

London Decides

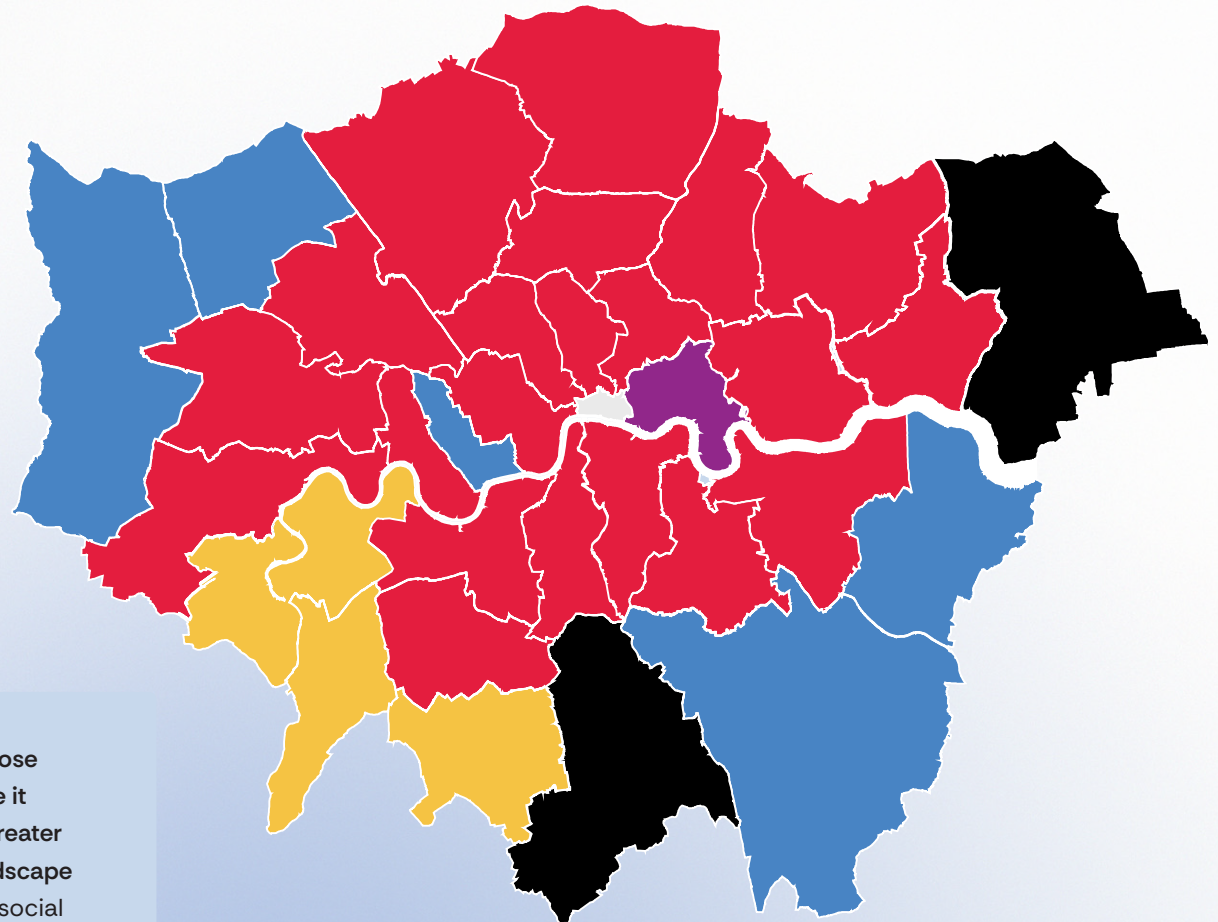
Borough Elections Guide, 2026

| BY LEWIS BASTON AND DAVE HILL

Introduction

In May 2022, the political map of Greater London's boroughs turned still redder. Labour won 1,156 of the capital's 1,817 council seats, an even larger proportion, at 63.6 per cent, than in 2018, even though its overall vote share was slightly down. The Conservatives, by contrast, slid to just 404 seats – less than a quarter of the total and not much more than a quarter of the vote share. Most of the other 257 seats were captured by the Liberal Democrats. With one exception, blue joined yellow in occupying only fractions of the capital's fringes. A local party ousted Labour in the East End but, overall, Labour's domination of the capital was confirmed.

Four years and one general election later, a status quo that had been solidifying since 2010 looks certain to be radically disturbed.



➤ The purpose of this guide is to direct readers in fine detail to those parts of the city where turbulence will occur, who is likely to create it and to what effect, while also pointing out that in some parts of Greater London's 606 square miles few, if any, tremors in the electoral landscape will be felt. Every ward is examined along with broader electoral, social and demographic trends. We doubt you'll find a more comprehensive preview of the capital's local government democratic contests.

Council Elections 2022

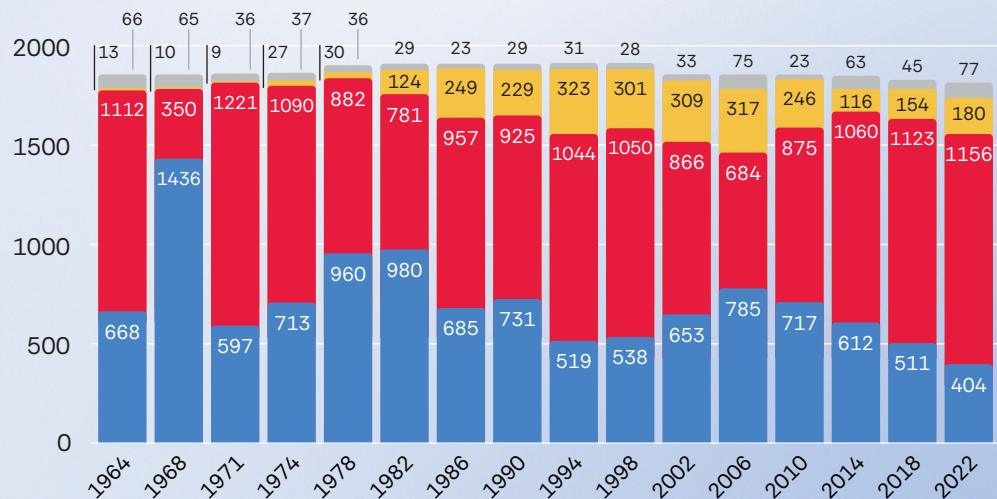
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Introduction

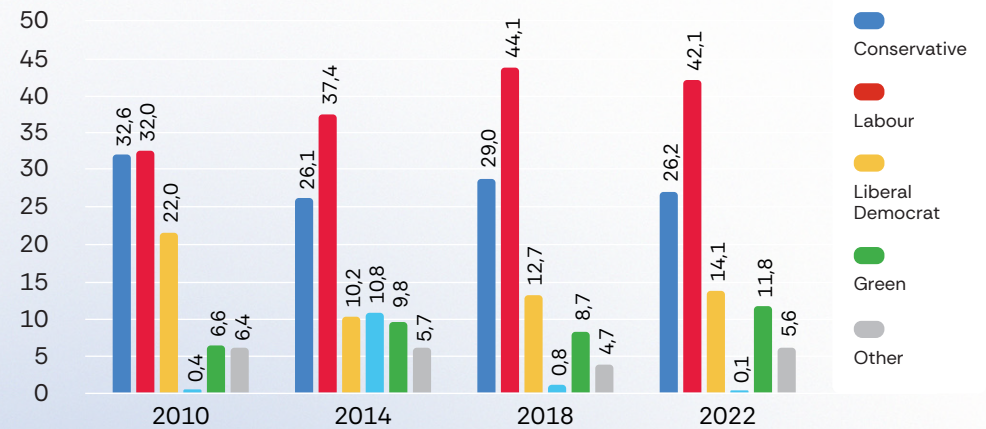
The big picture tells us that the unpopularity of the national government will mean a major collapse in support for Labour in every borough, resulting in it losing control of a dozen or more of the 21 where it currently has majorities. The Green Party, previously a marginal threat, has become its biggest challenger and harbours hopes of storming Labour fortresses.

New local parties, Left-aligned Independent groups and Residents' Association candidates have been increasingly showing that they can make a big mark too (the triumph of the Aspire party in Tower Hamlets in 2022 was the first time any other than the old biggest three had won an overall majority in borough elections history). Their proliferation is a big reason why the total number of candidates across all 32 boroughs this year is getting on for 9,000. In 2022, it was 6,191.

London borough councillors elected for each party since 1964



Percentage vote share in London borough elections since 2010



But it isn't only Labour whose London strongholds are besieged. Reform UK, the long-time leader of national opinion polls, isn't popular in the capital as a whole. Even so, it is menacing the Tories in boroughs previously assumed to be safe for them and also pitching in some areas to voters disillusioned with Labour. Only the Lib Dems, the smallest of what we used to call the three "main parties", can feel secure in their redoubts, and even they might be a bit nervous about one of them.

This fragmenting political landscape will manifest itself in lots of different ways on 7 May. Turnout will, as ever, be crucial to results, and this year could see very different levels of enthusiasm for different parties. In 2022, with Boris Johnson and "Partygate" dragging the Conservatives' reputation down, a lot of their supporters stayed at home. Some might do the same again. And Labour could have a bigger problem in that regard.

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By contrast, admirers of the Greens and Reform, sometimes termed “insurgent”, could be highly motivated, in the first case to register their anger with Labour, in the second, as in the 2016 EU referendum, to register their contempt for everyone else. In 2022, 35.5 per cent of the just over six million Londoners eligible to vote did so. Will that figure be higher or lower this year?

Predicting how all of these factors will play out is a perilous business. It seems fairly safe, though, to expect around one third of the boroughs to be under new political leadership after 7 May, another third to see no change (though in some cases with previous majorities slashed) and up to 12 – conceivably even more – ending up under No Overall Control.

It’s not impossible that Labour could end up in full control of only five boroughs, the same as the Conservatives now. They could lose around half of their London seats, half of their share of the Londonwide vote and all three of the directly elected mayoralities they won in 2022. For their part, the Tories could plausibly

lose as many councils as they win, a net gain of nil when in the past they’d have expected a healthy swing their way. Might they end up with fewer than 400 seats this time, breaking their own record? Don’t rule it out. The Lib Dem councils look very or fairly safe, but the Greens and Reform could make history by winning boroughs for the first time. The party politics of the “Labour city” of recent years could be utterly transformed.

Such an upheaval might be seen as healthy, a desirable shaking-up and clearing out of an established order that, in many boroughs, has seen Labour face little or, in some cases, literally no Town Hall opposition. It might equally be seen as a recipe for incompetence and chaos, as inexperienced politicians, some of them suddenly in senior positions, learn the hard way that making manifesto pledges is one thing, putting them into effect is something else. No Overall Control negotiations could be protracted and their outcomes, fragile. Callow or unstable administrations can have unhappy implications for the delivery of services and for partnerships with local businesses, voluntary groups, the development

industry and the public sector – and hence for local people.

All of that acknowledged, the creation of a whole new London local government mosaic, with tiles of many hues scattered across its famously diverse terrain, would reveal in richer detail than before just how various Londoners are and the array of different things they want from democracy and politicians. Perspectives and shades of opinion that might have been masked by the hegemony of two big parties and one smaller one look set to be revealed, sometimes in ways that may surprise.

One of the goals of this guide is to tell in fine demographic, economic and cultural detail stories about small parts of London and the Londoners who live in them that serve as broad predictors of political preferences but also reveal the complexities and fascinations of an extraordinary global city. Its length is that of a book. Hopefully, you will find it a good read.

Note on sources

The authors have drawn on past borough election results going back to the very first in 1964, all of which are available from the London Datastore maintained by the Greater London Authority. The 2021 Census and its 2011 predecessor have provided invaluable information about the social, employment, ethnic and housing mixes of individual electoral

wards, and GLA statisticians have published them on comparable ward boundaries. We are grateful to Adam Gray for sharing his work on boundary changes and by-elections. Trust for London’s poverty profile data has been an important source too.

Introduction

Given the unpredictability of many of this year's results, it's a relief to compilers of election guides that there are no ward boundary changes to cope with this year. Also unchanged are the rules about who is eligible to vote: broadly, over-18s who are British, Irish, Commonwealth or "qualifying" EU citizens, or EU citizens with "retained rights" following their divorce from, or the death or departure of, their sponsoring family member.

However, these will be the first borough elections at which voters will be required to produce approved forms of identification at polling stations (Londoners have already had to do this twice since 2022, first when voting for their Mayor and London Assembly members in May 2024 and then in the general election held the following July). And a few other things will be different from 2022.

One is that the five mayoral elections – in Croydon, Hackney, Lewisham, Newham and Tower Hamlets – will be First Past The Post races this time. The restoration of the Supplementary Vote system that has previously given Londoners in those boroughs the freedom of a first and a second preference vote is a parliamentary work in progress, but has yet to become law, still less put into effect.

Another change, more uneven but implemented in many boroughs, is the scheduling of vote-counting. Traditional

late Thursday night or Friday small hours declarations of results have gone out of style. Instead, a majority of the 32 boroughs won't start their counting until the Friday morning this year, and most of those with Mayors will do a separate, second shift on the Saturday.

The prospective high electoral drama will unfold against the more mundane and worrying backdrop of London local government finances as the responsibilities shouldered by many individual councils grow.

A concerted cross-party effort meant the government's Fair Funding Review did not turn out as badly for some boroughs as they had feared, and several have emerged in better shape. But even though nearly all the boroughs have increased their Council Tax levels this year by the maximum amount allowed, the high and rising costs of providing social care for adults and children, and of supporting homeless households, remain punishing. Eight boroughs – Barnet, Croydon, Haringey, Havering, Hillingdon, Lambeth, Redbridge and Waltham Forest – have been allowed "exceptional financial support" in order to help them make ends meet.

Administrations of whichever party will hope voters will judge them according to how well they have discharged their core responsibilities, along with their stewardship of housing and development and their delivery of street

cleaning and rubbish collection services. Individual councillors will hope to be rewarded for their diligence in attending to residents' casework, be it pressing for action on fly-tipping and other antisocial behaviour or listening to complaints about road management measures and school closures. But all will be resigned to knowing that many Londoners will vote entirely or in part to "send a message" to national parties about the economy, the NHS, immigration or Gaza – matters over which London's councils and councillors have little or no control.

That's politics, and so on. But whatever the outcomes of this year's borough elections and whatever voters' motivations, the resulting spread of preferences will shed light on the concerns, hopes and convictions of around two million Londoners. Politicians of whatever stripe should take careful note.



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