



RESEARCH NOTE

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Labour Labour Landslide: The 1997 UK Election— Some Facts and Figures



Introduction

The Labour Party, led by Tony Blair, achieved an historic victory in the election for the House of Commons held on 1 May 1997. The Conservative Party, led by Prime Minister John Major, was swept from office after 18 years in power.

The magnitude of Labour's victory and the apparent disarray of the Conservatives has led to speculation that Labour could be in office for at least the next decade.

This Research Note provides a summary of the election results, places the 1997 result in an historical context and looks at some of the prominent winners and losers in the election.

The Result

The Labour Party won a massive 419 seats, giving it an overall majority of 179 in the House of Commons. With a 10% swing in its favour, Labour received 44.4% of the vote compared with the Conservatives' 31.4%. The Conservatives lost 171 seats, leaving them with 165. Apart from Labour the other big winners in the election were the Liberal Democrats who, despite suffering an overall drop in support, gained 26 seats to give them 46 in total.

Election System

For the 1997 election the House of Commons was enlarged from 651 to 659 members. Members are elected for a maximum term of 5 years using the first-past-the-post election system. Voting is voluntary and is held on a week day. Voter turnout varies with a number of factors (weather, perceived closeness of result, etc.) but has consistently been over 70% since the War. At 71.3% the turnout for this election is the lowest since 1935.

Under the first-past-the-post system the candidate with the highest number of votes wins, regardless of whether a majority of votes is received or not. Thus some constituencies can be won with a surprisingly low vote, e.g. in Down North (Northern Ireland) the UK Unionist candidate won with 35.05% of the vote. No party has won more than 50% at the vote nation wide since 1935.

The most significant drawback of the first-past-the-post system is its unrepresentative nature: the winning party tends to be over represented while minor parties tend to be under represented. Labour won 63.6% of the seats with 44.4% of the vote, while the Liberal Democrats won only 7.0% of the seats with 17.2% of the vote.

The Scottish Nationalists were also able to take advantage of the collapse in the Conservatives' vote and picked up 3 seats, while the position of the Welsh nationalists, Plaid Cymru, remained unchanged.

Historical Context

The 1997 election represents a sea change in British politics. Among the historical highlights are:

- Labour's majority in the House of Commons is the party's largest ever.
- Labour's share of the vote was its highest since 1966.
- The 10% swing to the Labour Party was the highest swing to

the party since 1945.

- The result for the Conservatives was their worst in modern political history.
- Labour's margin surpassed the magnitude of Margaret Thatcher's victories in 1983 and 1987 and is the largest gained by any party since 1935.
- The result for the Liberal Democrats was the best result for a third party since the Second World War.

The Regions

The collapse in the Conservatives' vote in the industrial cities of England and in Scotland and Wales has left the Tories in danger of being the party of the shires and the South-East. Nowhere has the demise of the Conservatives been more apparent than in Scotland and Wales, where the Conservatives have been left with no representatives in any of the 112

1997 Election Result

	Seats		Votes	
	Won	Change	%	Swing
Labour Party	419	+148	44.4	+10.0
Conservative Party	165	-171	31.4	-10.5
Liberal Democrats	46	+26	17.2	-0.6
Scottish Nationalists	6	+3	7.0	+1.1
Plaid Cymru	4	..		
Other	19	+2		
Total	659	+8	100.0	

UK Election Results 1945-1997															
	1945	1950	1951	1955	1959	1964	1966	1970	1974	1974	1979	1983	1987	1992	1997
Votes %															
Lab	47.8	46.1	48.8	46.4	43.8	44.1	47.9	43.0	37.1	39.2	36.9	27.5	30.8	34.4	44.4
Cons	39.8	43.5	48.0	49.7	49.4	43.4	41.9	46.4	37.9	35.8	43.9	42.4	42.3	41.9	31.4
Lib/LD	9.0	9.1	2.5	2.7	5.9	11.2	8.5	7.5	19.3	18.3	13.8	25.3	22.5	17.8	17.2
SNP					0.1	0.2	0.5	1.1	2.0	2.9	1.6	1.1	1.3	1.9	} 7.0
PC					0.3	0.3	0.2	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.5	
Others	3.4	1.3	0.7	1.2	0.5	0.8	0.8	1.5	3.1	3.2	3.4	3.2	2.7	3.5	}
Seats															
Lab	393	315	295	277	258	317	363	287	301	319	269	209	229	271	419
Cons	213	298	321	344	365	304	253	330	297	277	339	397	376	336	165
Lib/LD	12	9	6	6	6	9	12	6	14	13	11	23	22	20	46
SNP								1	7	11	2	2	3	3	6
PC									2	3	2	2	3	4	4
Others	22	3	3	3	1		2	6	14	12	12	17	17	17	19
Total	640	625	625	630	630	630	630	630	635	635	635	650	650	651	659
Turnout %	72.7	84.0	82.5	76.7	78.8	77.1	75.8	72.0	78.7	72.8	76.0	72.7	75.3	77.7	71.3

constituencies. In the North of England the Conservative rout resulted in only 17 seats being won out of 162 on offer, while in the Midlands the Conservatives won 28 out of the 103 constituencies. Only in the South-East did the Conservatives remain the dominant party, winning 73 of the 117 seats.

The Liberal Democrats did best in their traditional heartland of the South-West, where they won 14 seats, one fewer than the Conservatives, while in Scotland they won 10 seats.

Labour won a majority of seats in all regions with the exception of East Anglia and the South-East. In London, Labour won 57 seats to the Conservatives 11, while the Liberal Democrats won 6.

The special nature of politics in Northern Ireland was demonstrated by the election of a combination of loyalist and republican candidates. Unionists of various guises (Ulster Unionists, Democratic Unionists and UK Unionists) won 13 seats while the Social Democratic and Labour Party won 3 seats and Sinn Fein won 2 seats (Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness, neither of whom are expected to take up their seats in the Commons).

Winners and Losers

The 1997 elections provided a number of prominent winners and losers, among the more interesting results were the following:

- Six Conservative Cabinet Ministers lost their seats. Among them were Defence Secretary, Michael Portillo; the Foreign Secretary, Malcolm Rifkind; the Scottish Secretary, Michael Forsyth; the President of the Board of Trade and Industry Secretary Ian Lang; and the House Leader, Tony Newton.
- Former Conservative Ministers David Mellor and Norman Lamont lost their seats.
- The Referendum Party backed by prominent businessman Sir James Goldsmith polled poorly with no candidate retaining their deposit.
- Former BBC journalist Martin Bell defeated Conservative Minister Neil Hamilton in the seat of Tatton to become one of two independents in the Commons, the other being the Speaker, Betty Boothroyd.
- 120 women were elected (101 Labour), the highest ever and double the number in the previous Parliament.
- Actress Glenda Jackson (Labour) retained her seat while Olympic athlete

Sebastian Coe (Conservative) lost his.

- Patricia Hewitt (Labour), daughter of former senior Australian public servant Sir Lenox Hewitt, was elected.

Related Papers

An assessment of some of the implications of the 1997 UK election result is made in a Current Issues Brief by Dr John Hart (Politics, ANU). See also the Information and Research Services Current Comment publication on the UK election.



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