Case Study

UK General Election 2017

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Background: why hold a general election?
The June 2017 general election led to one of the one of the most surprising political reversals of modern times. Prime Minister Theresa May called the election, confident of a decisive victory over a Labour Party under the left-wing leadership of Jeremy Corbyn. Instead she lost her overall majority and was left clinging to office as the head of a minority government. So why did the prime minister call the election in the first place?

May’s announcement that there would be a general election on 8 June took the political world by surprise. This was barely two years after the previous contest had been held and so would not have been expected until 2020. The prime minister herself had more than once dismissed speculation that she might call an early election. In any case, since 2011 the date of the general election had been set by the Fixed-term Parliaments Act.

How did Theresa May get around the Fixed-term Parliaments Act?
May used the provision of the act that allows an early election if it is supported by two-thirds of MPs. In a vote taken the day after her announcement, 522 out of 650 MPs voted for an election with only 13 against. The official Labour opposition, which voted for the election, could hardly be seen trying to evade an opportunity to put its case to the electorate as it would have appeared cowardly. The Scottish National Party abstained on the grounds that it supported fixed terms. The Fixed-term Parliaments Act itself was passed in 2011 largely for reasons of political convenience – during the early part of the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition – to give the coalition a guaranteed term of office at a time of considerable uncertainty, free of anxiety about speculation regarding the date of the next election.
Why did Theresa May decide to call an election?

The reason given by the prime minister was the need for certainty and stability as the UK entered the process of negotiating withdrawal from the European Union. ‘The country is coming together,’ she declared, ‘but Westminster is not.’ This was a reference to potential opposition to the government’s handling of the Brexit process from Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the SNP. All of these parties had accused May of pursuing ‘hard Brexit’ – in other words, a preference for a sharp break with the EU rather than a willingness to compromise.

It was also widely believed that Theresa May was seeking party advantage. With the Conservatives 20 points ahead of Labour in the opinion polls at the start of the campaign, there were widespread expectations that they could win a majority as large as 100 seats. This would have been an extraordinary improvement on the 17 seat majority that May inherited on becoming prime minister in July 2016. An election victory would also enable May to win her own personal mandate, independent of that won by David Cameron two years earlier, and possibly allow her to jettison policy commitments made by him.

Another reason may have been that, had she allowed the electoral cycle to run its course, May would have been preparing for a general election in 2019–20 – just at the time when the Brexit negotiations would be coming to an end. A prime minister in such a position might struggle to win favourable terms from the EU, and if the talks went wrong it would damage her chances of re-election.

As it turned out, these assumptions were to prove catastrophically wrong for May as the election on 8 June resulted in a **hung parliament**.

State of the nations: parliament before the election

Parliament was dissolved on 3 May to allow for a month of campaigning before voting took place on 8 June. This meant that in all 650 seats there were no MPs for this period, only candidates. The Conservatives had planned to reform the parliamentary boundaries, reducing the number of constituencies to 600, but this had not occurred before the election was called. The seats that had been recommended to be dropped in a Conservative-commissioned review included a disproportionate number held by Labour MPs.

The government continued in the absence of parliament, with ministers running their departments and the prime minister still in charge. For example, Theresa May attended a scheduled G7 summit meeting in Sicily during the campaign. However, it is a convention that no new policy initiatives are started during an election period, an interval known as ‘purdah’.

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**Key term**

**Prerogative power**
also known as ‘royal prerogative’, one of a number of powers that once belonged to the monarch but are now exercised by the prime minister or other ministers, including the right to dissolve parliament, to grant honours and deploy armed forces.

**Hung parliament**
a situation after a general election when no single party has a majority in the House of Commons. This happened in 2010, when David Cameron assembled a parliamentary majority after the election by forming a coalition government with the Liberal Democrats under Nick Clegg.
What happened at the 2015 general election?
The 2015 election gave David Cameron, the then Conservative Party leader, a narrow majority, against widespread predictions of a hung Parliament. There were two other remarkable developments at this election. The SNP took 56 out of the 59 seats in Scotland, ending decades of Labour domination. This left the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats holding one seat each north of the border. The Liberal Democrats, who had been in a coalition government with the Conservatives in 2010–15, were wiped out – even in their former heartlands of south-west England. Table 1 shows these results.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Number of seats</th>
<th>% of seats</th>
<th>% of votes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>331</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>36.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>30.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SNP</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Democrat</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UKIP</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>12.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plaid Cymru</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic Unionist</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sinn Fein</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Democratic and Labour Party</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ulster Unionist</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Results of the 2015 general election

What happened to the balance of power between the two general elections?
There were ten by-elections in the short 2015–17 parliament. Only in two of these did the seat change hands. In Richmond Park the sitting Conservative MP and prominent environmentalist, Zac Goldsmith, chose to fight a by-election in protest at Theresa May’s decision to authorise the building of a third runway at Heathrow. He lost to the Liberal Democrats, bringing their total of MPs to nine, but recovered his seat in the 2017 election. Labour lost Copeland – a Cumbrian seat covering an area they had held since 1935 – to the Conservatives, who retained it in 2017.

Several UK parties changed their leader after the 2015 election.

- Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg took responsibility for his party’s poor showing in the election and resigned as leader, to be succeeded in July 2015 by Tim Farron, who had played no part in the coalition.
- Jeremy Corbyn, a long-standing left-wing backbencher, unexpectedly won the Labour Party leadership in September 2015 after Ed Miliband, leader since 2010, stood down. This caused a division within the party since the unconventional Corbyn was popular with the party rank and file, but struggled to control a parliamentary party dominated by moderates from the New Labour era. After a leadership challenge in 2016, Corbyn won a second victory.
- David Cameron resigned as Conservative leader and prime minister after the defeat of the ‘Remain’ side in the EU referendum, which he had championed. He was succeeded by Theresa May in July 2016 after each of her parliamentary party rivals were eliminated.
Green Party leader Natalie Bennett was replaced in September 2016 by a joint leadership consisting of the party’s only MP, Caroline Lucas (Brighton Pavilion) and Jonathan Bartley.

UKIP’s long-serving leader, Nigel Farage, also stepped aside, to be briefly succeeded by Diane James and then, in November 2016, by Paul Nuttall. UKIP had one MP in the 2015 Parliament, Douglas Carswell (Clacton). He left the party to become an independent shortly before the 2017 election was announced, and then declared that he would not stand for re-election.

In Northern Ireland the largest party, the Democratic Unionist Party, also gained a new leader, Arlene Foster. She was the first minister in the Northern Ireland Assembly until January 2017 when a quarrel with the largest nationalist party, Sinn Fein, led to the suspension of the power-sharing government followed by fresh assembly elections in March, which failed to resolve the deadlock.

Setting out their stalls: the parties and their manifestos

Each party set out its policy proposals in a manifesto. Table 2 highlights some key policies of the three main UK parties.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy area</th>
<th>Conservative</th>
<th>Labour</th>
<th>Liberal Democrat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Handling Brexit</td>
<td>• Leave the single market and control immigration but seek ‘special partnership’ with the EU</td>
<td>• Accept result of the referendum and ending of freedom of movement</td>
<td>• Negotiate continued membership of single market and freedom of movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• ‘Great’ Repeal Bill to convert EU law into UK law, then parliament to decide which laws to retain</td>
<td>• Different negotiating strategy to the Conservatives, focused on continuing workers’ rights and environmental protections</td>
<td>• Hold second referendum on terms of the Brexit deal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• ‘No deal is better than a bad deal’</td>
<td>• ‘No deal is better than a bad deal’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taxation and the economy</td>
<td>• Balanced budget by 2025</td>
<td>• £250 billion stimulus package delivered by a National Investment Bank</td>
<td>• Increase all income tax bands by 1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• ‘Low tax’ party but no promise not to increase income tax or National Insurance</td>
<td>• Nationalise rail, Royal Mail, water companies</td>
<td>• Borrow £100 billion to invest in infrastructure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• No increase in VAT</td>
<td>• 45% income tax rate on those earning more than £80,000, rising to 50% at £123,000</td>
<td>• Reverse Conservative cuts to corporation tax</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Corporation tax to fall to 17% by 2020</td>
<td>• Increase corporation tax to 26% by 2020</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• No increase in National Insurance or VAT</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key terms

**Manifesto**
a document in which a political party sets out the programme that it would implement if successful in winning office.

**Single market**
the European Union as an area without restrictions on the free movement of goods, services, capital and people.

**Corporation tax**
a tax on profits made by UK companies, reduced from 26 per cent to 19 per cent between 2010 and 2017.

**Nationalise**
to take an industry or service into state ownership – a policy traditionally associated with the Labour Party, before Tony Blair dropped it as part of his efforts to modernise the party and make it more business-friendly in the 1990s.
Key terms

**Triple lock**
a principle introduced by the coalition, that the value of the state pension should track average wages, prices or 2.5 per cent, whichever is highest.

**Winter fuel allowance**
financial assistance with heating bills, paid to pensioners regardless of income since 1997.

**Bedroom tax**
the ‘spare room subsidy’ introduced by the coalition government, involving the reduction of housing benefit paid to council tenants living in properties deemed to be too large for their needs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy area</th>
<th>Conservative</th>
<th>Labour</th>
<th>Liberal Democrat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Welfare benefits</td>
<td>• Replace ‘triple lock’ on pensions with pledge that they will match inflation or average wages, whichever is higher</td>
<td>• Retain the triple lock and winter fuel allowance for all pensioners</td>
<td>• Retain triple lock but remove winter fuel allowance from better off pensioners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Means test winter fuel allowance</td>
<td>• Pension age not to rise above 66</td>
<td>• Reverse cuts to some benefits, abolish bedroom tax and restore housing benefit to 18-to-21 year olds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health and social care</td>
<td>• £8 billion extra for NHS and £4 billion for education</td>
<td>• £30 billion invested in NHS over 5 years</td>
<td>• £6 billion a year invested in NHS over 5 years and £7 billion extra for education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Payment for elderly social care can be taken from an estate at death with £100,000 of assets protected</td>
<td>• Integrate social care with NHS; no private sector involvement</td>
<td>• End public sector pay cap</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• End public sector pay cap</td>
<td>• End public sector pay cap</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>• Allow new academically selective schools (grammar schools)</td>
<td>• Opposed to selective schools</td>
<td>• Opposed to selective schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Abolish university tuition fees and reintroduce maintenance grants</td>
<td>• No change to tuition fees but restore maintenance grants for low income students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Selected party policies at the 2017 election

**EXTENSION ACTIVITY**

1. Use Table 2 to identify policy areas where the three main parties were in disagreement. Can you find any common ground between them?

2. Research the three parties’ positions on other policy areas, such as the environment, defence and foreign affairs. A useful resource can be found on the BBC website: see ‘General Election 2017: manifesto guide on where the parties stand’ at www.bbc.co.uk/news/election-2017-39955886

3. Use the same website, or other resources on the internet, to find three key policies for each of the most prominent smaller or regional parties: UKIP, the Green Party, the SNP and Plaid Cymru. Where on the left–right political spectrum would you locate each party?

**Seeking support: the election campaign**

One of the election campaign’s dominant themes, driven by May, was governing competency. Voters were asked to judge which of the two main party leaders was best placed to cope with the challenges of national government and, in particular, of conducting difficult and complex Brexit negotiations. Labour, by contrast, sought to frame the election as an opportunity for a fresh start: to reverse Tory under-investment in public services such as the NHS, and to govern in a manner that was fairer to the disadvantaged in society.
The governing competency issue
The mantra of ‘strong and stable leadership’ was repeated endlessly by May and her supporters. Some commentators noted that she rarely referred to the Conservative Party, instead emphasising that people should vote to strengthen her hand as prime minister. Her ‘battle bus’ carried the slogan ‘Theresa May for Britain’ in large letters. This may have been because she was seeking the votes of working-class former Labour or UKIP voters, in parts of the country where the label ‘Conservative’ has negative connotations. She and her supporters depicted Jeremy Corbyn as lacking judgement and experience. They warned of a ‘coalition of chaos’ if he and his left-wing supporters took office, propped up by a combination of the SNP, Greens and Liberal Democrats – even though Tim Farron stated that his party would not enter a coalition. The Conservative line of attack echoed Cameron’s message in the 2015 election, when he painted a lurid picture of a weak Ed Miliband government, kept in Downing Street by SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon and risking the break-up of the UK.

The Conservatives also criticised Labour for announcing unaffordable spending commitments. They argued that the money saved from Labour’s intended reversal of cuts to corporation tax and capital gains tax had been earmarked for too many different projects, and that they had not costed their plans for the nationalisation of railways, Royal Mail and water companies. The ‘governing competency’ line of attack was given credibility when Diane Abbott, the shadow home secretary until the final week of the campaign, struggled to recall figures when explaining how Labour would fund the recruitment of extra police officers. There was also embarrassment when Jeremy Corbyn was unable to state how much Labour’s planned expansion of free child-care would cost. However, these blunders did not significantly affect Labour’s standing in the polls. Many of the party’s policies were popular. In particular, there was an upsurge in registration to vote among young people, partly explained by support for the pledge to abolish student tuition fees. More generally, people responded to Labour’s promise to support public services and put an end to the limited pay rises of recent years.

The social care U-turn
Midway through the campaign came a major setback to the Conservatives’ efforts to present themselves as the party of strong, decisive government. The manifesto contained a promise that when elderly people needed care, their homes would not have to be sold during their lifetimes to meet the costs. Instead the money could be taken from their estates after death, and a guaranteed £100,000 of their assets would be left untouched. However, there was no announcement of a cap on the amount for which they might be liable. In addition, for the first time, those who received assistance in their own home would have its value taken into account as part of their assets. The ensuing outcry over the weekend of 20–21 May forced the prime minister to announce that the government was looking at a cap after all, prompting claims that she was actually weak and vacillating. The Conservatives had started the campaign with a poll lead of more than 20 points but this fell to single figures, largely because of the unpopularity of what Labour dubbed the ‘dementia tax’. It looked as though Theresa May was taking the elderly – normally seen as a key constituency for the Conservatives – for granted. Unlike Cameron, who had protected benefits for elderly people, she had taken a huge risk with an important section of the electorate. May was also accused of making policy with a small circle of advisers, and of not consulting widely enough among senior party colleagues before setting out the manifesto.
National security and counter-terrorism

Terrorism became a key issue after a radical Islamic suicide bomber killed 22 people at a pop concert in Manchester on 22 May, provoking widespread shock. The election campaign was suspended for three days and the official terror threat designation was raised from ‘severe’ to the higher level of ‘critical’ for several days, with troops supplementing police on the streets. May at once shifted from the persona of campaigning party leader to that of national leader, co-ordinating the government’s response and making statements about the investigation in an appropriately sombre manner. Ministers criticised Jeremy Corbyn for giving a speech in which he argued that the terror threat had been exacerbated by ill-judged British military interventions in the Middle East. Although he made a point of condemning the atrocity, the speech played into an established narrative, that Corbyn was too ready to understand the causes of terrorism, rather than combating challenges to national security. Conservative speakers and newspapers reminded the public that as a backbench MP he had associated with representatives of Sinn Fein, Hamas and other groups linked to terrorism. However, the episode did not benefit the Conservatives, whose poll lead a week after the outrage was a mere seven points.

On the evening of 3 June there was a further terrorist atrocity when Islamic extremists drove a van into people on London Bridge and then ran amok with knives, killing eight bystanders and injuring many more before they were stopped in their tracks by armed police. Once again political debate centred on issues of security and policing. Labour drew attention to the Conservatives’ implementation of cuts to police numbers that had left the country vulnerable. May proposed new measures to crack down on radical Islamic ideology and announced that the Human Rights Act would not be allowed to stand in the way of action. The gap between the Conservatives and Labour remained narrow as polling day approached, although the exact figure varied considerably from one polling company to another, from a lead of 12 points to just one point.

The conduct of the campaign

The nature of the parties’ campaigns was controversial. Unlike in the 2010 and 2015 elections, there were no televised face-to-face debates involving the leaders of the two main parties. This was because the prime minister refused to take part in them. Instead Corbyn and May appeared on two different TV programmes to take questions separately, without facing each other. It left a negative impression when May declined to take part in a leaders’ debate in Cambridge on 31 May, in which Corbyn chose to appear at the last minute. May was represented by Home Secretary Amber Rudd. With all the other party leaders present (apart from SNP leader, Nicola Sturgeon, who was not running for a Westminster seat), May’s absence seemed odd and was frequently referenced by the other leaders. Beyond the TV studios, Corbyn proved to be an effective campaigner, energised when he addressed enthusiastic rallies of his core supporters. May tended to speak at more carefully controlled events, involving smaller numbers of people, and often appeared ill at ease when confronted with difficult questions. It was widely felt that the Conservatives had fought a poor campaign, negative and uninspiring in tone, and too heavily focused on a leader who proved to be insufficiently appealing to voters. By contrast, the Labour message was one of hope – ending austerity and offering positive change. Labour was also more adept than the Tories at using social media to reach younger voters.

Pause & reflect

Using what you have read so far, and other resources available to you, how far would you agree that the decisions made by Theresa May as leader of the Conservative Party provide the most important reason for the outcome of the 2017 election?
Polling day: the results and what they tell us

In a huge shock to the Conservatives, although they remained the largest party in parliament, they lost their overall majority. Far from increasing her personal authority, Theresa May was humiliated. It was a victory only in the narrowest, most technical sense; the Conservatives had actually lost 13 seats, even if their share of the vote had gone up by more than five percentage points. The surprise beneficiary of the election was Jeremy Corbyn, whose party had not only gained 30 seats but had achieved its largest increase in vote share since Clement Attlee’s 1945 victory. Gains included seats in London and southern England such as Kensington, Canterbury and Portsmouth South, which had never been Labour seats. This strengthened Corbyn’s hold on the party, making it virtually impossible for his centre-right, or Blairite, critics to mount another challenge to his leadership.

But the reality was that neither of the two main parties were in a position to form a majority government. For that to happen a party would need a minimum of 326 seats. Even with the support of the other ‘progressive parties’ – such as the SNP and the Green Party – assuming that it was forthcoming, Labour would have fallen short of the required total. As leader of the largest party, May had the constitutional right to make the first attempt to form a government. The only way to make the arithmetic work was for her to seek the support of the largest party in Northern Ireland, the Democratic Unionist Party, which had ten seats in the new House of Commons. The two parties had a great deal of common ground – crucially they are both pro-Brexit – but there remained doubts about the stability of such a combination in the longer term. Some liberal Tories worried about the implications of association with a socially conservative party which is, for example, opposed to gay marriage.

Table 3: Results of the June 2017 general election

Table 3 shows the continuing lack of proportionality associated with the first-past-the-post (FPTP) voting system. The Conservatives won 56 more seats than Labour but their share of the vote was only two percentage points greater. The Liberal Democrats were once again disadvantaged by the system, winning under two per cent of the seats for seven per cent of the vote. As so often before, small parties with geographically scattered support are the main losers under FPTP.
CASE STUDY

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

Study the results for the Richmond Park constituency, shown below. Zac Goldsmith won the seat back in the 2017 election from Sarah Olney. What do the results here show about the way in which the FPTP voting system can work?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidate</th>
<th>Number of votes</th>
<th>Vote share (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zac Goldsmith (Conservative)</td>
<td>28,588</td>
<td>45.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah Olney (Liberal Democrat)</td>
<td>28,543</td>
<td>45.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cate Tuitt (Labour)</td>
<td>5,773</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter Jewell (UKIP)</td>
<td>426</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results and the party system

Many commentators viewed the election as a return to traditional two-party politics. The SNP had enjoyed an unusually high level of success in 2015, winning 56 out of 59 seats in Scotland. They had now lost 21 MPs, including some high-profile individuals, such as former leader Alex Salmond, and the party’s leader in the Commons, Angus Robertson. Twelve of these seats were taken by the Conservatives – one of the few optimistic signs for them in an otherwise disappointing election and, perhaps, partly attributable to the popularity of the Conservatives’ Scottish leader, Ruth Davidson. Six SNP seats went to Labour. Liberal Democrat gains across the UK were modest. Although some well-known figures, such as former Business Secretary Vince Cable, returned to the Commons, former leader Nick Clegg lost his seat, and Tim Farron himself survived with a much reduced majority. Farron resigned the week after the election, citing the incompatibility of party leadership with his evangelical Christian faith. UKIP was annihilated, winning no seats at all and precipitating the resignation of party leader Paul Nuttall. This was not entirely a surprise, as the party had struggled to define its identity after the achievement of its long-term goal of Brexit. Many of those who had voted UKIP in 2015 returned to their traditional political homes, the Conservative and Labour Parties, in 2017.

The share of the vote for the two main UK parties was 82.4 per cent – the highest since 1970 – compared to 67.3 per cent in 2015. However, claims of a return to a two-party system need to be viewed with some care. One estimate suggested that up to 20 per cent of people voted tactically – in other words they ‘gamed the system’ in a bid to defeat their least favoured candidate, rather than voting for the one they preferred. It is also a strange two-party system where the largest party cannot command an independent majority but has to rely on the support of a smaller partner like the DUP.

Political participation in 2017

Turnout was up by two points on the 2015 figure, from 66.4 to 68.7 per cent, a rise in part related to the increased number of young people who registered to vote. The polling company YouGov estimated that 58 per cent of 18–24 year olds turned out, compared to 43 per cent in 2015. This worked mainly in Labour’s favour. The ten constituencies with the highest proportion of 18–24 year olds experienced increases of 14 per cent in the Labour vote. This was partly due to the ‘Corbyn factor’ – although at 68 he was the oldest of the party leaders, his campaign was more attuned to the way in which young people access information, with extensive use being made of video clips shared on social media. Corbyn came across as more
‘authentic’ than other party leaders – not part of a political establishment that they mistrusted. Young people may also have responded positively to Labour’s promise to abolish tuition fees, which affect their generation the most, and they may have been less impressed than their elders by concerns over the affordability of such policies. Certainly they are less likely than older people to associate Corbyn with memories of Old Labour governments of the 1960s and 1970s, struggling to control trade union power and saddled with a reputation for poor economic management.

On the other hand it should be noted that turnout was down in some regions; in Scotland it dropped from 71.1 to 64.4 per cent. Although turnout has been gradually increasing across the UK from the low point of 59 per cent in 2001, it is still below the 1945–97 era average of 76 per cent.

Opinion polls in 2017
The opinion pollsters had learned some lessons from the 2015 contest, when they significantly underestimated Conservative support. The final polls in 2017 were very close to the 42 per cent won by the Conservatives on the day. But, with only one or two exceptions, this time they failed to pick up the rise in Labour support. Ipsos MORI, for example, gave the Conservatives an eight per cent lead over Labour, and ICM one as high as 12 per cent, whereas the actual figure turned out to be 2.5 per cent. It may be that the pollsters underestimated the turnout among younger voters, who were widely expected to boost the Labour vote if they chose to participate. The polling companies may have overcompensated for the way they exaggerated Labour’s popularity in 2015.

The composition of the Commons
As Figure 1 shows, the 2017 House of Commons is more diverse in terms of gender, ethnic identity, sexuality and educational background than its predecessor. However, this steady increase in representation for different groups marks a very slow erosion of the dominant position occupied by white, middle class males who have provided the stereotypical MP for generations. Women make up just over 50 per cent of society, and 13 per cent of the population is composed of ethnic minorities, so their representation in the Commons remains disproportionately low. Independent schools account for only seven per cent of the population, yet 29 per cent of MPs were privately educated and a further 18 per cent attended selective state schools as opposed to comprehensives. This is the first time in history, however, that privately educated MPs have made up less than half of the House of Commons.

![Composition of the House of Commons in 2015 and 2017](image)

Figure 1: The new House of Commons, June 2017
Where now? Post-election analysis and prospects for the future

The most immediate consequence of the election was the need to form a stable government. The UK has been here before. In February 1974 Edward Heath’s failure to win an outright victory as Conservative prime minister, and then his inability to form a coalition with the Liberals, opened the way to a minority Labour government under Harold Wilson. Although Wilson won a small majority in a subsequent election in October 1974, this was eroded by by-election losses and his successor, James Callaghan, was obliged to construct deals with smaller parties in order to stay in office from 1976–79. This is probably the closest parallel in modern times to the situation we face now. Unlike in 2010, when the country again faced a hung parliament, in 2017 Liberal Democrats were not prepared to enter another coalition with the Conservatives. The way in which they had to dilute their ideals as the junior partner, angering their supporters, has made them wary of such partnerships. In addition to this, there is now too much of a difference between them and the Conservatives on the key issue of Brexit.

The Democratic Unionist Party had in fact been giving informal support to the Conservatives since 2015. It was now in a position to exact a price in return for keeping the Conservatives in office on a confidence and supply basis. This included a pledge of £1 billion of extra public spending for Northern Ireland, which provoked the counter-argument that Scotland and Wales deserved a corresponding increase in investment. May’s new partners also dislike her preference for a ‘hard Brexit’. The DUP wants a ‘frictionless’ border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and a customs arrangement with the EU. There are other pressures for a so-called ‘soft Brexit’. The Scottish Conservatives’ leader, Ruth Davidson, has spoken of prioritising the safeguarding of economic growth. This puts her at odds with hard-line Tories south of the border, who have stressed control of immigration as an objective.

The impact on the prime minister

Heading a minority government significantly reduces a prime minister’s freedom of action. An early indication of this was the scaling back of the Cabinet changes that Theresa May was rumoured to be planning to carry out after the election. Chancellor Philip Hammond, who was widely expected to be sacked because of difficulties over the March budget and differences with May over Brexit strategy, was left in place. This was no time to shake up the top team and create further division. In the limited post-election reshuffle, the only noteworthy change was the return of Michael Gove from the backbenches to head the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. May had sacked him on taking over as prime minister, and his re-appointment was interpreted as a sign that she needed to bring potential opponents into her camp. There was talk of a leadership challenge but nothing actually transpired, at least in the short term. Although her colleagues were angry with her over the election, and Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson was seen as a possible alternative leader, there was no appetite for further infighting when the party and government needed to pull together. May also listened to critics who charged her with having made too many decisions with a small circle of close advisers. Her chiefs of staff, Nick Timothy and Fiona Hill, who were blamed for the ‘dementia tax’ debacle, left Number 10. It seemed likely that May would now govern in a more collegiate way, allowing the Cabinet an enhanced role and conciliating backbenchers in an effort to preserve her position.
The election and Brexit

Theresa May had called the election to strengthen her hand as the person representing the UK in the negotiations with Brussels. The outcome left her much weaker – diminished in the eyes of the EU, and less well placed to transmit a clear message about the UK’s position. The situation was particularly difficult because the talks were scheduled to start ten days after the election, and there are less than two years before the deadline date of March 2019, by which an agreement should be concluded. It is possible that the government will have to be less dogmatic about the line it will take in the negotiations, and more open to consultation and compromise on the kind of Brexit it aims to achieve.

The election and the future of the UK

In Wales Labour dominated the political landscape with a total of 28 MPs, an increase of three compared to the 2015 election. The Conservatives were reduced from 11 to eight MPs, Plaid Cymru won a modest four and the only Liberal Democrat MP in Wales was defeated.

In Scotland the SNP remained the largest party but its loss of 21 seats effectively closed down talk of a second independence referendum, which had dominated the political debate north of the border during the last parliament.

The part of the UK where a possible threat to the union existed was Northern Ireland. At the time of the general election, the devolved assembly in Northern Ireland remained suspended. Some commentators questioned whether the UK government would be able to act as a neutral broker in talks between the DUP and republican Sinn Fein to bring about its restoration, if it was dependent on the former for its survival at Westminster.

Assessment support

Here is a question in the style of Question 2 on A-Level Paper 2. It requires an essay-style answer in response, written in 45 minutes.

Evaluate the extent to which the conduct of election campaigns determines the outcome of UK general elections.

You must consider this view and the alternative to this view in a balanced way. [30 marks]

Guidance on answering this question

The specification requires you to examine three key general elections and the reasons for their varying outcomes: the 1997 election, one from the period 1945–92 and one since 1997. You could use 2017 as your post-1997 example. Remember the key features of the campaign, which could provide useful AO1 material, such as:

- the Conservative U-turn midway through the campaign on elderly care policy
- Theresa May’s non-appearance at the televised leaders’ debate
- Labour’s effective use of public meetings and social media to mobilise support.

Remember that in order to score highly for analysis, you must compare the importance of election campaigns with other factors that may affect the outcome, such as party policies, the role of leaders and the impact of national events.

Examples from 2017 could include:

- the background of resentment over years of austerity cuts, including concerns over funding of the NHS, police and other public services
- Labour’s promise to end student tuition fees and the likely impact of this on younger voters.

Throughout the essay you must ensure that you evaluate the significance of the various factors. You must write a conclusion in which, drawing on the lessons from all three general elections, you reach a supported judgement on the question posed: is the conduct of the campaign the main factor that determines the outcome, or are other factors usually more important?
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