

'Turning the Page'? The 2024 UK General Elections and First Implications of Labour's Landslide Victory

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Introduction

On 22 May 2024, the UK Conservative Prime Minister (PM) Rishi Sunak surprisingly announced that a snap general election was going to take place on 4 July, around 6 months ahead of the expected end of the parliamentary term. Since Sunak's entry in Downing Street in October 2022, opinion polls had consistently put the Labour party 15 to 20 points ahead of the Conservatives. Rumour has it that the vote was anticipated by the PM after he was advised about the dire economic forecasts for the autumn. The attempt to avoid a large defeat, however, was unsuccessful, and the Conservatives ended up with the worst electoral crash ever (losing more than 200 seats – from 326 to 121 – compared to the previous election in December 2019). Though Labour won big in terms of seats, this was due to a record-high level of disproportionality of the plurality electoral system, which magnified a rather modest victory (33.7, with an increase of less than two percentage points over 2019), translating it into a comfortable margin of majority of over 170 seats.

Seen in the context of the recent tensions and changes in UK politics, the electoral result was not very surprising, for at least three reasons. First, the Conservatives had governed since 2010. Like in the previous two long electoral cycles (Conservative with Thatcher-Major in 1979–1997; Labour with Blair and Brown, 1997–2010), voters clearly manifested an appetite for change, in what has been defined as a 'valence vote', in which the incumbent party lost 'competence, leadership, and capacity to deliver' (SurrIDGE, 2024).

Second, the political conditions were very different from the ones of the 2019 election (cf. Prosser, 2024). Back then, Boris Johnson won big, capitalizing, amongst other things, on the pledge to 'get Brexit done', in a process that, starting with the June 2016 EU Membership referendum, eventually led to the country's exit from the European Union in 2020. The electoral campaign, as well as the vote, also grafted onto a 'geography of discontent' (McCann, 2019), where many 'left behind areas' turned to the Conservative party, buying into its promise to 'level up the country' and address persisting socio-economic inequalities that drove also the support for Brexit (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Most prominent amongst them were the Midlands and North of England constituencies, making up the so-called 'Red Wall'. Ending a prolonged period of uncertainty, in 2019, Johnson won the necessary majority to achieve his goals also thanks to Nigel Farage's 'informal alliance', as his Brexit party did not contest candidates in seats with an incumbent Conservative Member of Parliament (MP). Yet, whilst Brexit was 'done', as it will be

discussed later, its negative socio-economic effects have persisted, giving rise to further discontent across large swathes of the country. In the end, most constituencies that switched to the Conservatives in 2019 went back to Labour in 2024. Meanwhile, 14 years of Conservative rule – marked by unrestrained neo-liberal measures, austerity and a broader context of poly-crisis – left the UK economy depleted and its public services crumbling. Taken together, these factors contributed to a widespread perception amongst voters of the state as ‘failing to deliver for its citizens’ (Diamond et al., 2024a).

Third, and related to this, 9 years after lack of trust had already emerged as a key determinant of the Brexit referendum (Clarke et al., 2023), opinion polls still signal that public opinion is dissatisfied and rather distrustful towards British institutions. In 2024, Farage’s new party – Reform UK – not only won a record-high number of votes (14.3%) compared to the two previous parties led by him (UKIP, the United Kingdom Independence Party in 2015 and 2017, and the Brexit Party in 2019) but went on – in the 6 months following the vote – to increase its support in opinion polls towards 20%. Early analyses of the Reform electorate clearly indicate that the dividing lines that had emerged in the polarized Leave/Remain referendum vote are far from over (Heath et al., 2025).

Against this background, the Labour party’s success in 2024 can be considered a ‘fragile victory’. To assess the political dynamics and first implications of such victory, we first analyse its anatomy (Section I), moving then to the main developments at domestic (Section II) and international levels (Section III). In the 2024 Labour manifesto, ‘turning the page decisively on the Conservative ideas that have caused chaos’ (p. 6) was presented as a key objective for the new government. Thus, by looking at its first 8 months in government (July 2024–February 2025), we ask whether Labour did really ‘turn the page’ – and argue that what emerged from the analysis is a rather compound picture, marked by tensions between change and continuity.

I. A Fragile Victory in a Fragmented Party System: The 2024 General Election

In the last decade, Brexit significantly contributed to disrupting British politics. In 9 years, four general elections were held (2015, 2017, 2019, 2024; the last three of them all snap votes, whilst the 2024 vote was the only one in which Brexit did not formally play a role). Before Sunak, four different Conservative Prime Ministers held office (David Cameron, Theresa May, Boris Johnson and Liz Truss). With just 7 weeks in Downing Street, in 2022, Truss also hit the non-enviable record of the shortest-serving PM in British history.

During the Conservative years in government (2010–2024), electoral behaviour in Britain has become more volatile. Even in a two-party system like the British one, there are fewer and fewer loyal voters, who support the same party in consecutive elections. This trend has also introduced uncertainty into the usually predictable two-party scenario of Westminster, already shaken by the growth of the Scottish National Party (in the 2011 Scottish election, which led to the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum), then with the rise of UKIP in the 2015 elections and, even more, by the Brexit referendum the following year. Such events were considered ‘unpredictable electoral shocks’ just 20 years ago (Fieldhouse et al., 2021).

By 2019, with the ‘fall of the Red Wall’, the Conservatives managed to make inroads into the traditional working-class strongholds of central and northern England. Thus, the two-party game seemed restored, though in the context of profound shifts in the electoral

geography and socio-demographic profile of the electorate of the two main parties. And yet, by 2024, turnout dropped to 59.7 (close to the nadir point of participation of 59.1, registered in 2001), and the two main parties struggled to preserve their 2019 electorates. This was particularly true for the Conservatives, keeping only slightly more than half of it (53%), whilst losing as much as 25% to Reform (whereas Labour was able to retain 71% of the 2019 vote). The Liberal Democrats – traditionally the third-most voted party – strongly enhanced their parliamentary representation (from 11 to 72 seats), with a very small increase from 11.5% to 12.2%. As it was the case in the last pre-Brexit referendum election of 2015, they were overtaken by Farage's party (then UKIP, now Reform) (YouGov, 2024).

All this resulted in the most fragmented and disproportional election in UK democratic history (Pattie and Cutts, 2024). Whilst the Labour majority in parliament looks solid, there is no shortage of potential sources of tension. After several attempts, Farage finally entered Westminster as an MP for Reform. With 14% of the votes, Reform is not far from the average that similar populist radical right parties have obtained for years in many European countries. If Reform remains very under-represented (only five seats) compared to the votes obtained, entering Parliament provides a new institutional platform (after that of the European Parliament) to one of the major architects of Brexit (Baldini et al., 2022).

Even to the left of the government, a group has formed that could give Starmer a hard time. In addition to former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, expelled from the party on the eve of the 2024 election, four other pro-Palestine MPs, who are strengthening their collaboration with the four Green MPs, also won their seats as independents. If these numbers are very low compared to those of other European parliaments and of little relevance within Westminster, they reinforce a trend towards fragmentation that already emerged in the previous parliament (cf. Table 1).

At the beginning of 2025, Kemi Badenoch, the newly elected leader of the Conservatives, appeared to struggle in her effort to revive the party's fortunes. Though Starmer also proved rather unpopular, enjoying no honeymoon in his first months in office, the smaller margin between the two main parties in opinion polls was matched by the rise of Nigel

Table 1: General Elections in the United Kingdom (2024 and 2019).

	2024			2019		
	Seats	Votes	Vote share	Seats	Votes	Vote share
Labour	411	9,708,716	33.7	202	10,269,051	32.08
Conservative	121	6,828,925	23.7	365	13,966,454	43.63
Reform UK*	5	4,117,610	14.29	0	644,257	2.01
Liberal Democrat	72	3,519,143	12.22	11	3,696,419	11.55
Green Party	4	1,843,124	6.4	1	865,715	2.7
Scottish National Party	9	724,758	2.52	48	1,242,380	3.88
Plaid Cymru	4	194,811	0.68	4	153,265	0.48
Others [^]	24	1,872,253	6.49	19	1,176,569	3.67
Total	650	28,809,340	100	650	32,014,110	100
<i>Turnout</i>			59.7			67.3

Source: House of Commons Library, 2024 and 2020. *Brexit Party in 2019. [^]Includes Northern Ireland; Independent candidates; other small parties; and the Speaker.

Farage and his Reform UK, which has been increasingly perceived as the main electoral threat to Labour. Looking at its voters, it has been underlined that ‘support for Reform in 2024 is slightly more polarised along Brexit lines than support for UKIP was in 2015 in the run up to the referendum, indicating that Reform has increased its base in more pro-Leave areas’ (Heath et al., 2025, p. 7). Such areas of the country, which are also amongst the most economically deprived, might become once again key electoral battlegrounds.

II. Domestic Policy: Old Habits Are Hard to Break

As mentioned, Starmer’s party entered government with a clear ambition to ‘turn the page’ from the era of Conservative government. In its manifesto, the party pledged to pave the way towards a ‘decade of renewal’, laying the ‘foundations of good government’ (p. 12). To achieve this goal, at domestic level, the new government has adopted a ‘mission-driven’ approach. It is no coincidence that from the start Labour’s first mission and top priority has been to ‘kickstart economic growth, to secure the highest *sustained* growth in the G7 – with good jobs and productivity growth *in every part of the country* making everyone, not just a few, better off’ (p. 13, italics added). Starmer and his cabinet knew all too well that reversing economic stagnation was key to ‘rebuild Britain’ and restore public services as well as citizens’ confidence towards the state and its institutions. Yet, from the moment it entered public office, Labour has had to face a series of material and ideological challenges that have been hindering its ambition to deliver transformative change at speed.

The first emerged just a few days after the vote, when a series of riots sparked across the country after the murder of three young girls of Southport, in Northern England. Some political and media commentators hastily tagged these events as an expression of radical right feelings exploited by extremist movements – not least in the wake of the continued prominence of immigration as a key issue in public opinion (YouGov, 2025). Yet, this is only a partial interpretation. As noted by Whiteley (2024), disruptive and violent events like the riots could stem from a profound sense of discontent that is often found in areas that endure deprivation – that is, so-called ‘left behind places’ (Pike et al., 2024). Indeed, many of the locations where the most violent clashes emerged (such as Middlesbrough, Blackpool, Liverpool, Hartlepool, Hull and Blackburn), fall in the top 10 most deprived areas according to the government deprivation index, whilst many others are still above the national average.

The United Kingdom is one of the most regionally unequal countries in the OECD (McCann, 2019; Raikes et al., 2019). Longstanding socio-economic regional disparities are not just persisting, but have continued to widen over the past decades. For example, the already significant living standards gap between London and the North of England has almost doubled between 2019 and 2024 – leaving a large portion of the population in ‘left behind places’ essentially stuck. This condition is amplifying existing territorial divides – between the North and the South, between metropolitan and rural or coastal areas, but also within and across regions – generating a vicious circle of socio-economic decline, perception of ‘left behindness’ and political discontent (Pike et al., 2024). To be sure, in recent years, areas lagging economically have often taken their grievances to the ballot box, as in the case of the Brexit referendum, voting to leave the EU; and have also returned high

levels of electoral volatility, as it happened in the 2019 general election, with the fall of the 'Red Wall'. Yet, despite promises to 'level up the country', little has been done by the previous Conservative governments to address economic decline in 'left behind places' (Tomaney et al., 2025; Webb et al., 2022). These areas have also been hit harder by the negative economic effects of Brexit, whilst immigration is still perceived as a highly salient issue (Goes, 2025; Prosser, 2024). As a result, grievances have continued to mount rather than subside. This helps to explain why the riots should not be read just as isolated outbursts of violence fomented by radical right groups, but as the latest manifestation of 'the revenge of the places that don't matter' (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). This provides a stark warning for the new government – especially because, to date, beyond seeking to re-establish public order immediately after the riots, Starmer's administration has not taken any clear step to understand or address their root causes.

Crucially, Labour's victory was particularly fragile in the 'Red Wall' seats. Moreover, the fact that Reform came in second in many of these seats shows that a profound sense of discontent is lingering in these areas, and allegiances could turn quickly again.¹ Labour's victory could be attributed more to a combination of a plummeting Conservative support and a split right-wing vote, often to the benefit of Reform, than to a solid backing for Starmer's party. This suggests that rebalancing the economy, reviving post-industrial areas that are bearing the brunt of decades of neglect and broken promises, whilst operating in a context of stagnation and public service decline, is the *real* mountain the new Labour government will have to climb to remain in power.

Against this complex background, delivering on its mission to kickstart growth *across the whole country* is clearly vital for Starmer's party. Arguably, this would require implementing an economic strategy that breaks away from the agglomeration approach adopted in the last decades, on which inequalities thrived; whilst also putting forward a radical plan of devolution in England,² essential to move towards a new, 'place-based' model of economic development (Mackinnon et al., 2024). But, whilst the new government's ambitions on these fronts have been high, during its first 8 months in office, progress has been limited. This suggests that, whilst spending a lot of time in opposition to reform the party and craft its electoral message of 'change', Starmer's team did not devote sufficient attention to what this meant in terms of its core social and economic policies and was arguably ill-prepared for government.

On growth, government action to date has been controversial. The first Budget delivered by the Chancellor Rachel Reeves in October 2024 seemed a step in the right direction, due to its focus on 'tax, spend and borrow' at much higher levels compared to the previous administration. Yet, considering the dire financial conditions inherited by Labour and a fast-changing international scenario, a big cash injection into public services in the next 2 years might not be sufficient to turn performance around, whilst the effect of

¹Reform came in second place in 89 constituencies – 60 in the North of England – won by Labour. Turnout was also very low (below 50%) in some of them (House of Commons Library 2024, pp. 61, 68).

²Of course, the process of devolution in the United Kingdom involves all the four nations. In this section, the focus on England is explained by three key factors: first, England remains the only nation of the United Kingdom without a coherent system of political devolution – this is an issue that previous governments have only partially tackled (see Giovannini, 2021), and Labour pledged to address this in its manifesto; second, and related to this, England remains the most regional unequal part of the country (see Raikes et al., 2019); third, as the largest and most populous nation of the United Kingdom, the result of this general election depended on the vote of England, and especially of 'swing areas' in the North and in the Midlands (much like in 2019, as previously explained).

extra borrowing remains hard to predict (IFS, 2024; Pope, 2024). Crucially, as indicated by the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR, 2024) in the wake of the Budget, there will be no significant improvement on growth in the next 5 years. In its longer term 10-year assessment, the OBR presents a more positive picture, suggesting that higher public investment will eventually encourage more private investment and increase growth (OBR, 2024). But, in practice, households will continue to feel the squeeze in the shorter term: their real disposable income is expected to fall in 2025 and reach pre-pandemic levels only in 2026/27 (Pope, 2024). With the next general election likely to be called in 2028, these forecasts are a source of apprehension for the government.

This fluid outlook, combined with its inability to develop a clear strategy and policy for government before entering public office, has impacted on Labour's ability to set a coherent roadmap to grow and rebalance the economy. Indeed, in an attempt to offset the risks implicit in the strategy outlined in the Budget, in the first quarter of 2025 Labour seems to have reverted to a faster version of the old Conservative playbook. For instance, the Chancellor's 'growth speech', delivered in Oxfordshire in January 2025, highlighted the government's intention to stimulate growth focusing on 'supply-side' changes aimed at encouraging businesses investments and job creation, by taking down barriers that slow down infrastructure projects. Yet, geographically, the focus of the policies announced was primarily on areas in the South-East of England that are already performing better/growing faster at economic level – for example, by developing the Oxford–Cambridge growth corridor or opening a new runway at Heathrow. Beyond mentions of some measures for lagging areas in the North and in the Midlands, Labour's pledge to create 'growth everywhere' did not materialise. Much like her Tory predecessors, Reeves seems to be still putting growth and addressing regional inequalities in two different brackets of the equation that underpins Labour's economic strategy: concentrating on faster returns from the South-East now, whilst working on what should be done elsewhere later, if at all (Williams, 2025). As noted, though, breaking (once again) a policy pledge sidelining 'left behind places' could fuel further resentment in these areas and might come with a high electoral cost. The round of local elections that will be held in spring 2025 could be a first test for this.

On devolution, the government has also oscillated between continuity and change. Overcentralisation in England has exacerbated regional inequalities (Raikes et al., 2019). Here, devolution has developed in fits and starts and consists essentially of ad hoc deals that are top-down driven and do not cover and benefit all areas – with the risk generating a 'devolution periphery' that has lower governance capacity and falls even further behind (Giovannini, 2021). As such, broadening and deepening devolution is instrumental to unleash 'growth everywhere'. The English Devolution White Paper (EDWP) published in December 2024 did set a roadmap for devolution, with the aim to extend it to the whole of England by 2028 and roll down further powers (for a full analysis see, e.g., Newman, 2024). Yet, whilst promoting a rhetoric of empowerment and partnership between central and local government, the EDWP maintained a centripetal approach as the main reforms announced – like the re-organisation of local government into 'mega unitary authorities' of approximately 500,000 inhabitants – were set unilaterally by Whitehall (Giovannini, 2024). Furthermore, whilst further powers are due to be passed down to subnational governance bodies, fiscal devolution is still not on the cards – limiting local autonomy within the new framework.

Pressing ahead on devolution is essential to give local leaders the levers to set a new, place-based path towards economic prosperity, but also to bring politics closer to the people, thus addressing the perception of 'left-behindness'. Yet, through its current approach, the government could miss the opportunity to 'get subnational governance reform right', following once again in the footsteps of its predecessors. Thus, on this front too, resorting to the centralising instincts that underpin the British Political Tradition (Diamond et al., 2024b), and opting for a centre-driven, incremental and limited approach might play against the Labour government at the ballot box, whilst also potentially creating tensions between Westminster and the Labour mayors at subnational level who might feel they do not have the power and resources to deliver.

III. Brexit: Not Turning the Page – Yet?

Also on the international stage, and particularly with regard to its relationship with the EU, the Labour government approach has not been linear so far. Whilst the 2019 general election had been fought on Brexit, in July 2024, the Brexit issue was almost irrelevant. Not only it was barely an issue for public opinion – with no more than a citizen out of 10 indicating it as a 'most relevant issue' and paling in comparison with the economy, health and immigration (YouGov, 2024) – but it hardly featured in the campaign and the manifestos of the major political parties (Rutter, 2024; Surridge, 2024).

For the incumbent Conservative party, facing a disillusioned and critical electorate, Brexit could not be seen as something to celebrate. The 2019 electoral pledge to 'get Brexit done', albeit technically delivered – as the United Kingdom had left the EU in February 2020 – did not turn into an electoral asset for the Tories. The then PM Rishi Sunak could not convincingly campaign as the leader of the party who 'got Brexit done'. The election manifesto made some scattered references to Brexit and its 'opportunities' – from the freedom to deliver regulatory reforms (p. 11) to less red-tape for small businesses (p. 73); from the possibility to sign further trade deals (p. 4) to the control of waters for fishing (p. 63) – but, overall, did little to try to persuade voters that the flagship policy of the Conservative party in power had brought the benefits it had promised in 2016.

The Labour party and its leader Starmer did also their best to leave Brexit out of the election contest. Its manifesto hardly ever mentions Brexit. There is a single reference in the whole document where, incidentally, Brexit is endorsed: the Labour government 'should make Brexit work' (p. 117). In the same section of the manifesto, the party promises to 'reset' relationship with the EU and 'deepen ties with our European friends', ruling out yet not only the option to fully re-join it ('With Labour, Britain will stay outside the EU'), but also a return to the single market, the customs union or freedom of movement. In the final days of the campaign, Starmer made the point even clearer, saying that he did not see the United Kingdom rejoining the EU in his lifetime. Finally, the manifesto included some specific (albeit not always clearly specified) policy measures, such as 'tearing down unnecessary barriers to trade', 'seek to negotiate a veterinary agreement', 'help our touring artists' and 'mutual recognition agreement for professional qualifications' (p. 118). Clearly, the success of Reform UK ex post signalled that the divides that generated Brexit were far from over. Yet, none of the major parties was willing to 'invest' on it as an issue in the elections.

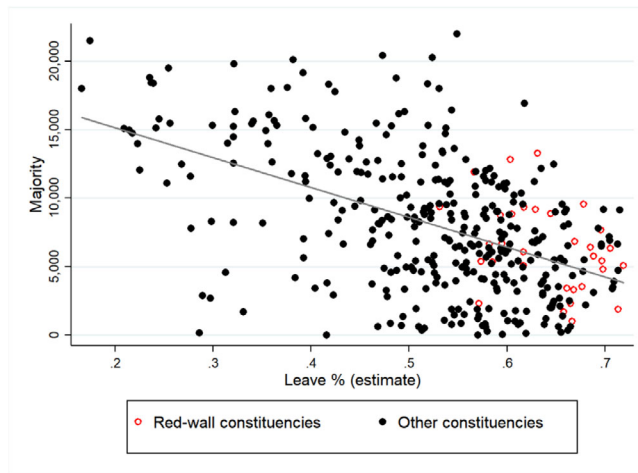
Given the general approach to the EU issue spelt out in the manifesto of the Labour party and the election campaign more generally, it was beyond doubt that ‘resetting’ the relations with the EU did not imply reversing Brexit. Yet, what ‘reset’ really meant could start to be appreciated (or questioned) as soon as Labour took office. The early steps of the new government towards Brussels have been, to say the least, prudent. On the one hand, Starmer sought to revamp immediately bilateral relations with leading EU partners such as France and Germany, meeting in the late summer President Macron and Chancellor Scholz. On the other hand, during the latter visit, the proposal to introduce a youth mobility scheme for young people under 30 years of age was very tepidly received by the Prime Minister. Even if the scheme had a limited applicability, it was still perceived as too close to the idea of ‘freedom of movement’, which Labour had vehemently rejected. Another illustration of the careful approach of the government towards the EU is provided by the Product Regulation and Metrology Bill, introduced in the 2024 King’s Speech, which enables ministers to ensure that the UK regulations automatically reflect changes in EU law (‘dynamic alignment’). Whilst this measure was meant to make the United Kingdom’s regulatory alignment with the EU easier, it obviously fell short of any more structured attempt to rejoin the single market.

The most important steps in the rapprochement with the EU were in the field of security and defence. The new geopolitical context following Russia’s illegal invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the re-election of Donald Trump in November 2024 pushed for stronger co-operation across the Channel. In this field, the treaty regulating EU-UK relationships post-Brexit – the Trade and Cooperation Agreement – remained silent, leaving therefore a gap to be filled. In the summer, soon after taking office, Starmer chaired the fourth meeting of the European Political Community, held at Blenheim Palace in Oxfordshire. In this forum, which allows the leaders of the EU member states and other European countries to discuss together high-profile issues in the international agenda, Starmer pledged to ‘deepen our cooperation [with our European friends] on defence and security and on illegal immigration’ (Starmer, 2024). Early in the summer, he also met with French President Macron and German Chancellor Scholz and, in the autumn, with the newly elected President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen. They agreed to ‘strengthen ambitiously their structured strategic cooperation’ and to set-up regular EU–UK leaders’ summits starting in early 2025. For his part, the president of the European Council, Antonio Costa, invited Starmer to the informal EU leaders’ summit in February 2025 given ‘the vital importance of closer cooperation between like-minded partners’. Also, at the level of Foreign Affairs ministers, regular UK–EU meetings were institutionalised in the format of ‘Foreign Policy Dialogue’.

All in all, the early months of Labour government have witnessed some pragmatic moves in the direction of the EU, without radically ‘resetting’ the direction of travel. How could this position be explained?

First, looking at the demand side, the support for the EU from British voters in general and Labour’s supporters in particular may still be too limited to trigger a radical change of policy. In a post-election survey, a majority of voters (51%) and a strong plurality of Labour supporters (47%) indicated that Labour did not have a mandate to reverse Brexit but, rather, should work to bring Britain closer to the EU (Smith, 2024). In addition, whilst most Labour voters would clearly favour rejoining the EU, the share is slightly lower after the 2024 general elections. As observed by John Curtice, amongst the voters newly

Figure 1: Support for Brexit and Labour Lead in the 2024 Elections. Key: Leave % estimates from Hanretty (2024). [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jems.12001)]



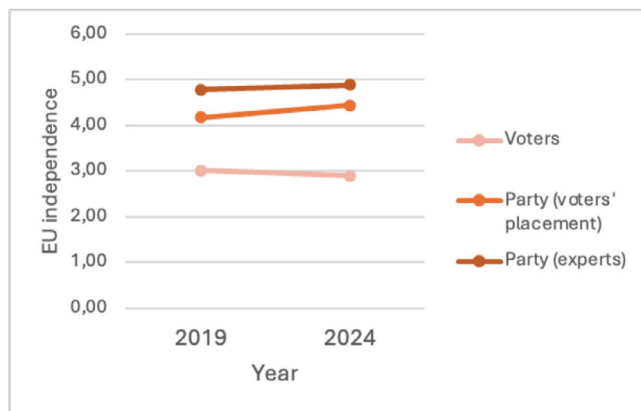
recruited by Labour in 2024, the share of EU rejoinders was about 10 percentage points lower, whilst the most loyal voters assess the effect of Brexit less negatively. In other words, Labour voters became less concerned about Brexit as Labour took office, despite the latter's pledge not to reverse it (Curtice, 2024).

Some caution in making bolder stances on the EU could have also been suggested by the geography of Labour support and its fragility (cf. above). One of Starmer's objectives has been to 'bring back' traditional Labour's voters who, in 2019, switched to the Conservatives. Figure 1 singles out 'Red Wall' constituencies as the ones, in the North of England and in the Midlands, which the Tories won from Labour in the 2019 elections.³ As the figure shows, the Labour's majority in the 2024 elections is smaller in those constituencies that gave stronger support to 'Leave' in the referendum and, particularly, in most 'Red Wall' constituencies that had made a comeback to Labour. Here attitudes towards the EU are difficult to disentangle from the issue of migration: the return of free movement is seen by many voters as the biggest threat of 'reversing Brexit'.

Second, moving to the supply side, Starmer's strategy may have been driven in part by the necessity to wait for a new European Commission to be elected. The process, which started in early June with the EP elections, was concluded only at the end of November 2024. Yet, London did little to speed the process up. For instance, the nomination of members in the parliamentary partnership assembly – an inter-parliamentary assembly composed of members of the EP and the UK Parliament to discuss post-Brexit developments – was delayed until mid-December, whilst the restructuring of the government machinery to lead discussions with the EU significantly advanced only towards the end of 2024 and early 2025 with the appointment of a Permanent Secretary to lead official-level discussions and a new unit in the EU directorate at Whitehall.

³For those constituencies where a boundary review was made in 2023, the 'closest successor' has been selected based on data from the House of Commons Library. See <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/boundary-review-2023-which-seats-will-change/>.

Figure 2: (In)congruence Between Labour Party/Voters on EU Integration. Key: BES Expert 2014–2024 Trend file. Variable EUindependenceLab (2019; 2024); BES Combined Wave 1–29 Internet Panel EUIntegration (Wave 29: July–September 2024; Wave 19: December 2019). Notes: 0: ‘unite fully with the EU’, 10 ‘protect our independence’. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jems.12001)]



Furthermore, pragmatic moves – such as re-engaging with the EU in multilateral institutions and introducing concrete policy measures without fanfare – may allow Labour to depoliticise the EU–UK relationship and, as a result, make some real progress behind the scenes. The current regulatory framework foresees a review of the TCA by 2026 – 5 years after its entry into force – and, therefore, gives the government some space (see Fabbrini, 2024). Any review beneficial to businesses and the private sector could be hard to oppose by the Conservative Party.

Yet, the context is rapidly changing. Both in the EU and the United Kingdom, the prevalent view amongst the public is that the relationship between the two sides of the Channel should become closer, with citizens being more ambitious than party leaders and calling for a significant reset. In the United Kingdom, polls show that a majority of voters would even accept free movement in exchange for closer economic relations (Leonard, 2024). Consequently, party leaders have made some moves. In January 2025, Badenoch recognised that her party made a mistake triggering Brexit without developing a plan for growth; the leader of the Lib-Dems, Ed Davey, urged the United Kingdom to join the customs union with Trump’s return to the White House. As Figure 2 indicates, the ‘incongruence’ or difference in the positions of the Labour party and its voters on EU integration is strong and, possibly, even increasing. With the EU issue making a comeback in party discourses and the high levels of electoral volatility, Labour may start losing its pro-EU votes as it keeps embracing its current official approach towards Brussels.

Conclusion: Turning Pages Is Much Easier Said Than Done

More than 40 years ago – in a book that is now a classic in the field of public policy – Richard Rose (1984) famously asked ‘Do parties make a difference?’. Whilst his response was mixed, our scope in this article was more modest. Starting from the fragile nature of

Labour’s victory in 2024, we have identified some ways in which the party Manifesto promise to ‘turn the page’ is encountering significant constraints, both domestically and at the EU level.

At the domestic level, the government is facing a difficult conundrum to achieve its mission to kickstart growth. It could stick with continuity: ‘pouring resources into the South-East, chasing short-term ‘sugar-rush’ growth but writing off many areas’ (Lockwood, 2025), whilst continuing to hoard power at the centre. Or it could embrace change: investing in regionally led renewal to drive sustained growth across the country, and letting go of power. Meanwhile, research has shown that left behind areas that are not perceiving any real change since the instalment of the new government could turn to Reform next time (Helm, 2025). Choosing continuity might be easier and more attuned to the precepts of the British Political Tradition, but the country needs change in the form of a new economic model and a more decentralised governance approach.

On the relation with the EU, the early days of Labour in government have been marked more by continuity rather than change. On the one hand, Starmer’s pragmatic approach follows the path already taken by Sunak, whose less confrontational approach towards the EU led, for instance, to the Windsor agreement on Northern Ireland. On the other, continuity appears to also reflect Labour’s approach in other fields, as a general approach to government. Certainly, Starmer’s activism on Ukraine and renewed talks with the EU – culminating in the first EU–UK summit in May 2025 – may fuel expectations that they ‘are turning a page’ and ‘opening a new chapter’ (von der Leyen, 2025). Yet, leaving the high symbolism aside, the details of the new relationships are yet to be carved out and do not impinge upon the ‘fundamentals’ of Brexit.

More generally, in a climate dominated by high uncertainties in voting intentions (with polls indicating Labour, Conservatives and Reform neck-and-neck around 25% since January 2025) and an international scenario marked by the extreme unpredictability of President Trump’s behaviour, it remains to be seen whether the new Labour government will prove bold enough to *really* turn the page.

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