

Who voted Labour? And why?

Nick Moon - NOP

The first answer to the question “Who voted Labour?” is, of course, exactly how many people in the final NOP poll said they would do so. But this, whilst enormously gratifying, does not advance the sum of human understanding greatly, because the only question we can generally answer from looking at the polling data is not “Who voted Labour?” but “Who said they were going to vote for Labour?”

To answer this modified question, I have drawn heavily on demographic information courtesy of ICM and MORI. Both organisations have very helpfully produced aggregate demographic data for all their polls across the campaign, thus giving us much larger sample sizes and making the results more reliable.

The gender gap was, as it tends to be, small. Indeed, ICM showed no difference at all in the propensity of men and women to vote Conservative or Labour, the only difference being a slightly higher tendency amongst women to vote Liberal Democrats than did men, as table 1 below shows.

	MORI			ICM		
	Con	Lab	LibD	Con	Lab	LibD
Male	34	34	22	33	36	22
Female	32	38	23	33	36	24

MORI did, however, show a small gender gap, and interestingly, it was in the opposite direction from that generally true in the past. In the MORI data, women were noticeably more likely to be Labour voters than were men, with 38% of women saying they would vote Labour and only 34% of men. The situation was reversed for Conservatives, where it had the support of 32% of women and 34% of men.

As far as age is concerned there were much more dramatic differences. Both the pollsters told the same story here, with almost identical figures throughout. The most striking age difference was the far higher level of support for the Conservatives amongst the older age group. Two in five of the over 65's said they would vote Conservatives, where as only one in four of the under 34's said they would do so. The 35 to 64 year olds were more likely to vote Conservative than the younger respondents, but not nearly so likely as the over 65's.

By contrast, Labours vote was almost equal across the age groups. It was slightly lower among 65+ but the difference was not big enough to be statistically significant.

Support for the Lib Dem's was much lower among the older respondents than younger ones. Whereas one in four of 18-34 year olds said they would vote Liberal democrats, only one in five of those aged 65+ did so.

	MORI			ICM		
	Con	Lab	LibD	Con	Lab	LibD
18-24	28	38	26	26	38	27
25-34	25	38	27	25	39	27
35-64	32	36	23	33	36	22
65+	41	35	18	42	34	19

Despite various mutterings about the declassing of society, voting in Britain continues to be heavily influenced by social class. In both the MORI and ICM data those in social class DE – the unskilled working class and those depending on state benefits – were much less likely to vote Conservative than any of the other 3 class groups. The skilled working class – C2's – were less likely to vote Conservative than the white collar C1's and AB's, but the differences here were not statistically significant. The differences were significant for Labour, where C2's were significantly more likely to vote Labour than AB's or C1's, and DE's much more likely. DE's were also slightly less likely to vote Liberal Democrats, while AB's were the group most likely to.

	MORI			ICM		
	Con	Lab	LibD	Con	Lab	LibD
AB	37	28	29	37	30	26
C1	37	32	23	34	33	25
C2	33	40	19	33	40	20
DE	25	48	18	28	43	20

With the proportion living in social housing now so much lower than it was 20 years ago, this is a much less useful demographic group to analyse. Nevertheless, it is significant that of all the demographic sub groups analysed the only one where any party got more than 50% of the vote was Labour support amongst those in social housing. At the other end of the scale, only 29% of those who own their home outright said they were going to vote Labour. The outright owners were far more likely to be Conservative, with 44%. Fewer than one in five of those in social housing said there were going to vote Conservative, and they were equally unlikely to support the Lib Dem's.

	MORI			ICM		
	Con	Lab	LibD	Con	Lab	LibD
Own	44	29	20	44	29	21
Buy	31	36	25	31	37	24
Social	16	55	19	18	51	21

Moving on now to look at the demographic differences in the swing from the last election to the 2005 one, gender does not seem to be an important factor here. Overall, Labour lost 6% of its 2001 vote share in 2005. The drop in the Labour vote was higher among men than among women, the difference between the sexes was not statistically significant.

	MORI			ICM		
	Con	Lab	LibD	Con	Lab	LibD
	0	-6	4	0	-6	4
Male	2	-8	4	1	-7	3
Female	-1	-4	4	0	-5	4

Age was a different matter, with very big differences between the age groups, in terms of swing. The decline in the Labour vote was most marked among the under 34's. ICM suggested an equally high level of decline among both 18-24 year old and 25-34 year olds, whereas in the MORI data it was only really 25-34 year olds who swung significantly differently.

	MORI			ICM		
	Con	Lab	LibD	Con	Lab	LibD
	0	-6	4	0	-6	4
18-24	1	-3	2	-2	-10	8
25-34	1	-13	8	-2	-9	9
35-64	-1	-5	5	2	-5	1
65+	1	-4	1	0	-2	1

As for social class, both pollsters showed the Conservatives increasing their support among C2's, while interestingly, Labour's vote held up better among AB's than among any other social class group.

	MORI			ICM		
	Con	Lab	LibD	Con	Lab	LibD
	0	-6	4	0	-6	4
AB	-2	-2	4	-3	-3	5
C1	1	-6	3	1	-7	4
C2	4	-9	4	4	-7	3
DE	1	-7	5	0	-6	3

Looking at tenure, there are no major differences in terms of swing between the different tenure types in the MORI data, but in the ICM data the decline in the Labour vote was dramatically larger among those in social housing (11% drop) compared with those who own their own home outright, where there was a drop of only 2% since 2001.

	MORI			ICM		
	Con	Lab	LibD	Con	Lab	LibD
	0	-6	4	0	-6	4
Own	1	-3	1	0	-2	1
Buy	0	-6	5	0	-5	3
Social	-2	-5	5	2	-11	7

Unfortunately, the exit poll did not contain any demographic data so we cannot use that to tell us who actually voted during the election. Instead I have drawn once again on data from MORI, this time from their post election survey. Overall there was a fractional increase in actual turnout at the election. The MORI data shows turnout dropping among 18-24 year olds, while among 65+ it rose by 5% to 75%.

18-24	37	-2
25-34	49	+3
35-64	66	+2
65+	75	+5

As has generally been the case recently; the professional and managerial social group AB are the ones most likely to vote, with a turnout of 71%. The decline in turnout was then fairly even as we move down the social class groupings, with only 54% of DE's having voted.

AB	71	+3
C1	62	+2
C2	58	+2
DE	54	+1

Quite surprisingly, the MORI data showed that private renters were the only group to show a significant increase in turn out. Given that private renters are particularly likely to be younger people, and given that the earlier findings turn out to be low among younger people, this particular finding is somewhat counter intuitive.

Own	71	+3
Buying	60	+1
Social housing	51	-1
Private rent	51	+5

Moving on why people chose to vote Labour, one obvious comment is to repeat Bill Clinton's campaign slogan of "Its economy, stupid". In what is known to have been a powerful question, predicting voting behaviour, MORI showed a clear lead for Labour over the Conservatives with the question "Do you think you and your family would be financially better of under a Labour or a Conservative government?"

Do you think you and your family would be financially better off under a Labour or a Conservative government? (MORI)	
Labour	36
Conservative	28
Other	3
Don't know	24
Neither	9

It would certainly appear that the Clintonian “It’s the economy, stupid” applied to the 2005 election, and it seems also clear that if it was the election, it wasn’t Iraq. In questions measuring the most important issues of the campaign, both ICM and MORI showed Iraq very low down the list of priorities. In the ICM question, health came top of the list, mentioned by 21%, with economy mentioned by 15%. Way down the list was Iraq, mentioned by only 3%.

Some commentators said that Iraq was likely to be particularly as an issue for the young, and could be a significant factor in switching votes amongst this age group. It was certainly true that in the ICM poll the young were more likely to mention Iraq, but even so it was only a tiny minority that did so. Though the 6% of 18-24 years olds who did mention Iraq was three times the level of 65+ doing so, it was still insignificant in comparison with other issues.

Which of the following issues will be most important in your decision on how to vote at the next general election? (ICM)	
	% mentioning Iraq
18-24	6
25-34	3
35-64	3
65+	2

Even this slightly greater likelihood of mentioning Iraq among the younger respondents was more than overcome in voting terms by the fact that the younger respondents were the ones least likely to turn out. Only 2% of 65+ may have mentioned Iraq, but fully three-quarters of them turned out to vote according to the MORI figures. Turnout amongst the oldest group was exactly twice that amongst the 18-24 year olds, underlining the limited impact of Iraq as a voting issue.

Which of the following issues will be most important in your decision on how to vote at the next general election?		
	% Iraq	Turnout
18-24	6	37
25-34	3	49
35-64	3	66
65+	2	75

However, whilst the polling evidence suggests that Iraq cannot have been significant is an issue in many peoples minds, there are still signs that at a very local level it may have had some effect in the lection results. Recognising the dangers of extrapolating the sample of one, I will cite the case of my own constituency in St Albans where a popular Labour MP was defeated by the Conservatives almost entirely as the result of a switch of Labour voters to the Liberal Democrats. Given that he himself had won the seat in 1997 with a swing of precisely the opposite direction we can't be sure this was down to Iraq and not merely people returning to their traditional homes, but it does seem indicative of an Iraq effect, made all the more ironic by the fact that the MP himself was quite a rebel on the war.

So if Iraq wasn't the most important issue, what was? Both MORI and ICM asked a question on this and although the figures are very different because ICM's was a most important issue with only one answer coded, whilst MORI's question was a multiple choice question, thus making the scores for each individual issue much higher, the general pattern was clear. Both pollsters had health, education and law and order in the top three positions in the issues list and whilst there were some differences in the ordering of other items, the pattern was extremely similar.

	ICM	MORI
Health	18	67
Education	15	61
Law and order	14	56
Economy	14	35
Taxation	13	42
Asylum	11	37

When the Conservatives won the 1992 election, despite the prediction of the pollsters, there was one key indicator ignored by most people at the time, that Labour was not in a stronger position as the poll suggested. This was that on the all important issue of best party to run the economy, the Conservatives had a clear lead. Conservatives keen to talk up their chances in 2005 cited the similarity in the polling figures of 2005 with those of 1992, but the key difference that they ignored was that in 2005 Labour not only led in the polls, but it also had a very substantial lead in the best party to manage the economy.

ICM showed almost twice as many people thinking Labour had the best policies on the economy as thought the Conservatives did so. Indeed for only one issue did the Conservatives have a clear lead, and that was that of asylum seekers, which other questions had shown to be insignificant as a factor in determine people's voting behaviour. As well as the very substantial lead on the economy, Labour had a large lead on health and a smaller but still significant leads on education and taxation. The only other Conservative lead was on law and order, where it was a statistically insignificant 1%.

	Lab	Con	Lab-Con
Health	37	23	+14
Education	32	24	+8
Law and order	30	31	-1
Economy	41	22	+19
Taxation	31	25	+6
Asylum	24	35	-11

Labour didn't just have the best policies; it clearly had the best leader as well. Offered a choice between the three main party leaders, 40% chose Blair, almost twice as many as the 23% who chose Howard and the 20% who chose Kennedy in an ICM poll.

An intriguing Populus poll offered a straight fight between Blair and Howard but also factored in an approval rating of Blair. This served very well to indicate the problems the Conservatives were under in trying to land blows on what they perceived to be an unpopular leader. Only 38% in the popular poll said that Blair was a good Prime Minister, but another 26% said that whilst he was not a good prime minister they still preferred him to Michael Howard. This adds up to an overwhelming two in three who preferred Blair in either absolute or relative properties. Only one in four said that Blair was not a good Prime Minister and they would prefer Howard instead.

Another questionnaire that had proved useful in 1992 (at least in retrospect) was the question of public reaction to a win by either party. NOP's final poll before the election asked half the sample how they would feel if they woke up and Labour had won the election, and the other half how they would feel if they woke up and discovered the Conservatives had won. There was in fact relatively little difference between them, with 11% saying they would be very happy if Labour won and 12% saying they would be very happy if the Conservatives won. There were slightly more people who would be happy if Labour won with 22% compared to Conservatives 15% and similarly, there were more people who would be very happy if Conservatives won at 22% compared with the 15% who would be very happy if Labour won. But the broad picture is one where neither party was seen as being much more of an unpleasant prospect than the other.

How would you feel if you woke up on Friday and found ... had won the election		
	Lab wins	Con wins
Very happy	11	12
Happy	22	15
Neither	29	29
Unhappy	15	14
Very unhappy	15	22

What is more interesting about this question is the breakdown between answers of different party supporters. Broadly speaking we would of course expect Labour supporters to be happy if Labour won and unhappy if the Conservatives won, whilst one would expect the opposite for the Conservatives. One would thus expect the figures to be mirror images of each other if the parties felt the same way, but they were clearly not.

Whilst 29% of Labour supporters said they would be very happy with a Labour victory, 43% of Conservatives said they would be very happy with a Tory win. Overall 76% of Labour supporters would be happy or very happy with a Labour win, compared with 85% of Conservatives, feeling the same about a Conservative win. One should perhaps make some allowance of the fact that a Conservative win would be seen as such a surprise people would be more happy to see one, but one can also read this as a degree of reluctance amongst Labour supporters that they were voting for a party perhaps as the best of two bad lots.

Labour is also more unpopular with the Conservatives than the Conservatives were with Labour. 76% of Conservative supporters would be unhappy or very unhappy with a Labour victory, compared with 63% of Labour voters reacting to a Conservative victory.

	Lab wins		Con wins	
	Lab	Con	Lab	Con
Very happy	29	-	3	43
Happy	47	11	5	42
Neither	19	21	25	13
Unhappy	1	34	22	1
Very unhappy	1	42	41	-

I would like to conclude with a reference to one of those books that crosses the boundary from the world of academia to a much broader readership. If this year's equivalent is *Freakonomics*, the 2004 equivalent was James Surowiecki's *The Wisdom of Crowds*, which postulates the possibilities of group intelligence. It is true that Surowiecki talks mainly about judging questions of fact, but it seems to me that the 2005 election does represent the wisdom of crowds in action. There seems little doubt most people in the country wanted Labour to return to power but with a significantly reduced majority. The polls gave some indications of how that objective could be achieved, though very imprecisely, and people ended up with almost exactly the majorities that most people would have wanted, had you offered them to them as a choice. But before we start thinking that any election can be decided by finding out in advance what outcome the majority of people would want, we need to bear in mind that this kind of thing can all go horribly wrong. I can still clearly remember a school friend, after the 1970 election telling me his mother had voted Conservative to bring about a reduced Labour majority because she wanted Howard Wilson, "brought down a peg or two", only to be absolutely horrified when, because so many people did the same thing, she woke up to find Conservative government.