

The rise of Reform UK

The political ascent of Reform UK represents the most significant electoral challenge to the established order since the rise of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) in the early 2010s and its successor, the Brexit Party. Founded in 2018, and strongly backed by Nigel Farage, Reform has sharpened its focus from pandemic-era concerns to a core platform centered on opposing mass legal immigration, illegal migration via small boats, Net Zero policies, high taxation, and an increasingly large state. The party argues that the incumbent Conservative Party is fundamentally out-of-touch. Furthermore, Reform advocates for systemic political changes, including restructuring the House of Lords and reforming the first-past-the-post electoral system. Despite expectations that the delivery of Brexit in 2020 would diminish the space for a populist alternative, Reform UK has attracted steadily increasing support in national polls, with much of this momentum coming directly from disillusioned former Conservative and Brexit voters. Polling earlier this year, for instance, suggested Reform was attracting just over one in four people who had supported Boris Johnson in 2019, and a similar proportion of 2016 Leave voters.

Reform supporters share a distinct social and political profile, typically being middle-aged or elderly, with a slight male bias, residing predominantly outside London and Scotland. These are voters who were overwhelmingly Conservative in 2019 and highly likely to have supported leaving the European Union. This national surge is now translating into tangible political gains: the party won five seats in the general election, including Farage's own victory in Clacton, boasts a claimed quadrupling of its membership, and achieved the third-highest vote share nationally at over 14%. While London's current voter share for Reform is comparatively smaller, a significant pool of citizens is now considering the party, a potential that is evident in its first London Assembly member and its recent takeover of Kent County Council. London politics expert Professor Tony Travers suggests Reform is poised to inflict "a lot of damage" in specific outer London boroughs—like Barking and Dagenham, Havering, and Bexley—areas heavily weighted towards the Leave vote.

This shift is reinforced by high-profile defections, such as Westminster City Councillor Laila Cunningham from the Conservatives, who cited voter

disappointment and a perceived lack of honesty as her primary motivations. Cunningham champions Reform's focus on cutting immigration, crime, waste, and tax, arguing this agenda, often characterized as right-wing, was simply "mainstream" until recently. Crucially, Reform is also making inroads into key demographics, notably the British Indian community, which has historically supported Labour. Support for Reform in this bloc has tripled from 4% to 13% since the last election, while Labour and Conservative support has fallen dramatically. Researchers identify this community as an important swing voter bloc, moving politically to the right due to rising social conservatism and nationalism, which is eroding traditional party loyalties. Nevertheless, Reform UK's platform faces sharp critique from opponents. Labour MP Deirdre Costigan warns that the party's proposed "massive tax cut for the rich" can only be funded through "drastic cuts to public services," endangering the NHS and police. Conversely, Conservative Assembly Member Alessandro Georgiou has labeled Farage a "tax-and-spend socialist," suggesting a fundamental contradiction in his financial proposals. In essence, Reform UK's ascent is a multi-faceted political phenomenon driven by national disillusionment, tactical gains in crucial swing areas, and demographic realignment, even as the fiscal viability of its agenda remains a major source of political debate.