



The December 2019 UK General Election

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1. Why was the general election called?

On Thursday 12 December 2019 Britain went to the polls for the fourth time in a decade. The reason for this latest general election was the inability of Boris Johnson, who had become prime minister in July, to get his exit deal with the European Union through Parliament as he intended. Johnson's fundamental problem was that he headed a **minority government** in a weak position in the House of Commons. Originally, he intended that the UK should leave the EU on 31 October 2019 – the date inherited from his predecessor, Theresa May, after the originally planned departure on 29 March was missed. However, a combination of Labour, Liberal Democrat and Scottish Nationalist MPs, reinforced by 21 Conservative rebels, did not trust Johnson to handle the exit process. They maintained that he might still leave the EU without a deal. Tensions between the prime minister and his critics had already been heightened in September by his attempt to **prorogue** Parliament for a month, a move which was ruled unlawful by the Supreme Court. Johnson's opponents argued that an extended prorogation was intended to limit their ability to scrutinise his Brexit policy.

Key terms

Minority government
a government which lacks a parliamentary majority.

Prorogue
to suspend the sitting of Parliament using royal prerogative power – something which is usually done between the end of one parliamentary session and the beginning of another.

Key terms

Fixed Term Parliaments Act (2011)

set the date of general elections at regular five-year intervals. It was the work of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition, which wanted to give itself a guaranteed term of office. An early election could be held in one of two situations:

- If two-thirds of MPs voted to dissolve Parliament
- If a prime minister lost a vote of confidence and a new government could not be formed within 14 days.

Johnson on the other hand argued that his critics were using parliamentary tactics to frustrate the British people's desire to leave the EU, as expressed in the 2016 referendum. Under the terms of the **Fixed Term Parliaments Act** he could not call a general election without the support of two-thirds of MPs. Mistrust of the prime minister was such that he failed three times to secure the necessary supermajority. MPs also passed the 'Benn Act', named after its pro-Remain Labour sponsor, Hilary Benn, which prevented Johnson from taking the UK out of the EU without a deal.

The prime minister finally secured his election by introducing an 'Early Parliamentary General Election Bill', which circumvented the Fixed Term Parliaments Act and required only a simple majority to pass. This became law on 31 October after MPs voted for it by 438 to 20 votes. Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, who had hitherto blocked an early poll, now supported it. Arguably he had little choice once the SNP and Liberal Democrats had signalled their acceptance. He conceded on the grounds that an extension of the Brexit date to 31 January had been agreed. His judgement was questioned by some members of his own party, who feared that they were being forced to fight an election in unfavourable circumstances and preferred a second referendum to resolve the Brexit issue. More than 100 Labour MPs absented themselves from the vote or abstained. After a last-minute attempt by opposition MPs to change the date failed, the election was called for 12 December. Parliament was dissolved on 6 November, the official starting date for the election campaign.

2. The 2017–19 Parliament

From May to Johnson:

Conservative minority government

It was the June 2017 general election that had placed the Conservative government, and the Brexit process, in the position it faced when Boris Johnson became prime minister. Johnson's predecessor, Theresa May, lost her parliamentary majority and was left dependent on the support of Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party in order to govern. Unable to get her own deal with the EU through Parliament, and severely damaged by losses in the May 2019 European elections, she was forced to resign as prime minister. Johnson won the ensuing Conservative Party leadership campaign, largely because he was the Conservative Party's most charismatic figure and, having headed the 2016 Leave campaign and later resigned from May's government, he was regarded as the leader best placed to bring about Brexit.

Johnson's government became a minority administration with the defection of Phillip Lee MP to the Liberal Democrats in September. Shortly afterwards 21 Conservative rebels, including former Chancellor Philip Hammond and former Justice Secretary David Gauke, lost the Conservative whip when they voted against the government's Brexit policy. Ten of them had the whip restored shortly before the dissolution of Parliament but this did not renew the government's majority. Johnson had also lost the support of the DUP, which rejected his EU withdrawal agreement on the grounds that it treated Northern Ireland differently from the rest of the UK. With a hostile array of opposition parties, Johnson could not proceed with his Brexit plan in what was termed a 'zombie parliament' – one where the government was perpetually frustrated in its efforts to get its business done.

Other parties and groupings

Table 1 shows the line-up of the various parties after the 2017 election and on the eve of the 2019 contest. The 2017–19 Parliament was remarkable for the number of suspensions and defections from political parties. In February 2019 eight Labour MPs and three Conservatives formed a new centrist grouping known as the Independent Group and later as Change UK. They were united by their opposition to Brexit and, in the case of the ex-Labour MPs, by dislike of Jeremy Corbyn's leadership and his failure to deal decisively with allegations of anti-Semitism within the party.

However, hopes of a realignment of British politics proved short-lived. Change UK fragmented within months, with some members simply becoming independents and others joining the Liberal Democrats. The latter, from July under a new leader, Jo Swinson, benefited from defections to their ranks and a by-election victory in Brecon and Radnorshire. In theory, with the two main parties strongly polarised, there should have been room for an effective moderate force in British politics. But there was little unity among the various MPs who occupied the centre ground, and in any case, many moderates chose not to stand again in the 2019 election.

Another development was the formation in January 2019 of the Brexit Party, led by Nigel Farage. The party campaigned for a 'clean break Brexit' – rejecting both Theresa May's and Boris Johnson's deals with the EU and calling for the country to adopt World Trade Organisation trading rules if a free trade agreement with the EU could not be secured. In the May European Parliament election, which used a highly proportional closed list system, it became the largest UK party in Brussels, with a total of 25 MEPs. This was a remarkable result for a party which had been founded just four months earlier. However, Johnson refused Farage's offer of an electoral pact, as the price would have been the abandonment of his own hard-won exit agreement with the EU.

Party	MPs after 2017 general election	MPs at dissolution of Parliament, November 2019
Conservative	317	298
Labour	262	242
SNP	35	35
Liberal Democrat	12	20
DUP	10	10
Sinn Fein	7	7
Plaid Cymru	4	4
Green	1	1
Independents	1	21
Independent Group/Change UK	N/A	5

Table 1 The House of Commons before the 2019 general election

Pause point

Review what you have read so far about developments prior to the 2019 election. What features made this an extremely volatile and unpredictable period in UK politics?

Key terms

Manifesto

a document in which a political party sets out the programme that it promises to implement if it wins an election.

3. Party policies and manifestos

The 2019 election offered voters a clear choice between competing programmes, set out in the parties' **manifestos**. The Conservatives focused on their pledge to 'get Brexit done', with Johnson repeating insistently that his deal was 'oven-ready'. In order to attract voters who might otherwise have supported Labour, there were also promises of increased spending on the NHS, police and infrastructure. Thatcherite tax-cutting priorities were set aside in order to reassure voters that this was a 'One Nation' party which believed in public services. For example, an earlier proposal by Johnson, to raise the threshold at which middle-income earners pay 40 per cent income tax from £50,000 to £80,000, did not appear in the manifesto.

Key terms

Renationalisation

taking industries or services back into public ownership.

Austerity

the programme of public spending cuts initiated by the coalition government after the financial crisis of 2008–09, regarded by critics as responsible for hardship among lower income groups.

The Conservative spending pledges were far more modest than those put forward by Labour, whose manifesto was the most radical in a generation. It comprised tax rises for those on higher incomes, extensive **renationalisation** of privatised services and ambitious plans for investment in public services, designed to end the 'decade of **austerity**'. It was calculated that Labour's planned increase in day-to-day spending over the next five years would amount to £83 billion, compared to £3 billion for the Conservatives and £50 billion for the Liberal Democrats. Johnson took a traditional line of attack on Labour's fitness to govern, stating that whereas previous Labour governments had ended with an economic crisis, Corbyn's agenda meant that he would begin with one.

The Liberal Democrats differentiated themselves from the other main parties with a clear-cut offer to cancel Brexit. They claimed that this would make available a so-called 'Remain bonus' of £50 billion which could be spent on public services. They also differed from their rivals with plans for specifically targeted tax rises – for example, an increase in air passenger duty aimed at tackling climate change – and insisted that they would have the toughest borrowing rules.

Key terms

Corporation tax

a tax on profits made by companies, reduced from 28% to 19% under the coalition and Conservative governments.

Universal credit

support for low-paid workers, replacing six older benefits. It was introduced by the coalition government. It was designed to simplify the benefits system but was criticised for its adverse impact on claimants moving from the old system.

Bedroom tax

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

Non-custodial punishments

alternatives to prison, such as community service.

Case Study

Policy area	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat
Taxation and the economy	No increase in income tax, National Insurance, VAT; no further cut to corporation tax , which had been cut from 28% to 19% since 2010.	Those earning £80,000 to pay 45% income tax; 50% level on £125,000 incomes. Corporation tax to return to 26%. Nationalise Royal Mail, rail, energy companies; free broadband by 2030.	1% increase on all income tax bands, restore corporation tax to 20%.
Welfare benefits	Raise national living wage to £10.50 an hour for over-21s; retain pensioner benefits; continue with universal credit .	'Real living wage' of £10 an hour for all workers over 16; scrap ' bedroom tax ', 2-child benefits limit and universal credit ; stop the pension age rising beyond 66. 32-hour working week within 10 years.	Increase work allowances under universal credit ; scrap bedroom tax and 2-child benefits limit.
Health and social care	£20.5 bn additional funding in total for NHS by 2023-24; 50,000 new nurses, 40 new hospitals. Extra £5 bn for social care; develop a new social care plan with cross-party support.	£26 bn extra funding for NHS; end private provision within the NHS; free personal care for the elderly.	Extra £26 bn for NHS and social care; treat mental and physical health equally.
Law and order	10,000 more prison places; tougher sentencing for serious offenders; 20,000 more police officers; expand police stop and search powers for knife carriers.	Return prison officer numbers to 2010 levels; scrap short prison sentences; recruit 22,000 more police.	£1 bn to fund community policing; 2000 more prison officers; shift from short prison sentences to non-custodial punishments .
Brexit	Leave the EU in Jan 2020; negotiate trade agreement with the EU, with no extension beyond Dec 2020. Introduce a points-based immigration system.	Renegotiate EU deal, with a referendum offering a choice between the new deal and Remain.	Cancel Brexit if they win a majority; if not, campaign for a second referendum with Remain as the preferred option.

Table 2 Selected party policies at the 2019 election

Extension activity

1. Use Table 2 to identify at least three areas of conflict between the three main parties. Can you find any areas of agreement on policies?

2. Find three key policies for each of the most important minor parties: the SNP, Plaid Cymru, the Green Party and the Brexit Party. The BBC website is a possible source of information: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election-2019-50291676>

4. The election campaigns

A 'presidential' election

The three main UK party leaders ran 'presidential' campaigns focused on themselves. They journeyed across the country in 'battle buses' to events where they were greeted by rapturous audiences of party loyalists.

The Conservatives ran a tightly disciplined campaign. All candidates were required to pledge loyalty to the prime minister's Brexit plan. Most of the unreconciled rebels did not stand, although three (David Gauke, Dominic Grieve and Ann Milton) fought doomed campaigns as independents in their old constituencies. Johnson played it safe during the campaign, which came as a surprise given his normally ebullient nature. There were few memorable stunts like the one in which he drove a JCB digger through a polystyrene wall, symbolising the parliamentary 'Brexit gridlock'. Towards the end of the campaign Johnson mishandled an encounter with a journalist who tried to make him look at photos of a four-year-old boy sleeping on a hospital floor. The gaffe enabled the Labour Party to focus attention on underfunding in the NHS but this had only a transient effect on the campaign. Johnson's decision to hammer home one simple message – 'get Brexit done' and allow the country to move forward – contrasted sharply with Labour's lack of clarity on the issue. Corbyn's eventual declaration that he would remain neutral in a second referendum, in which the choices would be his own Brexit deal and an option to stay in the EU, did not inspire people on either side of the argument. In the final stages of the campaign, worried that it had pivoted too far towards the Remain position, Labour switched its focus to Leave-supporting seats in its northern heartlands, but without success.

The Labour leader was widely regarded as a negative factor for his party, with many candidates reportedly forced to listen to harsh criticism of him when canvassing. He retained his old ability to energise the party faithful in open-air addresses, but his alleged past links to terrorist groups, and his inability to generate conviction where national security issues were concerned, worked against him. Corbyn's failure to deal with anti-Semitism on the Labour left, for which he was slow to apologise, was a continuous source of embarrassment for the party. His claim to have unearthed documents, indicating that the government was willing to use the NHS as a bargaining counter in trade talks with the US, caused only a temporary stir. In the final week of the campaign Shadow Health spokesman Jonathan Ashworth was recorded talking privately about his expectation of a 'dire' result under Corbyn.

The Liberal Democrat campaign never really took off. Jo Swinson's claim that she could be prime minister did not seem realistic for a party which had just 20 MPs at the start of the campaign. She ran an intensely personal campaign, even choosing to take the Liberal Democrat slot in a Cardiff BBC TV debate in which the Conservatives and Labour were not represented by their leaders. But Swinson's ratings remained stubbornly low during the campaign. Equally ill-judged was her pledge to revoke Article 50 if the Liberal Democrats formed a government, without holding a second referendum. Critics pointed out that this appeared to contradict basic democratic principles by disregarding the result of the 2016 vote.

The media and the election

Corbyn's supporters later blamed the media in part for their defeat. Certainly, as in 2017, most of the press supported the Conservatives; but Corbyn was also referring to the broadcast media. Yet Johnson also came into conflict with the broadcasters. He claimed bias on the part of Channel 4 after he was replaced by a melting ice sculpture when he declined to take part in a debate on climate change. The Conservative leader was also publicly challenged by BBC interviewer Andrew Neil to appear on his TV programme, after other leaders had agreed to do so. His refusal to participate made no apparent difference to the success of the Conservative campaign. There were two head-to-head TV debates between Johnson and Corbyn, one hosted by ITV, the other by the BBC. Neither leader was reckoned to have gained a clear advantage over the other, with opinion polls splitting 52 per cent to 48 per cent in favour of Johnson.

All parties used social media to send out targeted messages, but the Conservatives proved more effective in doing so than in the 2017 contest, when they had been outpaced by Labour. The Conservative campaign was managed by Johnson's chief adviser, Dominic Cummings, who applied the lessons learned during the successful 2016 Vote Leave campaign, and another key Downing Street figure, Isaac Levido. They used focus groups and polling to reach voters whose political loyalties could be swayed. The party stepped up its Facebook advertising in marginal seats during the last week of the campaign. A stream of messages warned undecided voters that Corbyn could become prime minister with Liberal Democrat and SNP support, and that Johnson needed just nine more seats to deliver Brexit. There were also reports of arguably unscrupulous tactics, including the renaming of the Conservatives' Twitter account as the more neutral-sounding 'factcheckUK', with the letters 'from CCHQ' in small print.

The collapse of the centre

Opposition to the Conservatives was further limited by the unwillingness of the various pro-Remain parties sufficiently to subordinate their separate interests in the common cause. The Liberal Democrats, Greens and Plaid Cymru agreed an electoral pact, whereby one of the three would be given a free run, in just 60 seats. Labour and the Liberal Democrats maintained a distance from each other, with Swinson insisting that Corbyn was not fit to be prime minister and refusing to participate in a coalition government.

Tactical voting to stop a 'hard Brexit' under the Conservatives was widely expected to affect the result but this did not prove to be the case. The pro-Remain Guardian recommended voting for named candidates in 50 marginal seats but in only 13 of these was a non-Conservative candidate successful. Of these, nine were SNP gains. The newspaper attributed the failure of tactical voting to voters' fears of a Corbyn government and the weakness of the Liberal Democrat campaign.

By contrast, the pro-Brexit forces managed to co-operate more effectively. Within days of the campaign starting, Nigel Farage abandoned his initial strategy of running Brexit Party candidates in all seats in mainland Britain. Instead he decided not to contest Conservative-held seats, thus halving the number of candidates from his party. This was because he had come under pressure from many of his supporters who feared that, by splitting the Leave vote, he might put Brexit at risk of not happening at all. This was a turning point, which increased the chances of a Conservative victory.

Pause point

The outcome of the 2017 election is often attributed to Theresa May's poorly run campaign – for details see '[UK General Election 2017](#)'.

Do you think that the election campaign played an equally important role in 2019? Give reasons for your answer.

5. The results analysed

The breaching of Labour's 'red wall'

The most important feature of the election result was what happened in Labour's so-called 'red wall' – a region stretching from the borders of north Wales across to north-east England and Yorkshire, and down into the north Midlands. The Conservatives won 33 of the 63 seats in this area. Their gains included constituencies such as Blyth Valley, Workington, Don Valley, Rother Valley, Great Grimsby and Scunthorpe – traditional manufacturing and mining towns, many of which had returned Labour MPs for up to a century. Among the high-profile Labour MPs to suffer defeat was Dennis Skinner, who had represented Bolsover (Derbyshire) since 1970.

This remarkable turn-around was partly explained by the fact that these seats had voted for Leave in 2016, and there was widespread disillusionment with Labour's lack of clarity on Brexit. Voters here were disappointed that Parliament had not delivered the result of the referendum, three-and-a-half years on. Conversely, Labour held on to most of its seats in London, a mainly pro-Remain area.

There were other factors in play. A YouGov poll of Labour voters who deserted the party in 2019 indicated that Corbyn's leadership was the main reason for 35 per cent of them, compared to 19 per cent who cited Brexit. Most respondents in this second category did not feel that Corbyn was too pro-Leave or too pro-Remain; instead they felt that he had not offered strong leadership on the issue. A further 16 per cent felt that Labour's plans for public spending and nationalisation were undeliverable and too costly.

Beyond this was a broader sense that Labour under Corbyn was run by a remote clique who did not understand the grievances of these 'left behind' localities. On crime and immigration, the London-based Labour leadership was out of touch with much of its northern grassroots. There is evidence in these areas of a longer-term process of disillusionment with Labour. In Sedgefield (County Durham), which was Tony Blair's seat from 1983–2007, the party's vote share dropped from a peak of 71 per cent in 1997 to 45 per cent in 2010, suggesting a degree of dissatisfaction with Labour in government. By 2019, when Sedgefield fell to the Conservatives, Labour support had fallen to 36 per cent.

Political participation in 2019

Turnout across the UK was 67.3 per cent – a drop of 1.5 per cent on the 2017 figure. It had been expected that turnout would be lower this time, in view of the fact that it was the first December election since 1923, with poor weather, and older voters in particular might therefore decide to stay at home. However, it was still higher than in the 2001, 2005, 2010 or 2015 contests – all of which were held in late spring or early summer. Turnout was lowest in ‘red wall’ seats, suggesting that it was mainly traditional Labour supporters who did not vote. For ingrained cultural reasons, it was hard for many of these people to transfer their loyalties to the historic enemy. The Conservatives did best where turnout fell, with Labour abstentions effectively lowering the bar for them to succeed in many marginal constituencies.

Party	Number of seats	Change from 2017 General Election	% of seats	% of votes
Conservative	365	+47	56.2	43.6
Labour	203	-59	31.2	32.2
SNP	48	+13	7.4	3.9
Liberal Democrat	11	-1	1.7	11.5
DUP	8	-2	1.2	0.8
Sinn Fein	7	+0	1.0	0.6
Plaid Cymru	4	+0	0.6	0.5
SDLP	2	+2	0.3	0.4
Green	1	+0	0.2	2.7
Alliance Party Northern Ireland	1	+1	0.2	0.4
Brexit	0	N/A	0	2.0

Table 3 The relationship between votes and seats in the 2019 general election

The results and the electoral system

The First Past the Post (FPTP) electoral system had an uneven impact on outcomes for the various parties. As Table 3 shows, Labour's percentage of the popular vote was remarkably close to its share of seats. But this was a random result in an election which gave the Conservatives 56 per cent of the seats with just 43 per cent of the vote. As in many previous contests, parties with geographically dispersed support, such as the Liberal Democrats and Greens, performed disappointingly. By contrast the SNP won 87 per cent of the seats in Scotland on just 45 per cent of the votes cast there.

The election did, however, provide support for the argument that FPTP produces strong governments with clear mandates. In terms of seats, if not votes, this point was incontestable. Critics of FPTP had been able to point to the indecisive results of the 2010 and 2017 elections, which produced a coalition and a minority government respectively, to suggest that this was no longer a valid argument. 2019 does, however, seem to have indicated a return to the large majorities of earlier decades.

The results and the party system

Earlier in 2019 there had been speculation that the UK was perhaps transitioning to a four-party system, with the Liberal Democrats and the Brexit Party offering credible challenges to the two older parties. However, the election signalled a reversion to two-party dominance, with the Conservatives and Labour together taking 75 per cent of the vote and 87 per cent of the seats. The Brexit Party did have an impact on the election even though none of its candidates was returned. By standing against sitting Labour MPs, it arguably prevented the government from winning a three-figure majority. This made a difference in 39 constituencies where Labour candidates won, even though their vote was less than the combined Conservative and Brexit Party vote.

Nor were any independent candidates returned, with the technical exception of Neale Hanvey, SNP MP for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath. He was suspended from the party over allegations of anti-Semitic postings on social media, but this occurred too late for his name to be removed from the ballot paper. Overall, the 2019 election supports the case for the survival of the two-party system.

Extension activity

Study the results for the Sunderland Central constituency below. What do the results demonstrate about the way in which the FPTP voting system can work? What might have happened if the Brexit Party candidate had not stood?

Candidate	Number of votes	Vote share (%)
Julie Elliott (Labour)	18,336	42.17
Tom d'Silva (Conservative)	15,372	35.36
Viral Parikh (Brexit)	5,047	11.61
Niall Hodson (Lib Dem)	3,025	6.96
Rachel Featherstone (Green)	1,212	2.79
Dale Mckenzie (Independent)	484	1.11

Opinion polls

The polling companies underestimated the Conservative lead in the 2015 election, predicting a hung parliament, and in 2017 they missed the surge in Labour support which denied Theresa May a majority. There was considerable debate as to how accurate they would be in 2019. This time they were generally correct in their assessment of the vote shares for the parties. On average they had the Conservatives on 43 per cent, Labour 33 per cent, the Liberal Democrats 12 per cent and the Brexit Party 3 per cent.

Opinion polls are less reliable as a guide to likely seat share because of the unpredictable effects of First Past the Post. Towards the end of the campaign there was widespread speculation that the Conservative lead was narrowing and that this could translate into a small majority of fewer than 30 seats. As usual, the **exit polls** were a better indication, predicting an 86-seat majority within minutes of the polls closing.

Key terms

Exit polls

a poll of voters taken after they have left the polling station, asking how they have voted, as opposed to what their voting intentions were in advance.

Age, gender, class and other determinants of voting behaviour

The election confirmed a pattern of voting behaviour which had become firmly established in recent contests. According to analysis by YouGov, age was the most important determinant of voting. 56 per cent of those in the 18-to-24 age bracket voted Labour, compared to only 14 per cent of those aged 70 and over. For every ten years older a voter was, the chance of them voting Conservative increased by nine points, and the chance of them voting Labour decreased by eight points. This must have been linked in part to Brexit, as younger voters tended to be more pro-Remain and older people were more likely to support Leave. But other considerations, such as the cost of housing and the burden of student debt, are likely to have inclined younger people towards Labour. Age was also an important factor when it came to gender. Overall the voting patterns of men and women were very similar, except in the 18-to-24 group, where 28 per cent of men but only 15 per cent of women voted Conservative.

The declining importance of class, already witnessed in 2017, was evident in 2019. Labour scored 33 per cent in both the ABC1 classes (middle-class 'white collar' occupations) and C2DEs (working-class 'blue collar' occupations). The Conservatives were ahead of Labour in all classes but scored more highly among C2DEs (48 per cent) than among ABC1s (43 per cent). Levels of education were a clearer dividing line than social class. The Conservatives outperformed Labour by 58 to 25 per cent among voters with the lowest level of educational qualification (GCSE or below) but amongst those with a university degree they trailed Labour by 29 to 43 per cent.

As we have noted, Brexit was a salient issue in the 2019 election. The Conservatives were supported by 74 per cent of Leave voters but only 19 per cent of Remain voters. This links to a theme which has been increasingly central in modern elections: voters' perceptions of the various parties' governing competence. Since 2016 the Remain/Leave issue has started to replace left/right as the key dividing line for the electorate. It seems that voters in 2019 trusted Johnson to deliver Brexit and did not blame him for his failure to achieve it by his original target date of 31 October. Instead they held his opponents responsible for the parliamentary deadlock that had frustrated him and (with the important exception of Scotland) they punished these parties at the polls.

The composition of the House of Commons

As **Table 4** shows, the 2019 House of Commons is similar to its predecessor in terms of gender, ethnic identity, sexuality and educational background.

Feature	2019 House of Commons (%)	2017 House of Commons (%)
Female MPs	33	32
Ethnic minority background	10	8
Comprehensive educated	50	51
LGBT	7	7

Table 4 Composition of the House of Commons: 2019 compared with 2017

Diversity has continued to advance, with a majority of Labour and Liberal Democrat MPs being female for the first time. However, women make up just over 50 per cent of the UK population, and 14 per cent of society is composed of ethnic minority people, so MPs still do not fully reflect the electorate who returned them. 27 per cent of MPs were educated at independent schools, compared to seven per cent of the population.

Pause point

Which were the most important factors in explaining voting behaviour in the 2019 election? The full YouGov report can be found at:

<https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2019/12/17/how-britain-voted-2019-general-election>

Ipsos Mori have also published an analysis at:

<https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/how-britain-voted-2019-election>

How far are the findings for 2019 consistent with developments that were already apparent in 2017?

6. Post-election prospects

The election and the future of the UK

The Conservative majority made it certain that Brexit would occur early in 2020 and that there would be no second referendum. Johnson had defied predictions of a hung parliament in the final stages of the campaign to win an overwhelming victory. As we have seen, this was based mainly on Conservative gains in England.

In Wales, Labour remained the largest party with 22 seats. The Conservatives emerged with a total of 14, taking six seats from Labour and recovering Brecon and Radnorshire, which had been won by the Liberal Democrats in an August by-election. Plaid Cymru, which stood on an anti-Brexit platform, did not add to its modest total of four seats.

It was a different story in Scotland, where the SNP increased its seat share by 13, leaving the Conservatives with six MPs, the Liberal Democrats with four and Labour with just one. The Nationalists' success was credited largely to their focus on the unpopularity of Johnson's EU policy in Scotland, with 'stop Boris, stop Brexit' proving a rallying cry. With a total of 48 out of 59 seats, the SNP renewed their call for a second independence referendum, which Johnson rejected.

In Northern Ireland the Democratic Unionists lost two of their ten MPs. One of the casualties was Nigel Dodds, who had led the party in the Commons. He was unseated in Belfast North by Sinn Fein, the Irish republican party, thanks to a decision by the moderate nationalist SDLP not to stand. This meant that for the first time, nationalists held more seats than unionists. Sinn Fein used the election to call for a referendum on Irish unity. The resurgence of nationalism in Northern Ireland, as well as in Scotland, is a potential challenge to the continuation of the UK.

The election and the power of the prime minister

The election victory strengthened Johnson's position as prime minister, making him more powerful than his immediate Conservative predecessors. This was demonstrated within days of the election, when his withdrawal agreement passed the House of Commons with ease. His slogan, 'Get Brexit done', enabled him to present himself as the head of a new government with a fresh agenda. He was also able to distance himself from the unpopular austerity policies of the previous decade – policies enacted by a government to which he had belonged for a time, as Theresa May's Foreign Secretary.

The passing of the withdrawal agreement also demonstrated the continuing disarray of the Labour opposition, with six of its MPs signalling their acceptance of Brexit by voting for it, and more than 30 abstaining. The electoral defeat left the Labour Party searching for a new leader and seeking a strategy to regain the lost seats in its historic heartlands.

But victory has brought its own risks for the prime minister. Negotiating a trade agreement with the EU, by Johnson's own deadline of 31 December 2020, will be challenging. In addition, as he has publicly acknowledged, his government needs to deliver the benefits that he promised would materialise after Brexit. The working-class northern and Midland voters, who turned to the Conservatives this time, have given the party their conditional support, and they could return to Labour if they do not see real improvements in public services and infrastructure.

Johnson has so far held at bay the SNP's demand for an 'indyref2', but pressure to allow a vote could become much harder to resist if the Nationalists were to do well in the May 2021 Scottish Parliament elections. A 'One Nation' prime minister would not want to go down in history as the leader who presided over the dissolution of the United Kingdom.

Practice question

This question, in the style of **Question 2 on A Level Paper 1**, requires an essay-style response, written within 45 minutes.

Evaluate the view that party policies and manifestos are the most important factor that determines the outcome of UK general elections.

You must consider this view and the alternative to this view in a balanced way.

[30 marks]

Please note: this practice question has been written by the author, and not by the senior examiner team for GCE Politics.

Guidance on answering the question

The Edexcel specification requires you to assess the reasons for the outcome of three key general elections: the 1997 election, one from the period 1945–92 and one since 1997. You could use 2019 as your post-1997 example.

Make sure that you consider the role of party policies and manifestos first, as this factor is highlighted in the question. You should draw on your knowledge and understanding of each of your three chosen elections. Then assess the role of other factors, such as the election campaigns and the wider political context.

You must *evaluate* the significance of the various factors and write a fully supported conclusion, based on your assessment of all three general elections. Are party policies and manifestos usually more important, or is one of the other factors more significant?