

The United Kingdom's 2024 Election

June 28, 2024

Polls [indicate](#) that the opposition Labour Party, led by Keir Starmer, is [likely to win](#) the general election scheduled to take place in the United Kingdom (UK) on July 4, 2024. The Conservative Party has led the UK government for the past 14 years, first under Prime Minister David Cameron (2010-2016), followed by Theresa May (2016-2019), Boris Johnson (2019-2022), Liz Truss (2022), and current Prime Minister Rishi Sunak (since 2022). Labour last governed under Prime Ministers Gordon Brown (2007-2010) and Tony Blair (1997-2007).

The Conservatives' tenure in government has been defined to a large extent by the party's support for *Brexit*, the UK's withdrawal from the European Union (EU) in 2020 following a national referendum in 2016. A number of factors have [eroded public support](#) for the Conservatives, including a [sluggish economy](#), the [rising cost of living](#), the perceived [decline of public services](#) including the National Health Service (NHS), a series of [scandals](#), and party infighting over issues such as taxes and immigration.

The Labour Party appears poised to capitalize on this [sense of disillusionment](#); a 2024 [study](#) of voter attitudes in the UK found public trust and confidence in government at record lows. Some analysts [observe](#) that since Starmer became Labour Party leader in 2020, he has sought to shift the party's policy positions from the left toward [the center](#). In a 2023 [manifesto](#), the Labour Party announced that its priorities in government would consist of boosting economic growth, developing clean energy, combatting crime, improving the education system, and reforming the NHS.

Issues for Congress

For decades, U.S. Administrations and many Members of Congress have [viewed](#) the UK as the United States' closest and most reliable ally. This perception stems from factors including a sense of shared history, values, and culture; a large and mutually beneficial [economic relationship](#); and extensive cooperation on foreign policy and security issues. The term *special relationship* often has been used to describe the high degree of mutual trust between the two countries. The UK and the United States have a particularly close defense relationship and a unique intelligence-sharing partnership, and the two countries are key partners in defense industry cooperation and defense sales.

Although analysts [expect](#) a high degree of continuity in most aspects of UK foreign policy regardless of the election outcome, Members of Congress may wish to monitor post-election developments with regard to U.S.-UK cooperation on numerous global issues. Areas of potential interest may include the following:

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NATO and Defense Cooperation. The UK remains a leading country in NATO and heads NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence battlegroup in Estonia. The UK had the world's sixth-highest defense expenditure in 2023, spending \$74.9 billion. At 2.3% of gross domestic product (GDP), the UK's defense spending exceeds the target agreed to by NATO members of spending at least 2% of GDP on defense. Some observers nonetheless express concern that the UK armed forces lack the size and capabilities needed to effectively meet security challenges. Both Sunak and Starmer have pledged to increase defense spending to 2.5% of GDP.

Ukraine. Behind the United States and Germany, the UK is the third-largest donor of bilateral assistance to Ukraine since Russia's 2022 invasion. Relations between Russia and the UK are especially tense; the UK government's 2023 foreign and defense policy review described Russia as "the most acute threat to the UK's security." Labour Party leaders have stated that there will be no change in the UK's support for Ukraine if Labour wins the election and that a Labour government's commitment to Ukraine would be "ironclad."

Indo-Pacific. The 2023 review additionally states that, "China poses an epoch-defining challenge to the type of international order we want to see." The UK has been increasing its engagement in the Indo-Pacific region in an effort to counter China's influence. Labour's shadow foreign secretary, David Lammy, wrote in 2023 that a Labour government would conduct a full audit of UK-China relations and base its strategy toward China on "three Cs: compete, challenge and, where we can, cooperate."

AUKUS. In 2021, Australia, the UK, and the United States announced the creation of an enhanced trilateral security partnership, called AUKUS. Under AUKUS, the three countries plan to develop shared military capabilities and deepen interoperability, and the UK and Australia (with U.S. assistance) plan to build a new class of nuclear-powered attack submarines.

Israel-Hamas Conflict. Prime Minister Sunak has outlined his government's priorities in the Israel-Hamas conflict as preventing further escalation; securing humanitarian access; and working diplomatically for regional stability, including a two-state solution. Keir Starmer has stated that a Labour government would "work with international partners towards the recognition of a Palestinian state as part of a negotiated, just and lasting peace" but would not unilaterally recognize a Palestinian state outside of a negotiated peace process.

U.S.-UK Economic Relationship. In 2023, the United States and the UK announced the Atlantic Declaration for a Twenty-First Century U.S.-UK Economic Partnership. The declaration sets out plans for deepening U.S.-UK cooperation on critical and emerging technologies, supply chain security, digital transformation, clean energy, defense, health security, and space. Legislation introduced in the 118th Congress (H.R. 3653/S. 629) would authorize the President to negotiate and enter into a comprehensive trade agreement with the UK.

Northern Ireland. Post-Brexit trade and customs arrangements have elicited strong objections from some in the unionist (pro-British) community of Northern Ireland (part of the UK). Unionist opposition affected political stability, as unionists withdrew from Northern Ireland's devolved government in early 2022 to protest the post-Brexit arrangements and subsequently blocked the formation of a new devolved government after elections in May 2022. Efforts by the UK government to address the objections have helped alleviate tensions, with the devolved government restored in early 2024. Many Members of Congress have expressed an enduring interest in peace and stability in Northern Ireland (see, for example, S.Res. 157, adopted by unanimous consent in the Senate in 2023).

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