *Comparative Political Studies*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1979, pp. 3–27.

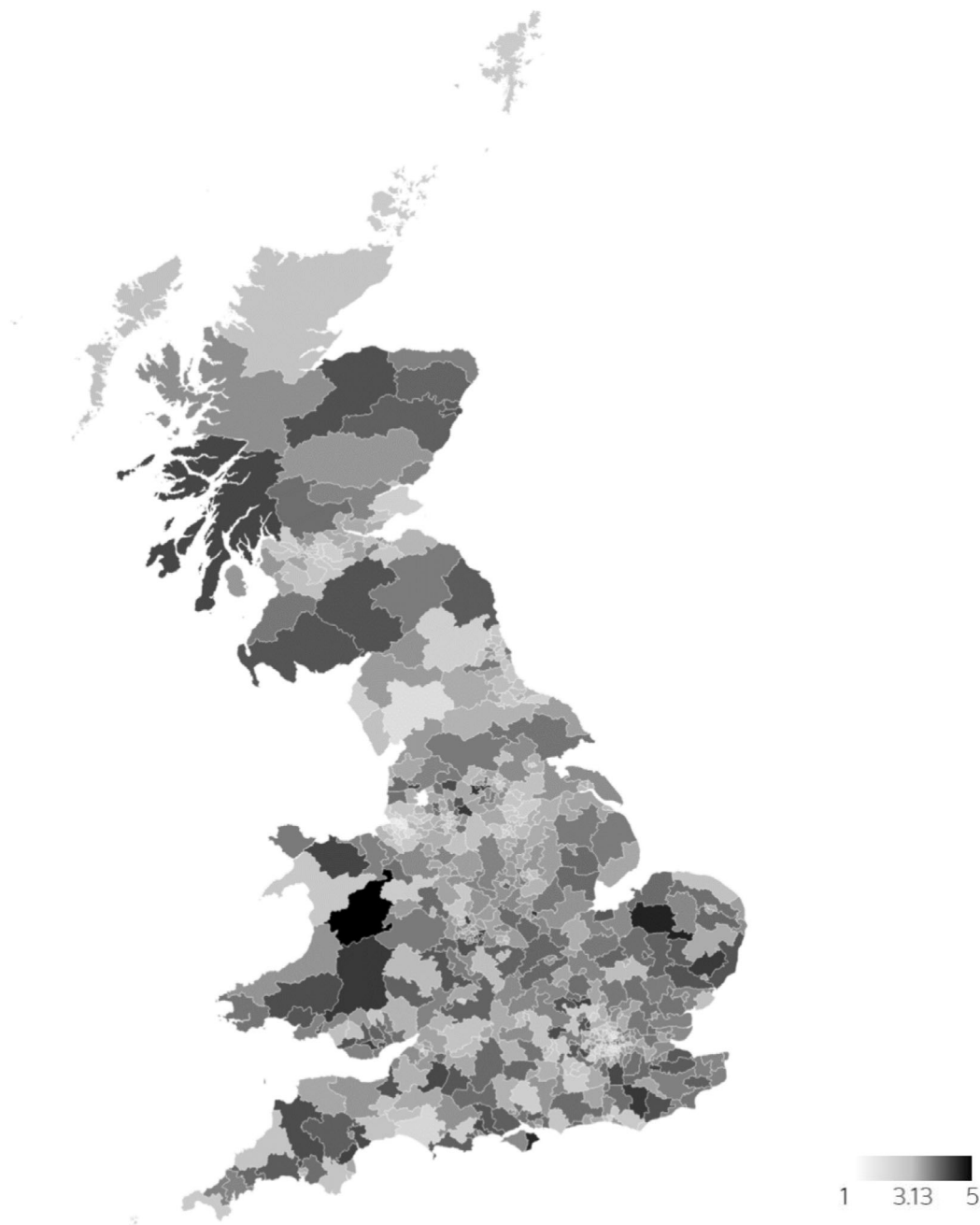


Figure 8: Effective number of parties by parliamentary constituency, Great Britain, 2024

$$ENP_e = \frac{1}{\sum_{i=1}^n V_i^2}$$

It is designed to capture the dispersion of the vote across parties in a given electoral system

or legislative district. In a system or district with two parties, each with 50 per cent of the vote, the effective number of parties would be equal to two. In a district with five parties, each on 20 per cent of the vote, it would be equal to five. There was a substantial increase

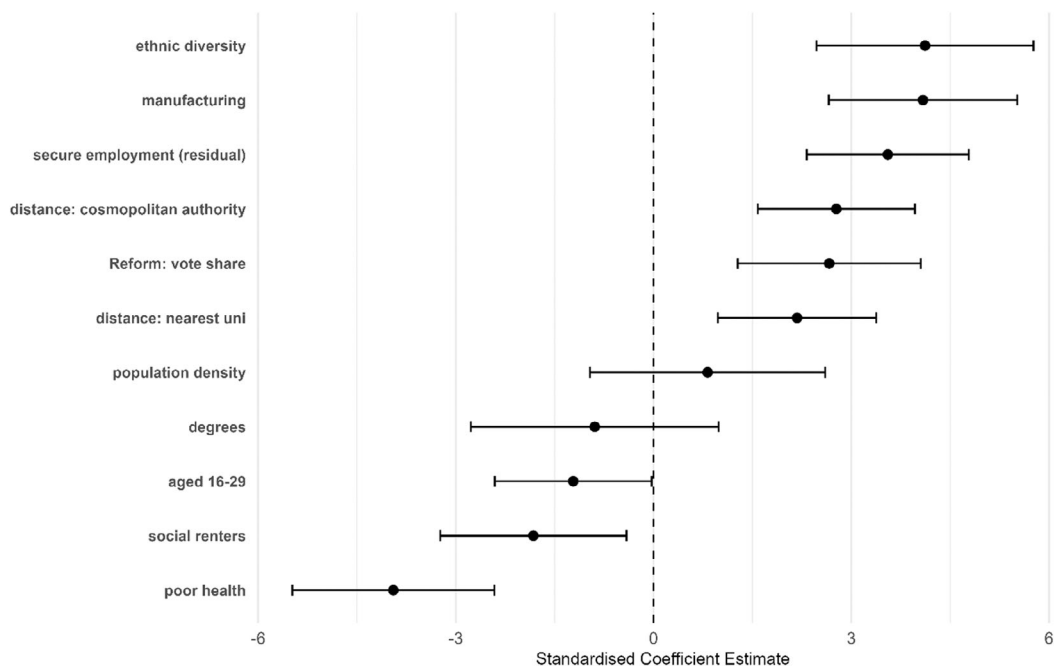


Figure 9: Standardised predictors of marginality of Labour-held constituencies, 2024

in electoral fragmentation between the 2019 and 2024 elections. At the national level (Great Britain), ENP increased by more than one party from 3.1 parties in 2019 to 4.5 in 2024 (having been 2.7 in 2017). The average value of ENP by constituency similarly rose from 2.5 parties in 2019 to 3.5 in 2024 (and 2.3 in 2017, an election where the combined Labour and Conservative vote share reached 84.5 per cent in Great Britain). These represent dramatic changes in such a short period.

In some areas, Labour and/or the Conservatives tend to dominate electoral competition, but in other places the vote is spread relatively evenly across several parties competing fiercely (see Figure 8). The most fragmented constituency in 2024 was Montgomeryshire and Glyndwr in Wales, with an ENP of 4.9, while the least fragmented was Liverpool Walton with an ENP of 1.9, excluding the Speaker's seat. Geographically, the lowest levels of fragmentation exist in Merseyside, London and parts of Yorkshire—all areas where Labour did relatively well—and the central belt in Scotland, where Labour and the SNP tended to dominate. Higher fragmentation is observed in the East of England—tending to correspond to areas where Reform, the Greens and Liberal Democrats

challenged the main parties—as well as Cornwall and rural parts of Wales and Scotland. In terms of sociodemographics, ENP is negatively related to population density ($-0.29, p = 0.000$) and to the proportion of university graduates ($-0.20, p = 0.000$), and positively related to the 2016 Leave vote ($0.30, p = 0.000$) and rates of outright home ownership ($0.28, p = 0.000$). More urban areas are thus associated with lower levels of fragmentation. It is the more peripheral parts of the country where electoral support has dispersed more heavily. This fragmentation creates considerable uncertainty in relation to patterns of competition at the next election.

Marginality: the fragility of the electoral future

This fragmented electoral map was also reflected in the growth of the number of marginal constituencies, making Britain's electoral future more fragile and less predictable. At the 2019 general election, there were 135 constituencies in England, Wales and Scotland with a majority for the winning party of less than 10 per cent, including sixty-three with a majority under 5 per cent. In 2024, this increased to

217 constituencies with a majority of less than 10 per cent, including 112 under 5 per cent. This increases the vulnerability of Labour—as the incumbent—to relatively modest swings against it. Despite the rise of Reform and challenge in certain places from the Greens and independents, the Conservatives continue to be the primary challenger to Labour in most parliamentary constituencies (see Table 1). Specifically, the Conservatives are in second place in eighty-five out of the ninety-seven most marginal seats (where the majority is under 10 per cent). Reform is second in just three of these seats and the Greens are second in none. It is only once Labour's majority is above 15 per cent that there is a considerable number of second places for Reform. Most of the Green second places are in the safest Labour-held seats where the majority is over 25 per cent.

To understand better the types of places associated with marginality for the Labour government, a multiple regression model of marginality (the inverse of Labour's lead over the second-placed party) restricted to seats won by Labour in 2024 was estimated (see Figure 9). This reveals that, once other factors are controlled, ethnic diversity and employment in manufacturing are both strong predictors of Labour marginality as is the Reform vote share. Poor health is the strongest negative predictor of marginality, which is consistent with the results above concerning the strength of correlation between deprivation and Labour's vote share over time.

An uncertain, unstable future

With the electorate now more volatile, discontented, dealigned and fragmented, what are the prospects for the new Labour government? Based on a politically naïve and stumbling start to their term of office, there is little evidence at present pointing to a reversal of these forces. Indeed, it is difficult to envision a return to the old status quo while the country continues to face challenging fiscal circumstances, decaying public services and no straightforward reforms to Britain's economic model that might deliver a boost to national growth and improved living standards for all. As such, the prospects for restoring public faith in politics and the capacity of government to deliver look bleak. At the same time, one might wonder if Britain has been here before or—worse—is condemned to

live out a never-ending political groundhog day. Writing in 1975, as the UK faced another period of economic stagnation, social unrest, divided politics and overloaded government, the late, great Tony King wryly observed:

It was once thought that Britain was an unusually easy country to govern, its politicians wise, its parties responsible, its administration efficient, its people docile. . . Now we wonder whether Britain is not perhaps an unusually difficult country to govern, its problems peculiarly intractable, its people increasingly bloody-minded. What has happened? What has gone wrong?¹³

Perhaps it is simply the case that, despite significant structural changes in economy and society, Britain has not found a way to overcome its long-term decline, while class dealignment has further reduced the 'docility' of its people. Whether or not the result of this economic malaise, public discontent and governing overload is another episode of the Great Moving Right Show remains to be seen.¹⁴ Labour's immediate challenge of taming Britain's recurring economic crises will ultimately determine its electoral future.

How the Conservatives recover from the 2024 general election therefore depends partly on the degree to which the Labour government squanders its already scarce political capital on unpopular policies, fails to deliver on voters' expectations of improvements in public services and struggles to reverse the current economic crisis. It also depends on the sort of electoral coalition the Conservative Party seeks to assemble and the geographical distribution of that support. Should it focus on winning back its traditional professional, middle class base or the Leave-supporting and working class voters that deserted the party in 2024? To win the next general election, it would need to do both. Just as Labour faces a pincer movement from Greens and independents on its left and from the Conservatives and Reform on its right, the Conservatives face a pincer movement from Reform on their right and the Liberal Democrats on their left. It is

¹³A. King, 'Overload: problems of governing in the 1970s', *Political Studies*, vol. 23, no. 2-3, 1975, pp. 284-296.

¹⁴S. Hall, 'The great moving right show', *Marxism Today*, January 1979, pp. 14-20.

Table 1: Second-placed party in Labour-held seats by marginality of parliamentary constituency, 2024

	Ultra-marginal (<5)	Marginal (5–9.9)	Somewhat marginal (10–14.9)	Somewhat safe (15–19.9)	Safe (20–24.9)	Ultra safe (25+)
Conservative Party	43	42	40	31	27	36
Green Party	0	0	2	1	0	36
Liberal Democrats	0	1	0	1	2	2
Other	6	2	5	4	0	0
Reform UK	1	2	7	20	24	35

these forces that are accelerating the dynamics of electoral fragmentation—and which will ultimately shape the geography of the next election.

As shown, despite the huge swing against the Conservative government, there was notable continuity in the underlying socioeconomic and sociodemographic predictors of party vote at the constituency level. The election did not mark a clear reversal of the dealignment of social class and education as predictors of support for Labour and the Conservatives, while socioeconomic deprivation remained strongly aligned with the geography of Labour's vote share. Similarly, while there was a slight weakening of the correlation of the electoral geography of England and Wales with age and the size of ethnic minority populations, these were only modest deviations from recent trends. There was similar continuity between 2019 and 2024 in the areas where the two parties tended to 'over'- and 'underperform' those predictors. Labour's vote share continued to exceed expectations based on the socioeconomic profile of the electorate in Merseyside and other parts of northern England, including in more rural areas. Even in defeat, the Conservatives continued to do better in Lincolnshire, parts of the West Midlands and Teesside than would be suggested by demographics.

Importantly, structural changes in electoral geography can be concealed by large swings of the political pendulum. Labour won back the red wall in 2024 not because of a structural change in the geography of the party's vote, but because the electoral tide went out so far for their opponents. Labour's 2024 majority differs significantly from that won by Tony Blair in

1997 as the size of majorities won in many of those seats in former industrial towns in the north of England is now substantially diminished. For example, in 1997, Labour held Bishop Auckland with a 21,064-vote majority. In 2024, after winning the seat back from the Conservatives, this majority stood at 6,672 votes. But the other end of the wedge is that Labour's vote share has grown in places that it was far behind even at the high point of the 1997 landslide. In Aldershot, for example, Labour came third in 1997, 10,062 votes behind the Conservatives. In 2024, the party's majority stood at 5,683. In both seats, the Reform vote—9,466 and 8,210 votes respectively—exceeded the gap between the parties.

In contrast to the perhaps surprising continuity in the underlying geographical structure of the vote for Labour and the Conservatives between 2019 and 2024, there has been a clear fragmentation of electoral support, particularly in more peripheral parts of England and Wales. This has left multiple parties competing for power in multiple constituencies, making the task of national campaigning even more challenging for the parties as they attempt to coordinate targeting different voter groups and different seat types. The relatively large number of seats with small majorities has left the government far more vulnerable than would be suggested by its July 2024 parliamentary majority of 174 seats. Despite the threat from Reform being talked up by some commentators, the Conservatives remain the primary challenger, holding second place in most of the most marginal Labour-held constituencies. While Labour's safest seats tend to have larger ethnic minority populations and lower levels of manufacturing employment, these—and the

Reform vote share—are a positive predictor of marginality once other factors such as poor health, social renting and younger populations are controlled for. This highlights that, although Labour's vote may come under pressure in certain places from the Greens and Reform, it is ultimately the Conservatives who are still their primary opponent. It remains difficult, however, to make confident predictions about what the electoral geography of England and Wales might look like at the next general election.

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