



How could Starmer be replaced and who are the likely challengers?

1.2.2 – Established UK parties

The last week has been rife with speculation over the future of Sir Keir Starmer as Prime Minister and leader of the Labour Party, this intensified on Wednesday 15 May with the resignation of the Health Secretary, Wes Streeting and the announcement that Andy Burnham would seek to return to Westminster. Unlike the United States, the Prime Minister does not have a directly elected mandate. This means that voters at the 2024 General Election were not voting for him to be Prime Minister (although this certainly does factor into the decision-making for many voters). Instead, Starmer is Prime Minister by virtue of being the leader of the largest party able to command a majority in the House of Commons. Labour, like all major political parties, has mechanisms in place to allow MPs to challenge the leader of the party.

A Labour leadership election could be triggered in one of two ways – either Keir Starmer announces his resignation as leader, or he is challenged by one of his MPs. Any challenger would need the backing of 81 MPs (there could be several contestants), while Starmer would automatically be on any ballot paper. It would then be up to Labour Party members and affiliated supporters to decide the next leader. If such a contest led to a change of party leader, it would also lead to a change in Prime Minister without the involvement of the wider electorate, as was the case several times during the previous Conservative government.

Given the febrile atmosphere amongst Labour MPs, it is distinctly possible

that there will be a new Prime Minister in the short-to-medium term, with several figures emerging as the most likely to challenge Starmer.

Wes Streeting



and Social Care. Born in east London, he grew up on a council estate, read history at Selwyn College, Cambridge, and became president of the National Union of Students. Before entering Parliament, he worked in the voluntary sector and served as deputy leader of Redbridge Council.

Streeting entered Parliament in 2015, winning Ilford North from the Conservatives. He became known as a sharp critic of Jeremy Corbyn's leadership and as a pro-European, reformist Labour figure.

Under Keir Starmer, Streeting rose quickly through the shadow front bench. He served in various junior roles before being appointed Shadow Secretary of State for Child Poverty, and then Shadow Health Secretary from November 2021 until the 2024 election.

After Labour's victory in July 2024, Streeting became Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. His brief includes NHS performance, finance and social care policy. In office, he declared the NHS "broken", prioritised ending junior doctor strikes, and helped secure a 2024 pay deal. He has also championed Labour's 10-year NHS plan, built around shifts from hospital to community, analogue to digital, and sickness to prevention. His resignation from the Cabinet last week could prove to be a key moment in determining what happens next to Keir Starmer.

Factionally, Streeting sits on Labour's soft right or centrist wing. He is associated with Starmerite politics and the Labour Growth Group. As a potential frontrunner in any electoral contest, he would have been hoping for a short campaign (triggered by an immediate resignation from Keir Starmer) in order to prevent Andy Burnham entering the race.

Andy Burnham



Andy Burnham is the Mayor of Greater Manchester. Born in Aintree in 1970, he studied at Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge, before working for Tessa Jowell, the NHS Confederation,

the Football Task Force and as a special adviser to Culture Secretary Chris Smith.

Burnham was Labour MP for Leigh from 2001 until 2017. He rose quickly under New Labour, serving in ministerial posts at the Home Office, Department of Health and the Treasury. Under Gordon Brown, he entered the Cabinet as Chief Secretary to the Treasury, then became Culture Secretary in 2008 and Health Secretary in 2009. In opposition, he served as Shadow Education Secretary, Shadow Health Secretary and Shadow Home Secretary, and unsuccessfully stood for the Labour leadership in 2010 and 2015.

In 2017, Burnham left Westminster to become the first directly elected Mayor of Greater Manchester. He was re-elected in 2021 and 2024. As mayor, he has focused on devolution, transport, homelessness, housing and skills. He chairs the Greater Manchester Combined Authority and leads on policy, reform and transport.



UK Politics

Within Labour, Burnham is usually placed on the soft left or centre-left. He is more critical of Westminster centralisation than many Starmerites, and presents himself as a voice for English regional government and working-class communities. For Burnham to become Prime Minister, he would first need to re-enter Parliament via a by-election (the MP for Makerfield, Josh Simons, announced on Wednesday his intention to resign his seat to make way for him). The last time he considered this, he was blocked from doing so by Labour's NEC on the grounds that it would jeopardise Labour's hold on the mayoralty of Manchester. However, this time they have said that he will be allowed to stand. Even if he does, it is far from certain Labour would retain the seat given Reform's strong performance in the area in recent local elections.

Angela Rayner



Angela Rayner left school without formal qualifications, later studied at further

education college, and worked as a care worker for Stockport Council. She became a UNISON workplace representative and rose through the union movement to become the most senior elected UNISON official in the North West.

Rayner entered Parliament in 2015 as MP for Ashton-under-Lyne, becoming the first woman to represent the constituency. She was first promoted under Jeremy Corbyn, serving in the shadow whips' office, then as Shadow Pensions Minister and Shadow Education Secretary.

Under Keir Starmer, Rayner became Deputy Leader of the Labour Party in April 2020. She also served as Labour

Party Chair, Shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Shadow Secretary of State for the Future of Work, Shadow Deputy Prime Minister, and Shadow Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Secretary. After Labour won the 2024 general election, she became Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government.

Rayner resigned on 5 September 2025 as Deputy Prime Minister, Housing Secretary and Deputy Leader of the Labour Party after controversy over underpaid stamp duty on a property. In her resignation letter, she said she had acted in good faith but accepted that she "did not meet the highest standards" and took responsibility for not seeking further tax advice. Last week, the Guardian reported that HMRC had cleared her of deliberate wrongdoing or carelessness, though she had settled £40,000 in unpaid stamp duty.

Rayner is usually seen as part of Labour's soft left. She has close links to trade unions, especially UNISON, and appeals strongly to Labour members because of her working-class background and plain-speaking style. She has worked with Starmer, but she is not usually seen as a full Starmerite. Her allies are often found among Labour's trade union-linked, soft-left and northern MPs. The Labour Party has never had a female leader – a fact that the Conservatives are keen to point out to them given they have now had four (three of whom have served as PM).

Ed Miliband



Ed Miliband is the MP for Doncaster North. He studied at Oxford and the LSE, worked as a

Labour researcher and adviser, and became closely associated with Gordon Brown before entering Parliament. Miliband has been an MP since 2005.

He rose quickly under New Labour, becoming Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change from 2008 to 2010. After Labour returned to opposition, he became party leader Leader of the Opposition from 2010 to 2015. Under Starmer, he returned to the front bench as Shadow Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Secretary in 2020, then Shadow Climate Change and Net Zero Secretary from 2021 to 2024. Since July 2024, he has been Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero.

The major controversy in his career was the 2010 Labour leadership contest, when he defeated his elder brother, David Miliband. The result was extremely narrow: Ed won by 50.7% to 49.3% under Labour's old electoral college system. David led among MPs and party members, but Ed won strongly among affiliated trade union members, leading critics to claim he was "the unions' choice". It was the changes to leadership contests introduced under him that led to Jeremy Corbyn's election as leader.

Miliband is usually placed on Labour's soft left. His politics combine social democracy, environmentalism, support for public investment and a more interventionist state. His allies have included figures from the Brownite and soft-left traditions, while recent reports describe him as still popular with Labour grassroots and a possible soft-left alternative in future leadership debates.

How are Labour leaders chosen?

Contests are held using the alternative vote (AV). If there are two candidates, the person with the most votes wins. If three or more candidates enter, voters rank candidates in order of preference. The winning candidate will need over half the vote to win. If nobody has over 50% of the vote, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated and their votes redistributed to second choice candidate. This continues until someone has over the half the votes.

Senedd Election Results Special

What happened in the Senedd and what next?

Last week was a historic week in Welsh politics. After 124 years of political dominance in Wales, Welsh Labour was comprehensively toppled by Plaid Cymru and Reform UK. This raises several questions over why Labour performed so poorly, what impact the new electoral system had, and what this means for Wales going forward.

Context

It is important first to understand the scale of defeat Labour experienced, and why it is so significant in the context of the Labour Party and Welsh politics as a whole. The Labour Party has its origins in Wales. It was formed in 1900 out of the actions of Welsh railway workers in the Valleys – an area just north of its capital city, Cardiff. Many of the key heroes of the Labour Party over the twentieth century have been Welsh – Aneurin Bevan, founder of the NHS, was Welsh. Keir Hardie, founder of the Labour Party, was an MP for Merthyr Tydfil in South Wales. Wales has also seemed to represent the ‘traditional’ demographic of Labour voters: it is a traditionally industrial country with mines, steel works and ports providing employment for its population until deindustrialisation in the late twentieth and early twenty first century. It is currently one of the most socio-economically deprived areas of the UK as a whole. Therefore, Labour policies should be winners amongst voters. And indeed, they were. For 124 years.

Senedd Election Results			
	% vote	Seats	% Seats
Plaid	35.41	43	44.8
Reform	29.3	34	35.4
Labour	11.08	9	9.4
Conservatives	10.74	7	7.3
Greens	6.74	2	2.1
Lib Dems	4.46	1	1

Why did Labour perform so badly?

However, although Labour losing in May 2026 is being reported as a shock, it shouldn't be. Partisan dealignment has been a political story in Wales for at least two decades, if not longer. This trend helps us to explain why did Labour fare so badly. Labour have been facing a growing strength of opposition from Plaid Cymru who share many of the same policies when it comes to social welfare, housing, the economy and education: the core tenets of Labour policy. However, Plaid Cymru, being a Welsh nationalist party, also have the advantage that they can argue that they truly understand the issues facing Welsh voters. Issues that Welsh Labour politicians cannot do, beholden as they are to Westminster and the central Labour Party. This has proved extremely attractive and feeds into the ever-present narrative that Westminster politics is dominated by an out of touch elite, that do not understand the problems of the working voter.

This message, too, has been seized by Reform UK who have used culture wars over issues such as gender, immigration and mundanities such as the incredibly unpopular 20mph blanket residential speed limit in Wales to argue that money that could be used on improving Welsh lives is being wasted on ‘woke’ policies. In a time of increasing cost-of-living in areas that have faced decades of declining opportunities, this is a seductive message and could account for the massive support for Reform UK.

There is also the problem of incumbency. Welsh Labour have been in power in the Senedd for 27 years, since its initial inception as the National Assembly for Wales but the issues that voters care deeply about in Wales (the NHS, education, housing) have not improved and under some metrics have declined. It is hard for Welsh Labour to promise change and improvement when the evidence seems to suggest that they have not been able to deliver.

What impact did proportional representation have?

Well, firstly, it has not delivered a majority. This is often a criticism of a proportional system with proponents of FPTP arguing that not having a majority party in power will lead to an inherently weak system. This is not necessarily true, as demonstrated by

decades of stable, secure government in countries such as Germany. Secondly, it means that parties that have broad but shallow support have gained seats when, historically, in FPTP systems they have not. Reform UK offer a salient example here. In the General Election of 2024, they received 14.3% of the vote and 5 seats whereas the Liberal Democrats in the same year received 12.2% of the vote but won 72 seats. Under the proportional system, Reform UK they received 29.3% of the vote and received 34 seats. Thirdly, the era of a two-party system is truly over in Wales: within the Senedd there are now 6 parties represented, which could be argued to be more representative than previous iterations. However, it will mean compromise as Plaid, the party with the most seats, will have to find partners within the Senedd to help them pass their core manifesto legislation. This support will likely come from the Greens and Labour, who have 2 and 9 seats respectively and sit on the political left with Plaid. But at what cost?

What next for Wales?

This brings us onto the third question: what will the future look like for Wales? Plaid will likely have to tone down any policy regarding Welsh independence (they have always stated that they wouldn't push for it in any initial position of power anyway) as neither the Greens nor Labour are in favour of Welsh independence. Additionally, they will face robust opposition from the next biggest party in the Senedd, Reform UK. Not only are they relatively close in number of seats and therefore voting power, Reform UK sit on the political right and many of their policies are in direct opposition to those of Plaid. This means that getting contentious legislation passed will require concessions to the right, which could alienate a lot of Plaid's voting base.

Ultimately, regardless of your political leanings and feelings about the outcome of the election, this is an exciting time to be living in Wales. We have a new government which is far more representative than it has been in the past. Newer, smaller, parties will have more of a say politically. What this means for people living in Wales, only time will tell.

Politics Online's *Senedd Election Special* is written by Anne John. Anne is Politics teacher from Cardiff.

UK Government

Why is Wes Streeting the most up-to-date example of CMR?

2.3.2 – Collective Ministerial Responsibility

Every so often there is an event in politics that will be used as an example for years to come. Last week offered such an example in the resignation of Wes Streeting. It is a very significant example of collective ministerial responsibility.

Wes Streeting has been an MP since 2015 and has been involved in politics for most of his life. Indeed, whilst at university, he was the President of the National Union of Students. After the 2024 General Election he was appointed Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. However, he has never been shy of admitting that this is not the limit of his ambition and that he has always wanted to be Prime Minister.

Following the local election results last week, it was clear that the pressure on Keir Starmer would rise to boiling point. As many as 90 MPs called for Starmer to quit as the week went on. Then, slowly, there were some ministerial resignations. These included Miatta Fahnbulleh, Minister for Devolution, Faith and Communities, who was the first to resign and called on Keir Starmer to go; Jess Phillips, the Safeguarding Minister (and the most senior of the four); Alex Davies-Jones, the Minister for Victims; and Zubir Ahmed, a Health Minister. Of these, some were known to be Streeting allies, perhaps with the hope that others would follow.

In politics, it is often said that 'he who wields the knife will never wear the crown' – Streeting, despite his ambitions, did not want to be the first senior member of the Government to resign. With speculation mounting throughout the week, Keir Starmer was asked if he 'had confidence' in Wes Streeting – his reply was consistently in the affirmative. Yet, on Thursday, Streeting could wait no more. He pulled the metaphorical pin from the grenade, writing Starmer a long resignation letter:

'You have many great strengths that I admire. You led our party to a victory few thought possible in 2024 and I was proud to fight alongside you in the trenches of that campaign. You have shown courage and statesmanship on the world stage –

not least in keeping Britain out of the war in Iran.

But where we need vision, we have a vacuum. Where we need direction, we have drift. This was underscored by your speech on Monday. Leaders take responsibility, but too often that has meant other people falling on their swords. You also need to listen to your colleagues, including backbenchers, and the heavy-handed approach to dissenting voices diminishes our politics.'

As is customary, Starmer responded. He praised Streeting for his record as Health Secretary and said that 'I have no doubt you will continue to play an important role in our party for many years to come'.

What comes next for Streeting is questionable. It appears he may not have the numbers to sustain a serious leadership bid. Yet, politicians who are close to him have indicated that he will run in any leadership contest. However, Streeting has called for a contest which 'needs to be broad, and it needs the best possible field of candidates'. Streeting has also supported Andy Burnham being put forward as the candidate for a by-election in Makerfield. To some, this has led to speculation that Streeting may be angling for a senior role in any potential Burnham Cabinet, rather than a serious bid for the leadership itself.

Is Keir Starmer in office but not in power?

2.3.3 – The Prime Minister

The turmoil over the past week has seen Keir Starmer's authority dwindle, as Labour MPs openly talk about who the next leader should be, despite no leadership contest having been announced.

While Keir Starmer's legal powers as Prime Minister – known as prerogative powers – remain undiminished, his authority over his party and the Government has been severely damaged. This is known as the 'elastic band theory', referring to the variables that often determine the power that a Prime Minister is able to wield. Key variables often include the size of the government's majority, Cabinet and party unity, the Prime Minister's personality and leadership style, and the government's popularity with the public and the media.

A majority the size of Labour's should make

a Prime Minister largely untouchable, and would actually enhance their power and authority. This is in contrast to Theresa May's government following the 2017 General Election, which lost a record 33 divisions in the Commons, thereby damaging her credibility as an effective leader.

However, it is Starmer's leadership style that has come under scrutiny, with Streeting criticising his lack of direction (code, perhaps, for ideological grounding) in his resignation letter. Starmer's lack of close allies in politics has meant he has quickly become isolated in office, with very few, if any, MPs being described as 'Starmerites' in the way that 'Blairite' and 'Brownite' were common parlance in the New Labour years.

The divisions within the party over what happens next is further testament to Starmer's weakness as party leader, with a significant proportion of his MPs prepared to write his political obituary already. The lukewarm words of support from some Cabinet colleagues are a further indication of a lack of support from those obliged to back the government and Prime Minister publicly.

Labour's unpopularity in the polls must also sit with Starmer, and his speech last Monday promising a reset appears to have come too late to convince anyone that change is likely. Labour's electoral victory in 2024 came with just 33.7% of the vote, meaning that any fall in that vote could have disastrous consequences next time around.

While Starmer has received some praise for his handling of international events, this has been offset by disillusionment among voters that Labour has been no better than their predecessors, despite their promise of 'change' in 2024. This view has been exacerbated by the Mandelson scandal and events such as 'freebiegate', which hit Labour shortly after coming to office.

It remains to be seen if, or when, a leadership contest will occur within the Labour Party. Even if Starmer's rivals hold fire for now, it would appear that his authority as Prime Minister has been severely damaged by events over the last fortnight. Even though his legal powers remain unchanged, his credibility and influence over the Government and the Labour Party have been severely affected, perhaps irrevocably.

UK Government

What is the King's Speech and what was in Labour's?

2.2.3 – The Legislative Process

The King's Speech takes place nearly annually in the Palace of Westminster during the State Opening of Parliament. It is one of the showpiece events of the British state. However, this year's was rather surreal. This is because it is unclear who will be Prime Minister when the King's Speech is expected to be put into action.

The State Opening of Parliament is the point that formally marks the beginning of a new Parliamentary Session. Prior to the Monarch arriving, the cellars of the Palace of Westminster are searched. This is now a ceremonial task, but it dates back to the 5th November 1605 when Guy Fawkes attempted to kill King James I at the State Opening of Parliament by placing gunpowder in the cellars. Then, the Monarch will arrive at the Sovereign's Entrance, normally after a horse-drawn procession from Buckingham Palace. The Monarch will then make their way to the robing room to put on the regalia of state. The Monarch will then walk in a procession to the throne of the House of Lords where they will take their seat.

Following this, Black Rod will be sent to summon the members of the House of Commons to the House of Lords. At this point an important example of constitutional symbolism takes place. As Black Rod approaches the chamber of the House of Commons, they have the door theatrically slammed in their face. This is to symbolise the independence of the House of Commons from the House of Lords and is done in remembrance of the fact that in 1642 Charles I stormed into the House of Commons in order to arrest five members of Parliament.

Famously, the former republican Labour MP for Bolsover, Dennis



Skinner, had a reputation for making a quip at the expense of Black Rod (and the Monarch), before keeping his seat in the Commons and refusing to attend on the Monarch. In this spirit, this year when Black Rod knocked on the door of the House of Commons, someone called out 'Not now Andy' – a reference to Andy Burnham's desire to get back into the House of Commons.

The King's Speech is the speech that is read out from the throne in the House of Lords. However, whilst it is called the King's Speech, it is written by the government and the Monarch has no input into it. The speech lays out the legislative plans of the government for the upcoming Parliamentary session. The delivery of the King's Speech is a theatrical event. However, it has a wider constitutional significance. Following the speech, there will be five days of debate on it. During this time there will be no other parliamentary business unless it is deemed exceptional. In addition, votes on the King's Speech are treated as confidence motions. If a government cannot produce a majority in the House of Commons on the King's Speech, it will not be seen as having the confidence of the House of Commons and this could force the resignation of the government and a new general election. Consequently, all votes on the King's Speech are given a three-line whip by the Government. As a result of this, it is exceptionally unlikely the government will lose a vote on the King's Speech. Indeed, the last time it happened was in January 1924 when Stanley Baldwin's minority government was defeated by 328-251 on an

amendment to the King's Speech. Baldwin subsequently resigned and Ramsay MacDonald formed the first Labour government.

In this year's King's Speech the Government set out thirty-seven legislative plans. These included:

Steel nationalisation - Brings British Steel into public ownership, with a public interest test for the transfer and powers to determine independently assessed compensation.

Northern Powerhouse Rail - £45bn to upgrade lines east of the Pennines (delivery in the 2030s), build a new Liverpool-Manchester route via Warrington and Manchester Airport, and improve cross-Pennine links.

Leasehold reform - Bans new leaseholds for flats, caps ground rents at £250/year, and creates a proper legal framework for commonhold so flat-owners get full freehold ownership without third-party landlords.

Votes at 16 - Extends voting rights to 16- and 17-year-olds in all UK elections, broadens accepted voter ID, tightens rules on political donations, and strengthens the Electoral Commission.

Police Reform - Creates a new National Police Service for the most serious crimes, merges forces into fewer larger ones with Local Policing Areas, abolishes Police and Crime Commissioners, and gives facial recognition a legal framework.

Notably, politics stopped for the day of the King's Speech. Senior politicians did not want to embarrass the King by politicking on the day he attended Parliament. However, it is inescapable that the value of the King's Speech this year is in question due to people not knowing whether an incoming Prime Minister, if that occurs, will want to be tied to this legislative agenda. This made the whole day rather surreal.

US

Why is MAHA struggling to break through on Capitol Hill?

3.5.3 - Interest Groups

3.5.4 - Interpretations and

Debates

3.2.2.2 - Legislative Function

The Make America Healthy Again movement, or MAHA, helped get Donald Trump back into the White House in 2024 after Robert F Kennedy Jr ended his own presidential run and threw his weight behind him. Kennedy now runs the Department of Health and Human Services, and his big ideas, banning artificial food dyes, stopping food stamps being spent on soda and sweets, and tightening the rules on farm chemicals, are meant to be central to what the Trump administration does at home. But Congress is not playing along. In late April the House threw out a plan to stop food stamps being used to buy soda by 238 votes to 186, with 55 Republicans crossing the aisle to kill it. Dozens of bills on dyes, labels and school meals have not moved at all.

A big part of the reason sits in the lobbying figures. Since Trump came back to power last January, the food and drink industry has poured a record \$113 million into lobbying in Washington, up more than 30 per cent on the year before. In the first three months of this year alone, Coca-Cola spent over \$2 million and PepsiCo another \$1.8 million, while the American Beverage Association added nearly \$1 million on top. Mars and Hershey together put in \$430,000, and the National Confectioners Association another \$250,000. A new alliance called Americans for Ingredient Transparency, backed by Coca-Cola, Kraft Heinz and Nestlé, is also pushing for soft national rules on food labels that would knock out stricter ones some states are bringing in.

In one sense, this is Congress doing what the Founders meant it to do: arguing, slowing the president down and listening to organised groups. But House members face the voters every two years and lean heavily on private donors to pay for their campaigns, which hands real power to industry. Even when a policy is popular, a well-funded lobby can kill it by burying it in committee, voting down amendments or threatening to back a rival at the next primary.

Counter-MAHA lobbying is becoming a clear example of how interest groups shape policy in a pluralist democracy. Big industries are using lobbying, donations and alliances to outgun a popular grassroots movement, which raises the old worry about whether American democracy listens to voters, or only to those who can afford to be heard.

Is the 119th Congress passing more laws than the last one?

3.2.2.2 - Legislative Function

3.2.3 - Interpretations and

Debates

Just over halfway through its term, the 119th Congress has signed 85 bills into law. That sounds reasonable until you put it next to the two Congresses before it. The 118th Congress, which sat through divided government from 2023 to 2025, had managed just 60 by the same point and ended up being called the least productive since the 1950s. The 117th Congress, with Joe Biden in the White House and Democrats running both chambers, had passed 123 by the equivalent date. So, the current Congress is doing better than the last one, but only about two-thirds as well as the one before, even though

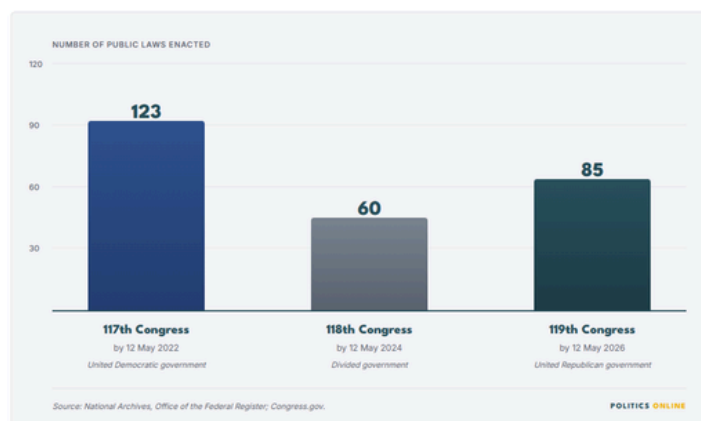


Republicans now hold the House, the Senate and the presidency. The headline number also hides what is actually being passed. A big chunk of the 85 laws are short joint resolutions cancelling Biden-era regulations under the Congressional Review Act. The one really substantive piece, the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, crammed taxes, welfare cuts, immigration and climate funding into a single reconciliation bill that scraped through last July on a 51 to 50 Senate vote.

This matters because raw output is one of the simplest tests of how well Congress is doing its Article I job. United government on paper should make lawmaking easier, but narrow majorities, the filibuster and tight party discipline are still getting in the way. What you can see here is partisan polarisation in action, with big set-piece bills passed through reconciliation, regulatory rollback by simple majority, and most ordinary cross-party legislation quietly stuck in committee while the executive branch sets the pace.

POLITICS ONLINE - US CONGRESS

The 119th Congress is passing more laws than the last one, but far fewer than the 117th



Global

What are the implications of the US-China Summit in Beijing?

3.1 - The state and globalisation

3.2 - Global governance: political and economic

3.4 - Power and developments

3.6 - Comparative theories

Donald Trump's state visit to Beijing in May 2026 highlights the growing importance, and growing tension, within the relationship between the United States and China. A state visit is the highest level of diplomatic engagement between countries and usually involves formal talks, ceremonies and symbolic displays intended to strengthen relations between governments. The timing of the summit is especially significant. Relations between Washington and Beijing have deteriorated in recent years because of disputes over trade, technology, Taiwan and military influence. At the same time, instability in the Middle East and uncertainty within the global economy have increased the need for communication between the two powers. Together, the USA and China account for over 40% of global GDP and are central to global manufacturing, trade and finance. Their relationship therefore shapes everything from energy prices to supply chains and investment flows.

One of the clearest themes emerging from the summit is that, despite globalisation, nation-states remain the dominant actors in world politics. Both governments are attempting to protect national interests, strengthen economic security and expand geopolitical influence. This challenges the hyperglobalist idea that globalisation has weakened the state.

During the talks, Xi Jinping warned against what he called the "Thucydides Trap", a concept associated with realist theories of international relations. The historian Thucydides argued that war between Athens and Sparta became likely because a rising power threatened an established one. In modern politics, the phrase describes the danger of conflict when an emerging power challenges a dominant superpower.

Realists see this as a structural problem within international politics. Because there is no higher authority above states, countries prioritise survival and security. As a result, rising and established powers

often become trapped in cycles of suspicion, military competition and rivalry. Some realists therefore believe conflict between the USA and China may be difficult to avoid, particularly over Taiwan and control of the Indo-Pacific region. Liberals take a different view. Liberal theories argue that economic interdependence, diplomacy and international institutions can encourage cooperation even between rivals. Xi's use of the "Thucydides Trap" was therefore significant because China presents it as a warning that should be avoided, rather than as an unavoidable prediction.

In this regard, Taiwan remains the most sensitive issue in US-China relations. China considers the island part of its territory and has increased military activity around it in recent years. The USA continues to support Taiwan militarily and economically, including approving an \$11bn arms package in late 2025. This reflects a realist understanding of international politics, where states prioritise security, territorial control and strategic advantage. Xi explicitly warned that misunderstandings over Taiwan could lead to intensified rivalry or even conflict.

Trade and technology were also central to the summit. Relations between Washington and Beijing have been strained by tariffs, export controls and accusations of unfair economic practices. Trump has repeatedly argued that China benefits unfairly from trade with the USA, while China has responded by restricting exports of rare earth minerals essential for semiconductors, electric vehicles and defence industries. China currently processes around 90% of the world's rare earth supply, giving it significant leverage within global markets.

The summit also highlighted the limits of Thomas Friedman's "Dell Theory", which argued that countries integrated into global supply chains would avoid conflict because war would damage economic prosperity. The USA and China remain deeply interconnected economically, with bilateral trade still exceeding \$500bn annually. However, economic interdependence has not prevented rivalry. Instead, supply chains themselves have become geopolitical weapons. The USA has restricted China's access to advanced semiconductor technology because of concerns over artificial intelligence and military development. China has accelerated investment in AI, robotics and electric

vehicles in response, attempting to reduce reliance on Western technology and strengthen economic self-sufficiency.

The role of multinational corporations was another significant aspect of the summit. Trump brought major technology and business leaders with him to Beijing, including Elon Musk of Tesla and SpaceX, Tim Cook of Apple, Jensen Huang of Nvidia and Larry Fink of BlackRock. Their presence demonstrated how corporations have become increasingly important actors in global politics and economics. These companies possess enormous economic influence, control major technologies and shape global supply chains. However, the summit also showed the limits of corporate independence. Both governments increasingly expect companies to support wider national strategic goals. Corporations therefore act as influential global actors but remain constrained by state power and national security priorities.

The Iran dimension added another layer of geopolitical complexity. China imports large quantities of oil from the Middle East and has close economic links with Tehran. The USA hopes Beijing can use its influence to prevent escalation and keep the Strait of Hormuz open, through which around one fifth of global oil supplies pass. Trump claimed after the summit that China had agreed to withhold military equipment from Iran, although Beijing has not publicly confirmed this.

The summit also demonstrated the importance of both hard and soft power. Military issues such as Taiwan, semiconductor restrictions and naval security reflect the role of hard power. However, the state visit itself was also an exercise in soft power. China carefully staged banquets, ceremonies and cultural visits to project an image of stability, prestige and global leadership.

Ultimately, the summit illustrates that contemporary global politics is shaped by both cooperation and competition. Economic globalisation continues to connect the world's two largest powers, but strategic rivalry increasingly dominates their relationship. The result is a world that is economically interconnected, yet politically divided, with the US-China relationship likely to define international politics for decades to come.