Chapter 8: Why the Conservatives lost their majority—but still won

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When Theresa May stepped into the glare of the television lights in Downing Street on 18 April to announce a 'snap' general election, there was almost universal agreement that she had made an astute if not brilliant call. It was widely assumed that the forthcoming campaign would centre on Brexit Britain's future outside of the European Union. It was even more widely assumed that the Conservatives would win.

The first assumption, that the 2017 election would be the 'Brexit election', seemed unimpeachable. Britain's relations with Europe had long consumed the attention of its political elite. David Cameron's attempts to renegotiate the terms of Britain's membership of the EU had absorbed the prime minister's energies during his brief second term. Britain had then undergone the national trauma of a referendum campaign that resulted in a vote to leave, defeat for Cameron and his replacement with Theresa May. The complex process of withdrawal had then dominated the new government's agenda. Announcing the election the new prime minister characterised the choice as one between:

> strong and stable leadership in the national interest, with me as your Prime Minister, or weak and unstable coalition government, led by Jeremy Corbyn, propped up by the Liberal Democrats—who want to reopen the divisions of the referendum—and Nicola Sturgeon and the SNP.[1]

The second assumption, that the election would result in an easy Tory victory, seemed even more of a 'no-brainer' as the Americans say. Having just voted to leave

the EU, it was hard to believe that the electorate would replace the Conservatives with Labour, a party largely devoted to the European Union. The Tories had entered January 2017 with a 16-point opinion-poll lead over their main rivals. By April 2017 this lead had stretched to 20 points. May's decision also caught everyone on the hop. Labour under Jeremy Corbyn seemed singularly unprepared to fight the election, the Liberal Democrats were still a 'toxic' brand after their five years in coalition between 2010 and 2015, and the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) were in disarray having secured and effectively won the recent referendum. Meanwhile, the Scottish National Party (SNP) posed no obvious threat to the Conservatives, whose 2015 majority was based almost entirely on English and Welsh MPs. For these reasons a Tory victory seemed inevitable. A survey of experts for the United Kingdom's Political Studies Association produced an average forecast vote of 43 per cent for the Conservatives and 29 per cent for Labour, and an average Tory majority of 92 seats.[2] A review published in the *Washington Post* produced a similar consensus.[3] Martin Boon of ICM Research declared that 'the result is going to be a foregone conclusion'.[4]

In the event, neither the campaign nor the outcome conformed to expectations. Labour's decision to accept that Britain was leaving the EU sucked much of the oxygen from the issue. Europe dominated the campaign's early skirmishes, but the publication of the manifestos shifted attention to public spending, the economy and defence. The 2017 general election campaign was not, therefore, a replay of the 2016 referendum: attitudes towards Brexit were merely an additional influence on top of other enduring influences. And once votes were counted, it was clear that there would be no landslide Tory victory. The Conservatives scraped home as the largest party but fell just short of a majority in the new House of Commons.

The aggregate outcome

Before analysing why the election resulted in a hung parliament, it is worth establishing the 'facts' about the 2017 general election. The most important fact is that the Conservative party 'won' the election, in that they gained more votes and seats than any other party (see table 8.1), and Theresa May continued as prime minister.[5] The party's share of the vote was higher than under Cameron in either 2010 or 2015, and saw the largest increase (5.5 percentage points) achieved by any governing party since 1945. Viewed in isolation this was a remarkable achievement.

TABLE 8.1: *The outcome of the 2017 United Kingdom general election*

| | Votes (%) | | Seats | |
	2017	Change	2017	Change
Con	42.4	+5.5	317	-13
Lab	40.0	+9.5	262	+30
SNP	3.0	-1.7	35	-21
Lib Dem	7.4	-0.5	12	+4
DUP	0.9	+0.3	10	+2
Sinn Fein	0.7	+0.1	7	+3
Plaid Cymru	0.5	-0.1	4	+1
UKIP	1.8	-10.8	0	-1
Green	1.6	-1.8	1	0
Others	1.7	-0.5	2	-6

Source: House of Commons library

But the Conservative performance cannot be viewed in isolation. Because of pre-election expectations, the party's victory felt like an emotional defeat. For similar reasons, Labour's defeat felt like an emotional—even euphoric—victory. Labour's share of the vote rocketed by 9.6 points to 40 per cent, exceeding its supporters' wildest dreams and bolstering Jeremy Corbyn's authority, as Thomas Quinn describes in chapter 2. This performance represented the largest percentage-point increase

achieved by either of the two major parties since 1945.[6] The net effect was that the Conservatives' lead over Labour fell from 6.4 points in 2015 to 2.3 points in 2017.

As the fortunes of the major parties improved, those of the smaller parties waned. As Paul Whiteley, Harold Clarke and Matthew Goodwin recount in chapter 4, UKIP received just 1.8 per cent of the vote, down 10.8 points compared with 2015. The party also lost its only seat in Clacton on the Essex coast. The Liberal Democrat vote fell to 7.4 per cent, down 0.5 points on its already low 2015 vote. Bizarrely, the electoral system translated this loss into a net gain of four seats. In Scotland, the SNP suffered a major rebuff. Its share of the UK vote fell from 4.7 to 3.0 per cent and its share of the Scottish vote fell from 50.0 to 36.9 per cent. The party lost a total of 21 seats, 12 to the Tories, six to Labour and three to the Liberal Democrats. In Wales, Plaid Cymru failed to make headway in the face of a Labour revival. The Green party's share fell from 3.8 per cent to 1.6 per cent, though Caroline Lucas retained her seat in Brighton Pavilion.

The flow of the vote

The aggregate election outcome provides an indication of the net changes that occurred between 2015 and 2017. Underneath the surface, however, were millions of individual changes, some of which cancelled out others. Table 8.2 illustrates these complex movements by displaying how individual respondents to the British Election Study (BES) reported having voted immediately after both the 2015 and 2017 general elections.[7] Table 8.2 suggests that around 84 per cent of all 2015 Tory voters again voted for that party in 2017. Similarly, 81 per cent of 2015 Labour voters voted Labour in 2017. The aggregate-level evidence from the constituencies confirms the impression of stability: the major parties' vote in 2015 was a powerful predictor of

their vote in 2017. Nevertheless, table 8.2 also shows that there was considerable

switching. One in ten 2015 Labour voters defected to the Tories in 2017, and one in

twelve 2015 Tory voters made the opposite journey.[8]

TABLE 8.2: *The flow of the vote, 2015–2017*

| Vote in 2015 | Vote in 2017 General Election | | | | | | |
	Con	Lab	Lib Dem	SNP	Plaid Cymru	UKIP	Green
Con	83.8	8.3	5.4	0.2	0.2	0.4	0.6
Lab	9.4	80.9	5.9	0.8	0.2	0.7	1.3
Lib Dem	17.7	22.8	54.6	0.5	0.5	1.1	1.5
SNP	8.5	16.3	2.0	71.8	0.0	0.5	0.0
Plaid Cymru	5.8	38.4	1.2	0.0	52.3	0.0	1.2
UKIP	56.1	17.0	3.6	0.1	0.8	18.2	1.8
Green	4.7	58.2	13.2	2.6	0.3	0.6	16.5
Did not vote	30.8	51.1	8.6	2.0	0.7	1.3	2.7

Source: British Election Study, Internet panel study 2015-17, post-election waves 6 and 13

The behaviour of 2015 minor-party voters, relatively few of whom remained

loyal, provides further clues about the forces shaping the 2017 general election. One

of the most striking findings in Table 8.2 is that 56 per cent of 2015 UKIP votes

switched to the Conservatives. This matches the aggregate-level evidence: at the

constituency level, the UKIP vote in 2015 strongly predicts the Conservative vote in

2017. It appears that the referendum vote and Theresa May's increasingly hard-line on

Brexit helped produce a realignment on the right. Nevertheless, some 17 per cent of

2015 UKIP voters switched to Labour in 2017. Brexit was far from the whole story.

There is also some evidence of a realignment on the left. Fully 58 per cent of

2015 Green party voters switched to Labour, and the Greens' vote share in 2015 was

strongly associated with Labour's vote share in 2017 at the constituency level. The

impact of this realignment was limited, however, because there were few 2015 Green

party voters. Finally, some 23 per cent of 2015 Liberal Democrat voters switched to

Labour and 18 per cent to the Tories. This slight tendency among centrist voters to

switch to Labour suggests the tide was moving leftwards.

Table 8.2 also illustrates some of the political dynamics in Scotland and

Wales. Fully 16 per cent, or one in six, of 2015 SNP voters switched to Labour, and

nearly 9 per cent or one in ten turned to the Conservatives. In Wales Plaid Cymru

failed to hold onto many of its former voters. Some 38 per cent defected to Labour.

Both sets of movements are consistent with Robert Johns' argument in chapter 5 that

the anticipated Tory landslide encouraged Nationalist voters to engage more closely

with Westminster politics and take sides accordingly.

One final intriguing thing to note about the data in table 8.2 is the behaviour of

former non-voters. Most (54 per cent) of 2015 non-voters again did not vote in 2017,

but of those who voted, 51 per cent chose Labour and 31 per cent Conservative.[9] The

aggregate-level evidence suggests that Labour's vote increased and the Conservatives'

decreased as turnout increased.[10] In the run up to the election, many experts expressed

doubts whether non-voters could make a difference. The experts, as with their

predictions of the outcome, were wrong. Nevertheless, the substantial conversion of

non-voters to the Tories suggests that pledges to reassert national sovereignty and to

'take back control' could mobilise voters just as much as pledges to 'end austerity'.

The dealigned electorate

The 2017 general election witnessed a significant exodus of voters from the smaller to

the larger parties. Just 64 per cent of those who voted cast their ballot for the same

party in elections just two years apart. Clearly, the electorate was changeable. A clue

about the source of this volatility is provided by Figure 8.1, which shows growing

levels of party non-identification as measured by successive BES surveys.[11] Over time, the proportion of non-identifiers—those saying they do *not* think of themselves as 'Conservative', 'Labour', 'Liberal Democrat' or 'Nationalist'—has greatly increased, from 5 per cent in 1964 to 19 per cent in 2015. Since voters who strongly identify with a party are more likely to remain loyal to that party and turn out, any increase in the number of non-identifiers increases the pool of floating voters. At the same time, the strength of identification among the smaller pool of partisans has waned. In 1964, some 47 per cent of all identifiers thought of themselves as 'very strong' partisans and a mere 11 per cent thought of themselves as 'not very strong' identifiers. By 2015, a mere 21 per cent of respondents described themselves as 'very strong' identifiers and 25 per cent described themselves as 'not very strong'.

FIGURE 8.1: *Non-identification with political parties, 1964–2015*
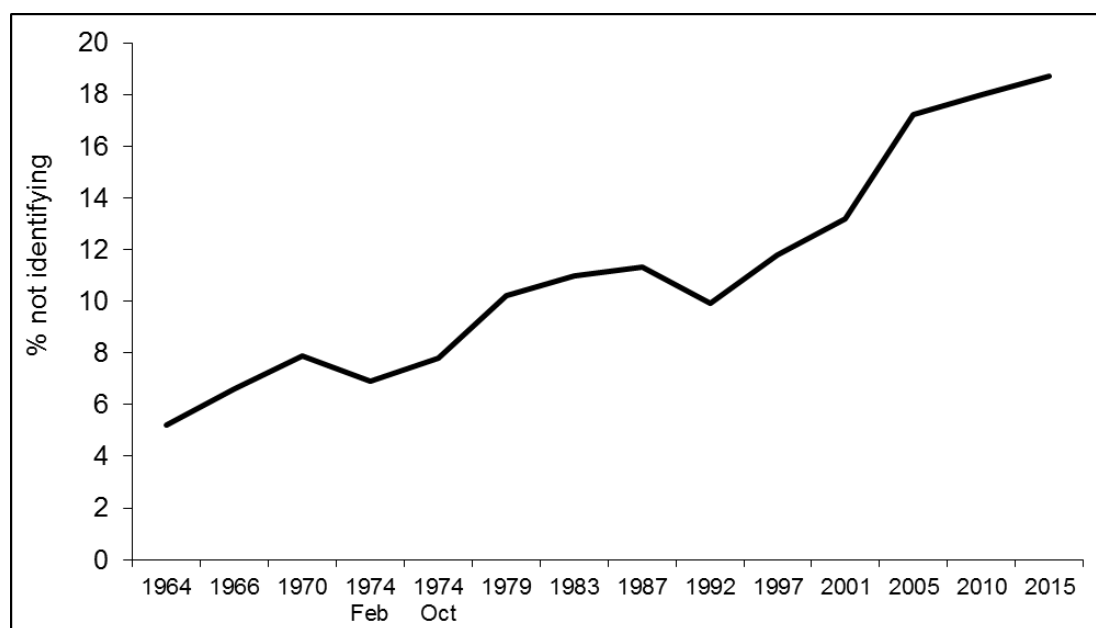
Source: British Election Study, Information System

Weakened party loyalties are partly a product of long-term social changes such as the expansion of education and exposure to non-partisan media that reduced

individuals' dependence on social groups for information. They are also a product of past ideological movements by the parties towards the extremes, which loosened voters' psychological bonds.[12] The same ties have weakened furthers as parties have failed to deliver in office. By 2015, the Liberal Democrats as well as the Conservatives and Labour had gained experience of governing, and all were judged to have 'failed' the public in one way or another. They had also done things to cast doubt on their integrity. The cash-for-questions scandal in the 1990s, the Iraq War of 2003, the financial crisis of 2008 and the MPs expenses scandal of 2009 all stimulated anti-system sentiment.[13] These sentiments were amplified by a cynical media.[14]

The weakening of partisan loyalties means that, other things being equal, short-term factors have a stronger impact on voting behaviour. Voters can be swayed by policy, the state of the economy or the populist appeals of anti-system parties. In the past, the Liberal Democrats were a convenient vehicle for protest votes. In 2015 UKIP successfully appealed to those who felt ignored by the 'Westminster elites', particularly on the issues of European integration and immigration. In 2017 both major party leaders tried to position themselves as anti-system. Theresa May, for example, claimed to represent the 'mainstream of the British public' who had been ignored by 'elites in Westminster'. Jeremy Corbyn spoke on behalf of 'the many not the few' and argued that the poor should not be punished for the failures of the bankers that caused the great recession.[15]

The social basis of the vote

Voting behaviour is rooted in people's social experiences. Voters' age, race, sex, education, social class and neighbourhood can profoundly shape their identities, perceptions of self-interest and exposure to information.[16] The same characteristics

shape their policy preferences, evaluations of national or personal conditions and assessments of which party or leader is most likely to deliver.

In 2017 age emerged as a new fault line in British electoral politics: younger voters were far more likely to vote Labour than the old. These differences were not entirely new. In 2015, the Labour vote among 18-24 year olds was 43 per cent, compared with 23 per cent among those aged 65 and above. Conversely, the Conservative vote was just 27 per cent among 18-24 year olds and 47 per cent among those aged 65 and above. These differences reflected the old adages about youthful radicalism being replaced by conservatism in old-age.[17] In 2015 they also had more immediate sources. Labour, under Ed Miliband's leadership, made a pitch for the youth vote, promising to reduce university tuition fees from £9,000 to £6,000 per year. This strategy had limited success, yielding just a 6-point lead among 18-29 year olds, and aroused little enthusiasm. Turnout among this group was just 43 per cent.

Table 8.3 shows how existing differences between the young and old widened considerably in 2017. Labour's lead over the Tories was fully 35-points among 18-24 year olds, 29-points among 25-34 year olds and 16-points among those aged 35-45. In contrast, the Tories enjoyed a 3-point lead over Labour among those aged 45-54, which jumped to 17 points among 55-64 year olds and 36 points among those aged 65 and above. Similarly, at a constituency level, Labour's share of the vote was associated with the proportion of the population aged 18-29.[18] In 2017 discussion about the causes and consequences of this new inter-generational politics, in which 'millennials' were seemingly set against 'baby boomers', moved from the seminar to the public spaces such as television and radio phone-ins.

TABLE 8.3: *How Britain voted in2017, Ipsos MORI*

	Con	Lab	Lib Dem	Con lead	Turnout
Age					
18-24	27	62	5	-35	54
25-34	27	56	9	-29	55
35-44	33	49	10	-16	56
45-54	43	40	7	+3	66
44-64	51	34	7	+17	71
65+	61	25	7	+36	71
Gender					
Female	43	42	8	+1	62
Male	44	40	7	+4	
Ethnic group					
White	45	39	8	+6	64
BME	19	73	6	-54	53
Education					
No qualifications	52	35	4	+17	60
Other qualifications	46	39	6	+7	61
Degree and above	33	48	12	-15	69
Class					
AB	47	37	10	+10	69
C1	44	40	7	+4	68
C2	45	41	6	+4	60
DE	38	47	5	-9	53
Tenure					
Owned	55	30	7	+25	70
Mortgage	43	40	9	+3	68
Social renter	26	57	4	-31	52
Private renter	31	54	7	-23	53

Source: Ipsos-Mori

The reasons for this widening gap in 2017 are necessarily speculative. Some relate to the immediate political context. Young voters were more likely to vote Remain in the 2016 referendum, and Theresa May's subsequent commitment to a 'hard' Brexit alienated them. The Liberal Democrats, despite their pro-Europeanism, remained toxic after their acquiescence in raising tuition fees. The young, therefore,

naturally gravitated towards Labour. The new generational divide also reflected

political interests. Younger voters were more vulnerable to changes in the workplace

and zero-hours contracts. Many welfare reforms, such as restrictions on housing

benefit, affected the young most. Students entering higher education in 2017 from the

poorest 40 per cent of families were forecast to graduate with debts of £57,000.[19]

They increasingly found it difficult to find 'graduate' jobs or get a foot on the housing

ladder. For 'generation rent' the dream of owning a property remained just that—a

dream. Labour's promise to abolish tuition fees and re-introduce grants in 2017

appealed to younger voters' self-interest. So did Labour's promises to regulate rents in

the private sector. Older voters, on the other hand, were less likely to work, more

likely to own their own homes, and were protected by the 'triple lock' on pensions.

The Tories' proposals to change the rules on social care and winter-fuel payments

tested their loyalties. In the zero-sum game of intergenerational politics, however,

Labour's pull on the young may have also pushed the old towards the Tories.

Another factor driving young voters to Labour was undoubtedly a 'Corbyn

effect'. Most politicians paid little attention to the young. They doubted whether

young people could be induced to vote and whether it would make a difference if they

did. Instead, most politicians 'wisely' focussed on the 'grey vote' that could be relied

on to turn out. Here, as elsewhere, Corbyn cast doubt on the conventional wisdom and

focussed on youth. The scale of Labour's pledge to abolish tuition fees was breath-

taking. It was estimated to cost £11 billion per year. Young people responded to this

attention with enthusiasm. Such was Corbyn's personal appeal that those aspects of

his record that raised questions among older voters counted in his favour among the

young. His rebelliousness on the Iraq War was taken to illustrate his commitment to

principle. His reluctance to sing the national anthem demonstrated his unwillingness

to conform. His dull speaking style and failure to deliver carefully prepared soundbites were evidence of his authenticity. Remarkably, he was generally absolved of charges of 'careerism', despite being an MP for over thirty years. Endorsements by musicians—for instance, the 'Grime4Corbyn' movement—and organs such as the *New Musical Express* (*NME*) music magazine, created a sense of excitement. Labour's unexpected gains in constituencies like Canterbury, Reading West and Kensington owed much to the efforts of students in particular.

The 2017 'youthquake' not only altered the share of the vote but did something to alter the size and composition of the registered electorate. As Sarah Birch shows in chapter 7, the start of the campaign witnessed a surge in voter-registration applications, driven in part by a campaign led by the National Union of Students. There were 2.9 million applications to register between the announcement of the snap election on 19 April and the deadline on 22 May. Fully 96 per cent of these applications were made online and 69 per cent of these online applications were made by voters below 34. The impact of all this was limited since many were duplicate applications. Nevertheless, Ipsos MORI estimates that turnout among 18-24 year olds increased by 11-points to 54 per cent. Older voters were still more likely to vote than the young but voted at similar or slightly lower levels than in 2015. These differential changes benefitted Labour.[20]

While the impact of age increased, that of social class declined. For much of the post-war period voting behaviour was rooted in social class. The middle class—those in non-manual occupations—tended to think of themselves as Conservative, while the working class—those in manual occupations—tended to think of themselves as Labour. Over time, the relationship between class and party declined. Nevertheless, in 2015 there were still significant differences. The Conservatives received 44 per

cent of the vote from the ABs (those in managerial and professional occupations), 41

per cent from the C1s (clerical occupations, administrators and salespersons), 34 per

cent among the C2s (skilled manual workers) and just 28 per cent from the DEs

(semi- or unskilled manual workers). Labour received 28 per cent from the ABs, 30

per cent from the C1s, 33 per cent from the C2s and 42 per cent from the DEs.

By historical standards, the relationship between class and party was already

weak by 2015, but as table 8.3 shows, it was even weaker in 2017. The Tory vote

among the ABs was just 9-points higher than among the DEs, compared with 16-

points in 2015. The Labour vote among the DEs was just 10-points higher than the

ABs, compared with 14-points in 2015. The Tories, moreover, enjoyed a 4-point lead

among the C2s, the skilled working class.

The most obvious reason for the further weakening of the association between

class and vote between 2015 and 2017 was undoubtedly Europe. Working-class voters

were far more likely to think that European immigration depressed their incomes and

imposed burdens on the public services, as discussed in chapter 4. They tended to vote

Leave. In 2017 Labour reduced the salience of Brexit by accepting the result of the

referendum but Brexit gave the Conservatives an opportunity to claim that Labour had

abandoned the working class for a metropolitan elite. This strategy appealed as much

to the social conservatism of parts of the working class as much as anti-immigration

feeling, and was partly successful. The Tories gained five seats with high Leave votes:

Mansfield, North East Derbyshire, Middlesborough South and East Cleveland, Stoke-

on-Trent South and Walsall North.[21] These gains, however, were far fewer than the

Tories had hoped and entirely offset by losses in the southern middle-class seats that

had voted Remain. Seats like Battersea and Bristol North West swung to Labour as a

result of middle-class Remainers switching from the Tories. The pledge to abolish

tuition fees may have also reduced class voting since it was most likely to benefit middle-class children and middle-class parents.

As the association between class and vote waned, that between education and vote increased. As table 8.3 shows, the Conservative vote peaked at 52 per cent among those with no qualifications, fell to 46 per cent among those with some qualifications and fell to just 33 per cent among graduates. The profile for Labour voters was a mirror image, rising from 35 per cent among the least educated to 39 per cent among those with some qualifications, and peaking at 48 per cent among graduates. These differences in part reflect the fact that older voters were less likely to be educated. They also reflect the fact that the educated were far more likely to vote Remain and were more supportive of an 'open' UK.

Housing continued to play a role in shaping party preferences. The Tories have generally favoured a 'property owning democracy' and Labour has supported social housing. Not surprisingly, therefore, fully 55 per cent of those who owned their own home voted Conservative compared to 30 per cent who voted Labour. Those with a mortgage divided 43 to 40 per cent in the Tories' favour, while social and private renters plumped for Labour. These differences again reflect age and education. Older and better educated people are more likely to own their home. The young are more geographically mobile and likely to rent. Labour's share among private renters leapt from 39 per cent in 2015 to 54 per cent in 2017. Labour's promises to control rents proved attractive to hard-pressed tenants.

Table 8.3 suggests that Labour received slightly more support from women than men. The Tories had a lead of 4-points among men but were just 1-point ahead among women. Since women tend to live longer and older voters are more likely to vote Tory, gender-based differences are larger than they first appear. As Meryl Kenny

notes in chapter 6 there was also a striking relationship between gender, age and vote. Labour's support among men aged 18-24 was 16-points, nowhere near as large as its 55-point lead among women of the same age.

Ethnicity also played a visible role in vote choice in 2017. The Conservatives' share of the 'white' vote rose from 39 per cent in 2015 to 45 per cent in 2017. Labour's share rose from 28 per cent in 2015 to 39 per cent in 2017. The Conservatives' share of the BME vote, on the other hand, fell from 23 to 19 per cent, while Labour's rose from 65 to 73 per cent. Both groups swung to Labour, though BMEs swung more. Jeremy Corbyn's reputation as a campaigner on equality may have drawn ethnic minority voters back to Labour. The Conservatives' rhetoric on Europe and immigration may have had the opposite impact.

Austerity and the policy mood

Austerity defined both the Coalition government and Conservative governments. The Coalition Agreement promised to reduce the deficit primarily by reducing spending.[22] While the health and overseas aid budgets were protected, all others were subject to cuts. Between 2011 and 2016 the Departmental Expenditure Limits (DELs) for local government were reduced by 51 per cent.[23] The impact of cuts was mitigated by efficiency drives, new working practices and technology. Nevertheless, the scale of the savings meant that frontline services were affected. Many Sure Start centres, designed to support parents back into work, were closed. Other cuts hurt the elderly poor. By 2014, 150,000 pensioners had lost access to help with washing and dressing.[24] The cuts even affected areas traditionally favoured by the Conservatives. The DELs for the Justice Department and Defence departments were cut by 34 and 14 per cent respectively between 2011 and 2016.[25]

Britons generally support a 'cradle to the grave' welfare state. The British

Social Attitudes (BSA) survey has regularly invited people to 'agree' or 'disagree'

with the proposition that 'the creation of the welfare state is one of Britain's proudest

achievements'. Responses in 2015 were typical: around 57 per cent agreed and a

mere 11 per cent disagreed.[26] Those who receive no welfare still benefit from public

services.[27] Few people have private health insurance and most rely on the NHS,

especially for GP and accident and emergency services. Most people send their

children to state-funded schools. Those living in urban areas rely on public transport.

Not surprisingly, Britons prefer more spending on these things. The same Britons,

however, pay taxes. Equally unsurprisingly, they prefer lower taxes.

In short, most Britons are ambivalent about the state.[28] They want it to act, in

the form of doing something about unemployment and to provide public services and

a safety net. They also worry about the consequences of the state doing too much, in

the form of higher taxes, regulation, bureaucracy and the sapping of incentives and

personal responsibility.[29] This ambivalence implies that their preferences about

government activity depend, at least in part, on current policy. When policy moves

left and governments increase spending and taxes, people come to want less activity

than before. When policy moves right and governments reduce spending and taxes,

people come to want more activity than before. Policy preferences respond

'thermostatically', moving in the opposite direction to policy.[30]

Between 2010 and 2017 the government's tax and spending policies shifted to

the right. Total managed expenditure fell from 45.3 per cent of GDP in 2009-10, to

39.4 per cent of GDP in 2016-17 (see Figure 1.2). Even in respect of areas where

spending was protected, such as the NHS, there was a growing sense that the public

services were in crisis. Above-average inflation, rising expectations and increased

demands resulting from the failure to fund social care, added to concerns. A Kings Fund survey in June 2017 reported that 43 per cent of all NHS Trust finance directors were forecasting a deficit.[31] The BSA has regularly asked respondents whether the NHS was getting better or worse over the last five years. In 2009, during Labour's last full-year in office, 41 per cent thought it was getting better and 19 per cent thought it was getting worse, a net score of +21. By 2016, 25 per cent thought it was getting better and 36 per cent worse, a net score of -11.[32] Just as in the 1990s, the Tories were associated with social decay. Just as in the 1990s, this cost the party at the polls [33]

The Conservatives combined public-sector spending restraint with cuts in direct taxation.[34] The Coalition had adopted the Liberal Democrat policy of progressively raising the personal threshold for income tax from £6,475 in 2009-10 to £10,000 by 2014-15 and then £11,000 by 2017-18.[35] It had also scrapped Labour's top rate of income tax of 50 per cent and introduced a new rate of 45 per cent for those earning above £150,000. Tax cuts simultaneously reduced public concerns about taxation and waste, and raised concerns about public services and inequality.

This 'thermostatic' effect of the Conservative government's policies is clear in the public's changing responses to the same survey questions. From 1983 to 2016, for instance, the BSA has asked respondents whether they preferred to increase or decrease taxes and spending. In 2010, 34 per cent of respondents wanted to increase taxes and spending. This increased year by year until in 2016 support for higher taxes and spending stood at 48 per cent.[36] There were parallel movements on welfare. In 2010 only 30 per cent agreed that the government should spend more on welfare and 64 per cent disagreed, a net score of -34. By 2016, 35 per cent agreed and some 30 per cent disagreed, a net score of +5. There were also movements on attitudes to equality. In 2010 36 per cent agreed that the government should redistribute from the rich to the

poor and 36 per cent disagreed, a net score of 0. By 2016 the same figures were 42 per cent and 28 per cent, producing a net score of +14. In each and every case, opinion had clearly moved leftwards.

FIGURE 8.2: *The policy mood, 1979–2017*
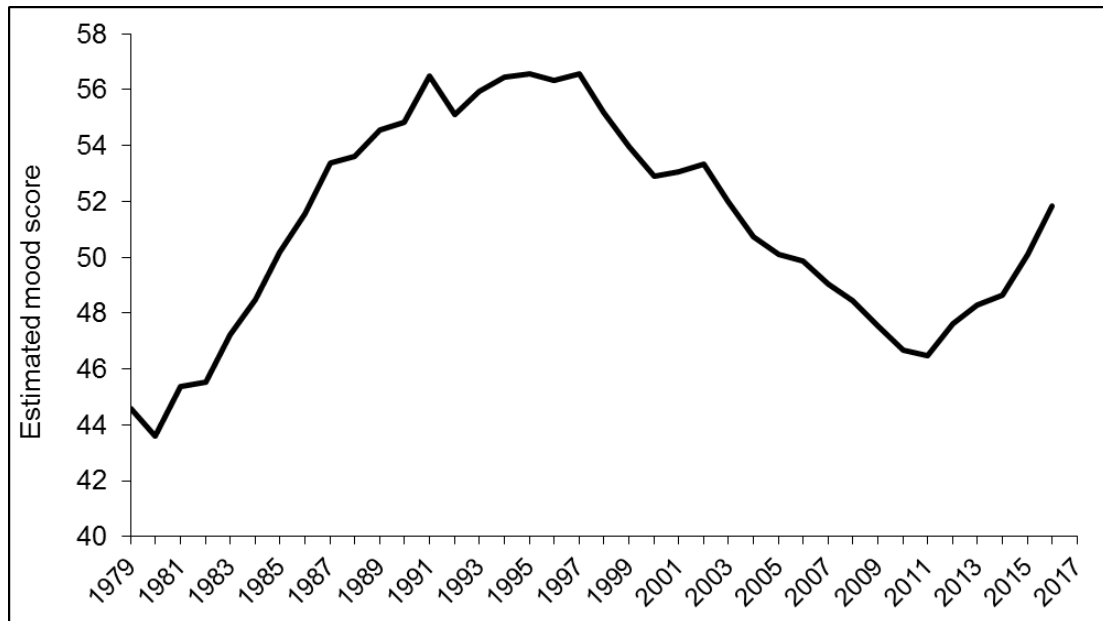
Source: Author's estimates

Movements in public opinion such as these can be aggregated to infer the public's general left-right preferences or 'policy mood'.[37] Figure 8.2 displays the estimated policy mood from 1979 to 2017, using *all* the available data, from *all* sources. Scores above 50 indicate that there are more left than right preferences, and scores below 50 indicate that there are more right than left preferences. A score of 50 represents a perfect balance. From 2010 to 2017 the mood in Britain clearly shifted leftwards. Moreover, statistical modelling in previous studies suggests the electorate moves left as unemployment increases and right as spending and direct taxation increases.[38] Had unemployment not fallen between 2010 and 2017 (see Table 1.2) austerity would have driven the mood even further to the left.

By 2014 the mood was roughly where it had been in 2005, the year of Labour's third successive election victory. By 2017, it was roughly back to where it had been in 1999, just two years after New Labour's triumph. It is, of course, necessary to put these developments in context. Britain had not become a radically left-wing nation. The public remains ambivalent about government activity. Aggregate public opinion evolves slowly. Nevertheless, on issue after issue and year after year, there were incremental movements in opinion that cumulated to produce a leftwards shift in mood. This movement directly shifted votes towards Labour, and it indirectly shifted more by ensuring that Labour's messages on austerity, the public services, welfare, housing and inequality cut through. By contrast, Conservative arguments about the need for fiscal discipline had less traction. Not everyone was tired of austerity but the balance of opinion had shifted in Labour's favour.

Brexit

Although the 2017 general election was not a re-run of the 2016 referendum, Brexit continued to arouse strong feelings and the parties were sufficiently distinctive for it to influence individual vote decisions.[39] Of the three major parties, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats had the clearest positions. Theresa May repeated her mantra that 'Brexit means Brexit' throughout the campaign. The Liberal Democrats promised a second referendum on any deal. Labour's policy was ambiguous. It accepted the vote for Brexit and that 'freedom of movement will end when Britain leaves the European Union'.[40] It also wanted to retain the benefits of the single market but was wholly vague on whether it wanted to remain inside the single market. Its manifesto simply stated that any deal would 'put jobs and the economy first'.[41]

Table 8.4 shows that support for Brexit divided Conservative and Labour voters. Fully 61 per cent of Leavers voted Conservative. Almost as strikingly, some 50 per cent of Remainers voted Labour and 15 per cent Liberal Democrat. Nevertheless, large portions of voters cast general election votes at odds with their referendum vote. One quarter of Remainers still voted Conservative and one quarter of Leavers still voted Labour.

TABLE 8.4: *Brexit referendum vote and general election vote, 2017*

	Con	Lab	Lib Dem	UKIP	Other	Total
Remain	25.1	49.7	15.2	0.3	9.7	100
Leave	60.9	24.0	3.6	5.5	6.0	100

Source: British Election Study, internet study

In order to gauge the impact of referendum voting on vote choice in 2017, Table 8.5 uses evidence gathered immediately after the 2015 election, the 2016 referendum and 2017 election. Where referendum voting was aligned with the 2015 vote, voters tended to stay loyal in 2017. Fully 87 per cent of 2015 Conservative voters who voted Leave in 2016 voted Tory again in 2017. Equally, 85 per cent of 2015 Labour voters who voted Remain in 2016 voted Labour in 2017. Where referendum vote was misaligned with 2015 vote, people were less loyal. Only 69 per cent of 2015 Tory voters who voted Remain in 2016 stayed loyal in 2017 and only 72 per cent of 2015 Labour voters who voted Leave voted Labour in 2017. Fully 12 per cent of 2015 Conservatives who voted Remain defected to Labour and 12 per cent went to the Liberal Democrats. Among 2015 Labour voters who voted Leave some 18 per cent voted Conservative in 2017 and 2 per cent voted UKIP. The Liberal Democrats picked up a small portion of Labour Remainers, who may have voted for

tactical reasons or out of disappointment with Labour's policies. On the whole, however, Labour's ambiguous position on Brexit seems to have been enough to keep potential defectors on board.

TABLE 8.5: *The impact of Brexit on vote switching, 2015-17*

2015 Vote	Con	Lab	Lib Dem	UKIP	(N)
Conservative					
Leave	87.4	9.3	1.1	0.8	1198
Remain	69.4	16.2	11.6	0.2	844
Labour					
Leave	18.3	72.0	3.0	3.7	629
Remain	4.0	85.4	7.4	0.0	1069
Liberal Democrat					
Leave	28.2	21.9	56.3	0.0	124
Remain	9.1	30.2	58.1	0.3	298
UKIP					
Leave	58.5	13.2	2.6	21.4	646
Remain	41.2	8.8	2.9	26.5	34

Source: British Election Study, internet study

The aggregate-level evidence tells a similar story. The estimated Brexit vote in the referendum in 2016 is a powerful predictor of Conservative and Labour vote at the constituency level in 2017 even controlling for previous vote share.[42] The higher the Leave vote in 2016, the higher the Tory vote share a year later and the lower the Labour vote. Although Brexit was less visible in the campaign than many expected, its impact on election night was still clear in the results.

The economy

Elections are shaped by the economic context. Governments are generally re-elected when times are good and ejected when times are bad. Britain's economic performance in 2017 was neither good nor bad. Unemployment had fallen from 8.5 per cent in

2011 to just 4.7 per cent in the first quarter of 2017, a forty three year low (see Table 1.2). Inflation, moreover, was at 2 per cent and interest rates, which had been stuck at 0.5 per cent since March 2009, were cut to just 0.25 per cent August 2016. Growth and productivity, however, were disappointing.

The economic numbers in 2017 were mixed at best. But whatever the numbers indicated, most people did not feel the economy was getting better. Real earnings remained stubbornly below pre-2007 levels.[43] The headline indicators, moreover, masked changes that made workers feel insecure. The new 'gig' economy left many workers feeling stressed and uncertain. As Britain prepared for Brexit, its labour markets appeared to be moving away from European protectionist models and towards US-style flexibility.

The lingering impacts of the 2008 financial crisis and austerity were compounded by the fallout from European referendum. The pound depreciated from 1.45 euros in June 2016 to 1.26 in April 2017, partly as a result of the cut in interest rates and partly because the markets downgraded the country's future worth. Inflation nudged upwards, raising the prospect of interest-rate rises that would further erode real standards of living. Public sector workers had been subject to pay restraint for seven years. They grumbled loudly.

Figure 8.3 displays Ipsos MORI's monthly Economic Optimism Index (EOI) from 2010 to 2017.[44] The index is the difference between the percentage of respondents who expect national economic conditions to get better and the percentage who expect things to get worse. The EOI had dipped below zero under the coalition but tracked upwards from 2013. The 2015 general election was fought against the backdrop of improving economic confidence. In April 2015 the EOI stood at +26. The Conservatives' 2015 campaign had made much of their 'long-term economic plan'.

This claim, together with the memory that the economy had crashed under Labour, gave the Tories a clear lead over Labour on economic competence in 2015 according to YouGov. The 2017 election, by contrast, was fought against the backdrop of post-referendum uncertainty. In June 2016 the EOI stood at -10 but in July fell to -36. Theresa May's arrival initially led to a burst of economic optimism. The EOI was still negative (-1) but heading upwards. As uncertainty increased, however, optimism declined. In January 2017 the index dipped to -20. Although it rose to -16 in April, it was 42 points below its 2015 level. These developments eroded confidence in the government's economic policies. In March 2015 Ipsos-MORI found that 53 per cent of respondents agreed that 'In the long term, this government's policies will improve the state of Britain's economy' and 39 per cent disagreed, a net score of +14. By March 2017 the equivalent figures were 44 per cent and 50 per cent, producing a net score of -6.[45]

FIGURE 8.3: *Economic optimism index, 2010–2017*
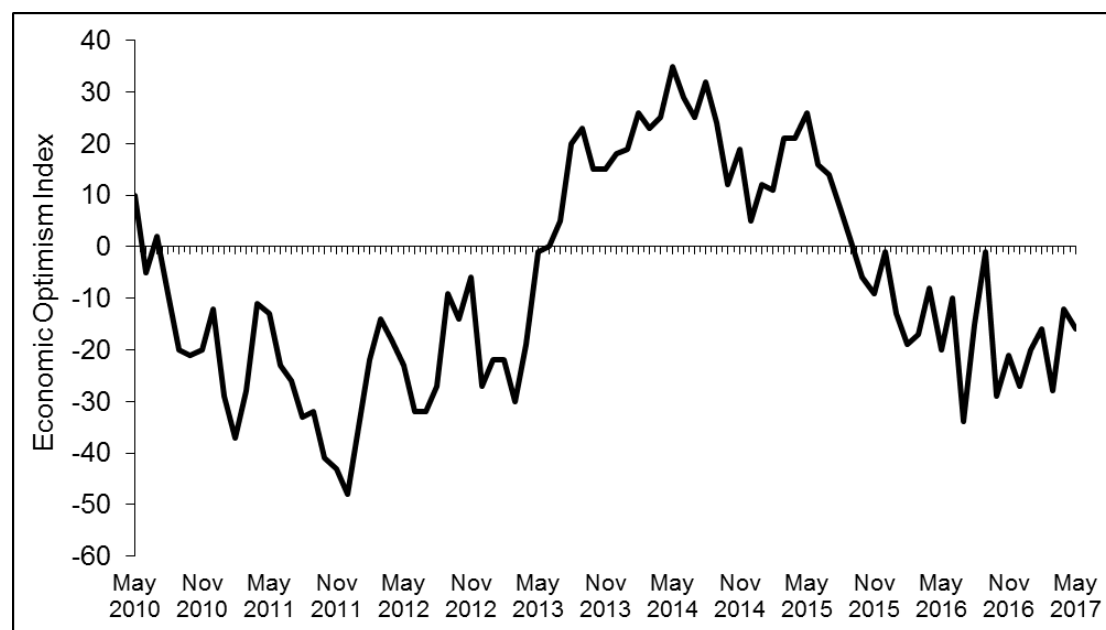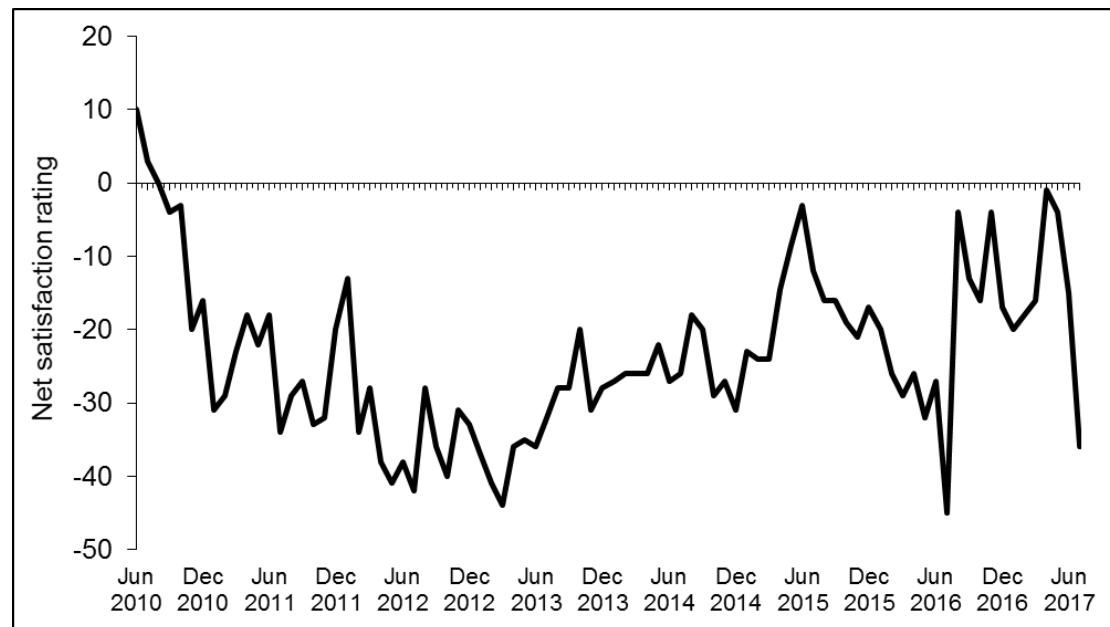

Source: Ipsos MORI

The costs of ruling

The general election gave the public the opportunity to pass judgment on the government's record. The Conservatives had been in power from May 2010 until June 2017. They had presided over austerity and had been responsible for their fair share of policy blunders and U-turns. They had reorganised the NHS despite complaining loudly about previous 'pointless' reorganisations.[46] They had introduced the so-called 'bedroom tax' that was said to be responsible for splitting up families. The government found that almost every policy decision—let alone blunder—created a grievance among one group of voters or another. Like all governments everywhere and at all times, it was vulnerable to 'the costs of ruling', the tendency to lose support net of all other factors because it was blamed for everything.[47] In 2015 the Tories had been protected from judgment on its record by its junior coalition partner. In 2015 the Liberal Democrats bore the electoral brunt of public anger and were all but wiped out. By 2017 the Conservatives had to take all the blame themselves.

Figure 8.4 displays net satisfaction with the government—the percentage of respondents saying they were satisfied minus the percentage saying they were dissatisfied—from June 2010 right through to June 2017 as measured by Ipsos-MORI.[48] Between 2010 and 2015 levels of net satisfaction broadly corresponded to a well-established pattern: a brief electoral honeymoon, followed by a long trough with consistently low satisfaction and a rally before the general election. The short 2015-17 parliament displays some of the same U-shaped features. Net satisfaction was relatively high in late 2015 but declined in the spring of 2016 when it averaged -30. This was followed by a sharp fall after the referendum. Satisfaction leaped upwards in August following May's elevation to prime minister. By the time that she had called

her snap election net satisfaction was -1. As the government's record came under scrutiny in the campaign, it fell to -15, some 4-points lower than it had been in 2015.

FIGURE 8.4: *Net satisfaction with the government, 2010–2017*

Source: Ipsos MORI

It is still possible for governments with negative net levels of satisfaction to win re-election, however. It was no impediment to the Conservatives in 1983, 1987 and 1992. It was no impediment to Labour in 2001 and 2005. Figure 8.5 displays the association between net satisfaction and the government's share of the Labour–Conservative vote—the votes secured by the two main parties of government—in thirteen general elections from 1970.[49] Net satisfaction is positively correlated with vote for the governing party: the higher the satisfaction, the higher the expected vote.[50] Figure 8.5 suggests that the Tories' share of the two-party vote in 2017 is pretty much what one might expect given net satisfaction. Fom this perspective, the Conservatives share of the two party vote should have come as no surprise.

FIGURE 8.5: *Net satisfaction with the government, 2010–2017*
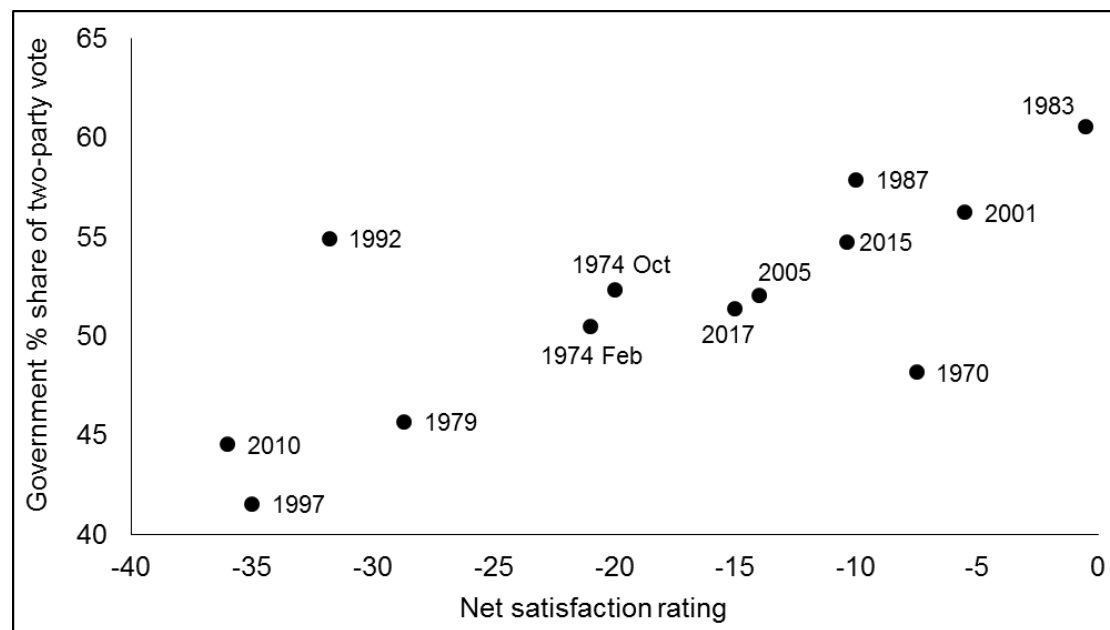
Source: Author's calculations

Competence and trust

Elections do not simply provide voters with a chance to cast judgments on incumbents—they also provide voters with a choice between competing futures. Both the policies offered to voters and prospective evaluations of competence matter. By April 2017 large portions of the electorate thought that the Tories had a poor record but were still more competent than Labour. This can be simply illustrated by responses to YouGov's regular questions about which party was best able to handle certain problems, such as the NHS, economy and Brexit, and which are reported by Nicholas Allen in table 1.3.[51]. The evidence shows that Labour was generally advantaged on the issues of the NHS and housing, while the Conservatives were advantaged on security issues like law and order, immigration and the economy. Indeed, the Conservatives lead on the economy actually grew, which is striking given the deterioration in the economy. In early January 2017 their lead on this issue was

16-points. By mid-April it had increased to 24-points. Doubts about Labour were clearly a major of Tory advantage.

FIGURE 8.6: *Evaluations of Conservative and Labour ability to reduce immigration, 2015–2017*
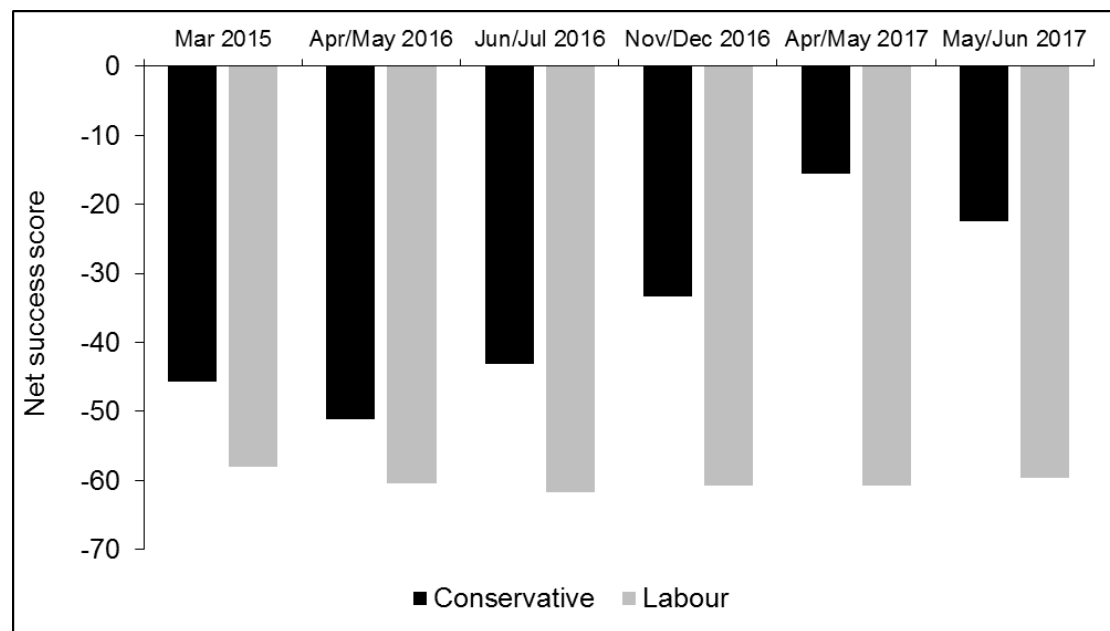
Source: British Election Study

Since the issue of immigration has attracted a lot of attention it is worth noting that the Conservatives were effective in persuading the electorate that they would 'take back control' of the borders. One indicator of the Tories' progress on the issue is provided by responses to a question posed by the BES: 'Would any of the following political parties be successful … in reducing the level of immigration?' Figure 8.6 displays the net score—the percentage saying the party would reduce immigration minus the percentage saying they would not reduce—for both the Conservative and Labour parties over time. The Tories initially struggled to convince on immigration. In April/May 2016 their net score was -51. It was still negative by November/ December 2016 but had risen to -33. By April/May 2017 it had risen to -15. Both their

embrace of the referendum result and the prime minister's rhetoric about taking back control reduced this negative. Evaluations of Labour, by contrast, did not improve.

Ironically, the Conservative achievement in reassuring more voters that they could control the borders had a less positive effect than it might have. In the run up to the 2017 election, there was no repeat of the European-wide migration crisis of previous summers and the issue was less visible. Fewer voters thought immigration was 'the most important issue' by the time the Tories had persuaded the electorate that they were taking back control. Their advantage over Labour thus counted for less.

A campaign that mattered

When the prime minister announced she would seek an early election, the Tories were around 20-points ahead in the polls. Labour appeared to be floundering. In the first couple of weeks of the campaign Conservative support fluctuated around 46 per cent. From around 14 May it drifted down a little but rallied to around 44 per cent on the eve of the election. Support for Labour, by contrast, started in the mid-20s and trended upwards remorselessly, as shown in figure 1.5. By late May it had increased to the mid-30s as former Greens, Liberal Democrats, abstainers and Tory Remainers flocked to Labour. By early June Labour appeared almost to have closed the gap, although the final polls gave the Tories a lead of 8 points. In the event, these polls understated Labour's share by 4 points and overstated the Tories by about 2 points, massively overestimating the actual 2.4-point lead.

The improvement in Labour's standing over the course of the campaign was the largest ever observed ahead of any general election since polling began in 1945. There does not appear to be any obvious turning point, such as that which was observed in 2010 after the first ever televised prime ministerial debate.[52] The almost if

not quite linear trends in both major parties' poll ratings suggest that their vote shares were returning to their long-term levels based on the policy mood, economic conditions and satisfaction with the government's record. There are good reasons for thinking that the campaign had an almost catalytic effect on vote choice.

From 'strong and stable' to 'weak and wobbly'

A great deal of the Conservative campaign was carried on the shoulders of Theresa May. Her elevation to the prime ministership less than a year before had appeared to represent a break with the past, as described by Nicholas Allen in chapter 1. David Cameron, George Osborne and Michael Gove, the modernising members of the 'Notting Hill set', all left the cabinet, and May pointedly distanced herself government from the 'privileged few'. She promised to protect workers' rights after Brexit and have workers serve on the boards of companies. She even proposed to impose controls on energy prices. The 2017 manifesto declared: 'We must reject the ideological templates provided by the socialist left and the libertarian right and instead embrace the mainstream view that recognises the good that government can do'.[53]

May promised a different style of leadership appropriate to a national emergency. She was described, and liked to think of herself, as a 'bloody difficult woman'.[54] Her pledge to provide 'strong and stable government in the national interest' was repeated *ad nauseam*. The implicit claim was that she was a leader in the mould of Margaret Thatcher, who would bring the warring factions in her own party together, win an election and use her enhanced authority to get the best deal from the EU. This idea was appealing to many worried about Britain's post-Brexit future.

Although May promised change it was slow to materialise. The shift in the policy mood required a loosening of the purse strings. Revealingly, the Tories' most

popular manifesto proposal was to increase spending on the NHS by at least £8 billion. This secured 79 per cent support.[55] Nevertheless, the Tories continued to emphasise fiscal prudence. She told a nurse who had not had a pay rise in seven years: 'there's no magic money tree'.[56]

Other polices raised questions about whether the prime minister offered change. Her commitment to lift the ban on new selective schools was straight out of the Thatcher playbook, offering opportunity to a few gifted children from less advantaged backgrounds. Her commitment to allowing a 'free vote' on hunting with dogs—an issue that animated a small minority of the landed wealthy—seemed incompatible with the pledge not to govern in the interests of the privileged few. 'Stability' was reassuring if you thought that the country was going in the right direction. It was *not* reassuring if you thought that it was not.

In 2007, following series of political calamities and policy failures, the Liberal Democrat Vince Cable produced one of the most famous put-downs in British parliamentary history. He said of Gordon Brown, the then prime minister: 'The house has noticed [his] remarkable transformation in the past few weeks from Stalin to Mr Bean, creating chaos out of order, rather than order out of chaos'.[57] Brown's reputation never recovered. Theresa May underwent a similar transformation from April to June 2017, from being 'strong and stable' to 'weak and wobbly'. The immediate cause of her fall in public esteem related to policy. As Nicholas Allen recounts in chapter 1, the Conservative manifesto made bold proposals to fund social care that alarmed pensioners. After a few days of token resistance the prime minister announced a U-turn right in the middle of the campagn. This may have not been quite so damaging if it had not followed two other U-turns. The government had backed down on proposals to reform national insurance in the March budget. The prime

minister then performed the mother of all U-turns and announced the election. This new U-turn was part of an emerging pattern –and it was at odds with the prime minister's self-image.

Theresa May might have been less damaged by these changes had she admitted to her mistakes. Instead, she tried to maintain her reputation by repeating 'Nothing has changed. Nothing has changed'. A YouGov poll found that while 33 per cent said that U-turns are 'a good sign—showing they [politicians] are willing to listen and change their minds', 37 per cent said that 'U-turns are normally a bad sign—showing they are incompetent, weak, or have not thought their policies through properly in advance'.[58] The week before the manifesto launch a YouGov poll had suggested that 25 per cent thought the Conservative party had 'lots of policies that seem well thought through' and just 20 per cent thought that they 'have lots of policies, but they don't seem very well thought through'. One week later 12 per cent thought that they had well thought through policies and 32 per cent thought that they did not.

May had promised new policies and a new style of leadership. The new policies were constrained by ideology and inertia. Her leadership was undermined by a tendency to change her mind under pressure. Her preference for carefully controlled media events and her refusal to take part in the televised debates sealed her growing reputation for insecurity. The Conservative party's advantage on competence nose-dived across every issue from mid-May onwards. So did assessments of May as the 'best prime minister'. Conservative support was shallow indeed.

Despite the failures of her campaign, Theresa May still enjoyed a lead of 12-points over Jeremy Corbyn on the question of who would make the best prime minister (see Figure 1.4). This was lower than the 14-point lead that David Cameron

had enjoyed over Ed Miliband two years earlier and far smaller than May's apparent

lead in April. The movement in the polls and outcome confirmed that she was not the

awesome electoral weapon that she or her advisers assumed. Nevertheless,

comparisons of the two leaders in 2017 still probably benefited the Conservatives.

Some 93 per cent of Tory voters thought that she would make the best prime minister,

compared with just 55 per cent of Labour voters who thought the same of Corbyn.

'Jez we can'

The Labour election campaign began with low expectations. Labour MPs trooped

back to their constituencies convinced that they would be hammered at the polls.

Some decided to ignore the national campaign and fight on their own records. Many

did not extend the customary invitations to their leader to visit their constituency.

Jeremy Corbyn was thought to be a handicap rather than a source of appeal.[59]

Despite these forebodings, the first few days of the campaign witnessed a rise

of around 4-points in support for Labour in the YouGov polls.[60] This was simply the

result of former Labour voters returning home or anti-Conservative voters shifting to

Labour when they realised that their preferred candidate could not win in their

constituency. As the campaign wore on the election came to be seen as a two-horse

race between the Conservative and Labour parties outside Northern Ireland, including,

to some extent, in Scotland. Labour's share in the polls trended upwards. Even

campaign gaffes, such as Diane Abbott's inability to cost Labour's policies on

policing on 27 April, had no visible impact.

Ironically, given Corbyn's reciprocated antipathy towards Tony Blair,

Labour's campaign slogan 'For the many, not the few' was drawn from the new

clause 4 of Labour's constitution that Blair had penned. There may have been

something of a whiff of New Labour in the central proposition of the party's manifesto that there could be improvements in public services by raising levels of corporation tax and income tax levels on the wealthiest 5 per cent. The proposal that corporations and the rich should pay more tax matched the leftward drift in the policy mood. Between 18-19 May, YouGov found that 58 per cent supported increasing the top rate of income tax.[61] Another proposal to cap rent rises in line with inflation was supported by 65 per cent. The party's commitments to nationalise the railways, the national grid and water companies were not quite as popular, but still secured the approval of 46 per cent. Proposals to abolish tuition fees were wildly popular with young people and 49 per cent of the public in total supported this proposal.

The manifesto helped to reassure voters abut Labour. At the start of May only 10 per cent of YouGov respondents thought that Labour had 'lots of policies that seem well thought through' and 20 per cent thought they 'don't have many policies and those they do have are not well thought through'. By the end of May these figures had changed to 24 per cent and 10 per cent respectively. This did not represent a transformation but it suggested that Labour was being given a hearing. The popularity of Labour's policies contributed to the reduction in the Conservatives advantage on competence from mid-May onwards across all issues.

Both the Conservatives and Labour were hampered by their associations with past failures, which made them vulnerable to populist appeals. Theresa May tried to put distance between her and Cameron by claiming to govern on behalf of the 'mainstream' but was hampered by the fact that she had served for seven years in his cabinet. Jeremy Corbyn, on the other hand, was a genuine outsider. As Thomas Quinn describes in chapter 2, his elevation to the leadership and the refusal of long-serving Labour MPs to serve in his shadow cabinet resulted in wholesale changes on Labour's

front bench, promoting many people who were neither associated with Blair and New Labour or with the financial crash under Gordon Brown. The public did notice the splits in Labour but these developments enhanced Corbyn's status as an outsider.

Labour's manifesto energised its members. Corbyn's election as leader had presaged a significant boost in Labour's membership to over 500,000 compared with the Tories 180,000. These new members brought and energy and commitment to the business of campaigning. Many had learned how to use social media to mobilise support for Corbyn in the two Labour leadership contests of 2015 and 2016. They now applied these methods to campaign on behalf of Labour in the country. Blogs such as the *Canary* and *Another Angry Voice* churned out arguments to support Labour and rebuttals to counter the pro-Conservative bias of the national press. Younger voters in particular relied on social media for their news and opinions. Those who relied on these sources were, in turn, more likely to vote Labour.[62]

The influx of new members undoubtedly had another positive effect on Labour's campaign: it meant that there was a larger number of people to deliver leaflets, canvass potential voters and mobilise the vote. In some places the official Labour campaign was supplemented by contributions from Momentum, the grass-roots movement that was formed to support Corbyn. Some of this activity may have duplicated the official Labour campaign so it is difficult to establish its unique impact. For the first two or three weeks of the campaign, Labour appeared to be fighting a defensive campaign and focussed on consolidating its safe seats. Some Labour MPs ran a campaign that emphasised their constituency service and distanced themselves from the national campaign and their leader. There is evidence that such MPs fared better when the votes were counted.[63]

The leftward shift of the electorate, the deteriorating economy and the low esteem in which the government was held, together with Labour's policy appeal and the energetic campaigns waged by Labour, led to a rise in evaluations of Labour's competence and Corbyn's personal standing during the campaign. Yet as noted above, only just over a half of Labour voters reported that he would make the best prime minister. Around one in ten Labour voters reported that Theresa May would make the best prime minister, and around one-third reported that either that neither would or that they didn't know. The euphoria that followed the election outcome cannot obscure the fact that evaluations of Corbyn's as a potential prime minister held Labour back in 2017.

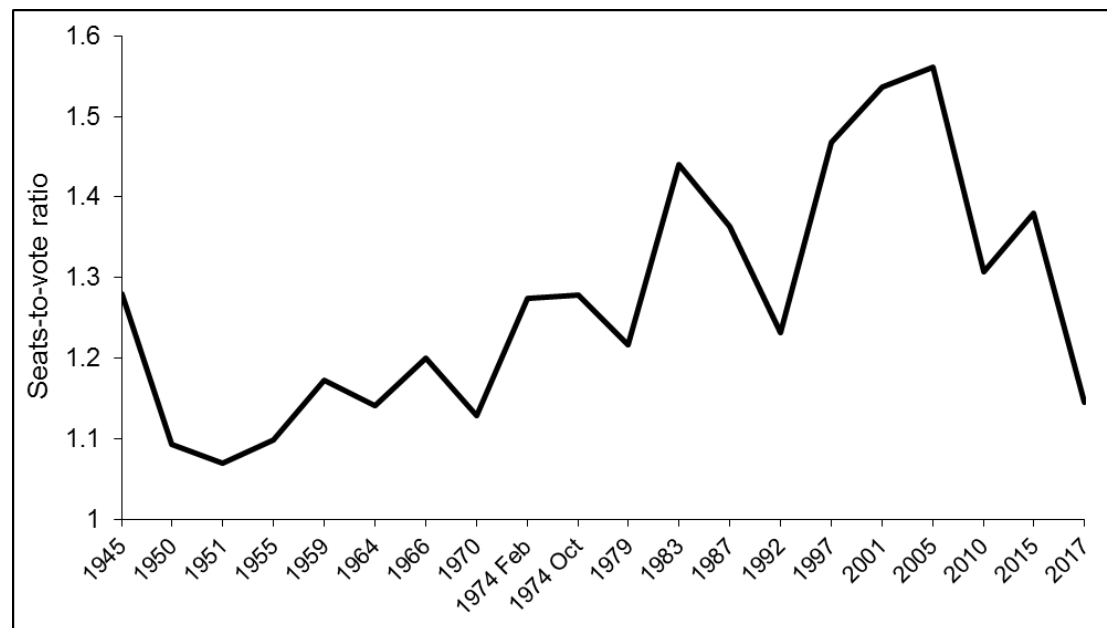**The electoral system: the other national lottery**

The electoral system mechanically translates votes into seats by applying the plurality rule in all the UK's 650 constituencies. This simple rule states that the candidate with the most votes wins. Nevertheless, the way in which it transforms votes into seats at the national level is difficult to predict because so much depends on the geographical distribution of the vote.

The plurality electoral system has been described as 'Britain's other national lottery'.[64] The simplest way to illustrate the weird and wonderful way that it operates is to examine the seats-to-votes (s/v) ratios i.e. the percentage of seats won by party X divided by the percentage of votes won by the same party. These ratios vary across parties and time. The system penalises parties that have wide but geographically dispersed support. The s/v ratio for the Liberal Democrats, for example, has varied between 0.2 and 0.4. The system generally favours parties that have either geographically concentrated or high levels of support. The s/v ratios for the Tories

and Labour, for example, usually exceed 1. The governing party usually enjoys a winner's bonus so that its s/v exceeds that of the opposition. In 2017 the s/v ratio was 1.2 for the Conservatives and 1.0 for Labour.

One of the reasons why the s/v ratio was higher for the Tories in 2017 was that the average plurality was 13,423 for seats won by Labour and 12,481 for seats won by the Conservatives. In places like Liverpool and London, Labour piled up massive pluralities in some constituencies. This may be related to Labour's campaign, which initially focussed on consolidating their core seats. To be sure, the Conservatives piled up impressive majorities in more rural or gentrified places North East Hampshire, Maidenhead, East Hampshire, North Dorset and Meon Valley. On average, however, the Tory vote was more efficiently distributed than Labour. Other factors such as the number of voters in a constituency and differences in turnout can also influence the s/v, since—other things being equal—it takes fewer votes to win a constituency with fewer voters.[65]

The unpredictable operation of the electoral system in 2017 can be illustrated by comparing it with previous general elections. Figure 8.7 displays the s/v ratio for the party that went on to form the government between 1945 and 2017. The ratio has varied from a low of 1.07 in 1951, to a high of 1.56 in 2005. In principle, therefore, the system could translate 42.3 per cent of the vote into anything from ($42.3 \times 1.07 =$) 45.3 per cent of the seats in the 'worst' year for the governing party to ($42.3 \times 1.56 =$) 66.0 per cent in the 'best' year. In 2017 the s/v ratio was only 1.14 and the Conservatives only obtained 48.5 per cent of seats. By contrast, a Labour lead of 2.8 points in 2005 translated into 355 seats and a majority of 66. In 2017 a similar Tory lead of 2.4 points translated into 317 seats, some nine seats short of an absolute majority.

FIGURE 8.7: *The seats-to-votes ratio for the governing party, 1945–2017*

Source: Author's calculations

In short, Theresa May gambled the Conservative party's 2015 majority on her personal appeal, the weakness of the opposition and the lottery that is the electoral system—and she lost.

The 2017 general election also resulted in the re-establishment of traditional patterns of party competition at the constituency level.[66] Table 8.6 shows which two parties were in first or second place at selected general elections. The traditional pattern is illustrated by 1966. In that election the Conservatives or Labour came either first or second in 574 constituencies. By 2010 this figure had fallen to just 286 seats. From the 1970s onwards, the Liberals and their successors became the second placed competitors in many seats held by the major parties. In 2010 the Liberal Democrats came second in 245 seats. They also won 58 seats. The post-coalition backlash in 2015 left the Liberal Democrats in second place in just 46 seats. Labour's revival in 2017 meant that the Liberal Democrat retreat of 2015 was carried forward another two

years. The Liberal Democrats came second in just 35 seats (28 Tory-held and seven

Labour seats). The collapse of UKIP, however, meant that two major parties filled the

top two places in 522 seats. Had Scotland not been dominated by competition

between Unionists and SNP, the circle from 1966 to 2017 would have been complete.

Superficially at least, Britain had returned to 'traditional' two-party politics. Future

electoral contests look likely to be framed in a different way from now on.

TABLE 8.6: *The numbers of constituencies according to which parties occupied first and second places at selected elections*

First place	Second place	1966	2010	2015	2017
Con	Lab	222	139	207	276
Lab	Con	352	147	169	246
Lib Dem	Con	19	167	46	28
Lab	Lib Dem	10	38	4	8
Lib Dem	Lab	7	78	0	7
Other*		5	46	203	66

* These figures exclude the seat won by the speaker of the House of Commons, traditionally not contested by the main parties

Source: Johnston et al., 'Coming Full Circle: the 2017 UK General Election and the Changing Electoral Map'.

Conclusions

This chapter has sought to explain why the Conservatives lost their majority but still

won. Important parts of the story have been covered in other chapters. As John

Curtice has shown in chapter 3 and as Paul Whiteley, Harold Clarke and Matthew

Goodwin have shown in chapter 4, the collapse of the Liberal Democrats from 2010

and UKIP after 2016 meant that that, across most of the UK, the choice effectively

boiled down to that of either a Conservative or Labour government. This chapter has

showed that the electorate was volatile and up for grabs and that the policy mood had

shifted leftwards in response to austerity and tax cuts. The post-referendum economy was subject to uncertainty and the Conservative government had a weak record. The Tories fought a dull and uninspiring campaign, while Labour caught both the policy and anti-system *moods* of the times. The electoral system funnelled this mess of motivations and causes into choices. A broad electoral coalition was formed out of traditional Labour voters, former non-voters, former Greens, former Conservative Remainers, former Liberal Democrats and Unionist social democrats in Scotland. The electoral system transformed these changes into a hung parliament.

At this point it is perhaps worth remembering that it is always easier to explain (or rationalise) than to predict. All but one of the brave forecasters who put their reputations on the line in 2017 had their fingers burnt.[67] Curiously, none felt the need to incorporate either the policy mood or policy into their forecasting models. Nor did they factor in the impact of the party campaigns. It may well be that the 2017 election is a one-off with little to teach us about elections in general. Yet, if the 2017 election has any lesson for students of British politics, it is surely that policy and unpredictable campaigns can matter. That being so, would-be forecasters are well-advised to heed Winston Churchill's advice to politicians: those seeking to predict election results need 'the ability to foretell what is going to happen, tomorrow, next week, next month and next year. And to have the ability afterwards to explain why it didn't'.[68]

Notes

[1] Jack Maidment, 'Theresa May's early general election speech in full', *Daily Telegraph*, 18 April 2017.

[2] Expert Predictions of the 2017 General Election: a survey by Stephen Fisher, Chris Hanretty and Will Jennings on behalf of the U.K. Political Studies Association. Available at: https://www.psa.ac.uk/psa/news/expert-predictions-2017-general-election-survey-stephen-fisher-chris-hanretty-and-will, last accessed 24 October 2017

[3] Andreas Murr, Mary Stegmaier and Michael S. Lewis-Beck, 'How did the U.K. election forecasts do?' *Washington Post*, 12 June 2017.

[4] Alan Travis, Pollsters believe general election is 'foregone conclusion' *Guardian* 18 April 2017.

[5] Lukas Audickas, Oliver Hawkins and Richard Cracknell House of Commons Library Briefing Paper, *UK Election Statistics: 1918-2017*. London: House of Commons, 2017.

[6] Indeed, it was only exceeded by the performance of the Liberals between 1970 and February 1974.

[7] This panel data evidence provides a more reliable indication of the flows than those based on recollections of past vote recorded two years after the first election.

[8] Since there were more 2015 Tory voters these cross-currents cancelled each other out.

[9] In the referendum campaign by contrast, former non-voters appeared to vote Leave.

[10] See Oliver Heath and Matthew Goodwin, 'The 2017 General Election, Brexit and the Return to Two-Party Politics: An Aggregate-Level Analysis of the Result', *The Political Quarterly* 88 (2016): 345-358,

[11] Some analysts treat partisan dealignment as a consequence rather than a cause of volatility. See Anthony Heath, Roger Jowell and John Curtice, *How Britain Votes*. Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1985.

[12] Ivor Crewe, Bo Sarlvik and James Alt, 'Partisan dealignment in Britain, 1964-74', *British Journal of Political Science* 7 (1977): 129-190.

[13] Nicholas Allen, 'The restless electorate' in John Bartle and Anthony King (eds) *Britain at the Polls 2005*. New Jersey: Chatham House, 2016.

[14] John Lloyd, *What the Media are Doing to our Politics*. London: Constable, 2004.

[15] Maidment, 'Theresa May's early general election speech'.

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[49] The data from 1970 to 2001 are from Gallup and relate to approval. This wording tends to produce very similar results to 'satisfaction'.

[50] The two outliers that don't quite fit the general pattern are 1970 and 1992, two elections that are associated with polling errors when the satisfaction ratings may have been biased. I am grateful to Will Jennings for this suggestion.

[51] See YouGov, Best party on issues:

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centre'.

[53] The Conservative Party, *Forward Together: Our Plan for a Stronger Britain and a
Prosperous Future*. London: Conservative Party, 2017, p. 7.

[54] On 5 July 2016 Kenneth Clarke and Malcolm Riftkind, two senior Tory MPs, were
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[55] Matthew Smith, 'How popular are the parties' policies?', 22 May 2017/
https://yougov.co.uk/news/2017/05/22/how-popular-are-parties-manifesto-policies/.
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[56] Lizzie Dearden, 'Theresa May prompts anger after telling nurse who hasn't had pay
rise for eight years: 'There's no magic money tree', *Independent*, 3 June 2017.

[57] *Hansard*, 28 November 2007, column 275.

[58] YouGov poll, 22-23 May 2017,
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warns the party has 'abandoned' working class' *Daily Telegraph*, 12 May 2017.

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