

The next general election

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Each general election creates a baseline for the following election – determining how many seats must change hands for the governing party to lose power, and for the opposition to secure an overall majority. However, once in every three (on average) Parliaments, the baseline shifts as a result of boundary changes. The new parliament is one of these. The work of the Boundaries Commission is not yet complete, but two things are certain. 650 MPs will be elected at the next general election; and, to a modest extent, the impact of the Boundaries Commission's work will be to help the Conservatives and hurt Labour.

Here is a provisional estimate of how the baseline will be affected by the boundary changes:

	<i>2005 result</i>	<i>2005 after boundary changes</i>	<i>Change</i>
Labour	355	345	-10
Conservative	198	212	14
Liberal Democrat	62	63	1
Others	31	30	-1
<i>Labour majority</i>	66	40	-26

Although Labour's baseline majority on the new boundaries will be lower than on the existing boundaries, Britain's political geography will still be tilted in Labour's favour. This becomes clear when one looks at the polling benchmarks that will apply at the next election.

The following calculations incorporate three assumptions: that, if the Conservatives gain ground, they will gain one seat from the Liberal Democrats for every six they gain from Labour; that there will be no net shift in seats between Labour and the Lib Dems, and that there will be a uniform swing to the Conservatives in Con-Lab marginals (or, more strictly, that deviations from a uniform swing will be random in both incidence and impact).

On these assumptions:

- Labour loses its majority on a 1.5% swing to the Conservatives – that is, when the Tories draw level with Labour in the national popular vote.
- The Conservatives need a 4% swing to become the largest party, or a 5% lead in the popular vote.
- The Conservatives need a 6.5% swing to win an overall majority, or a 10% lead in the popular vote.

As with any such exercise, the precise figures depend on the assumptions. The Conservatives might perform especially well in Labour's marginals. They might also gain back most of the seats they lost to the Liberal Democrats at the last three elections.

If either thing happens, let alone both, then the Conservatives will not need swings quite as large as the numbers above indicate. However, even on the most benign assumptions (from the Conservatives' point of view), the mountain they must climb remains high and steep.

(It's worth noting that anything between level-pegging at a 10-point Conservative lead is likely to result in a hung Parliament, in which no party enjoys an overall majority. This is a wide span. It flows mainly from the fact that there are now many more "third force" MPs [i.e. not Labour or Conservative] than there used to be. As a result, any election in which the gap between the number of Labour and Conservative MPs is less than 70 or so will produce a hung Parliament, unless the number of Lib Dems MPs collapses. The UK has had only one hung-Parliament election since 1945, following the February 1974 general election. They may become much more common over the next 20-30 years.)

That is the psephology; what about the politics? A YouGov survey for the Daily Telegraph, conducted over the weekend before polling day, found that Labour had a much stronger image than the Conservatives.

The following table shows what YouGov found when we tested 15 image statements and asked, in each case, whether they applied more to Labour or more to the Conservatives. The positive images are shown against a green background, the negative images against a yellow background.

As can be seen, Labour enjoyed a clear lead on five of the seven positive images, while the Conservatives were ahead on seven of the eight negative images. The two parties were neck-and-neck on the three remaining images, two positive and one negative.

Labour worst “positive image” score was the 22% who thought that the party did better than the Tories on having leaders who were “by and large pretty honest”. But the Conservative score was almost identical: 23%. In other words, the Conservative election campaign struck a public nerve when it attacked Tony Blair for dishonesty; but the Tories’ reputation was too poor for Michael Howard to extract much benefit from his assault on Mr Blair.

<i>For better or worse, only two of the political parties -- the Conservatives and Labour -- have any real chance of forming a Government after this election. Irrespective of how you intend to vote (or have already voted by post), which of the following statements do you think apply more to the Conservative Party and which apply more to the Labour Party? (Fieldwork April 29-May 1)</i>					
Applies more to...					
	Con	Lab	Both / neither	Don't know	Lab minus Con
	%	%	%	%	%
It seems to have succeeded in moving on and left its past behind it	17	42	24	17	25
Its leaders are prepared to take tough and unpopular decisions	19	42	28	11	23
Even if I don't always agree with it, at least its heart is in the right place	22	40	22	17	18
It is led by people of real ability	19	36	34	12	17
The kind of society it wants is broadly the kind of society I want	33	40	19	8	7
Its outlook on the world outside Britain is similar to mine	27	29	26	18	2
Its leaders are by and large pretty honest	23	22	44	11	-1
Its leaders tell people what they think people want to hear instead of doing what they believe to be right	29	26	37	8	-3
It seems to chop and change all the time: you can never be quite sure what it stands for	35	26	26	12	-9
It is too extreme	29	16	33	22	-13
It seems to want to divide people instead of bringing them together	41	20	25	14	-21
It seems rather old and tired	44	18	27	10	-26
It seems to appeal to one section of society rather than to the whole country	48	20	22	10	-28
It seems stuck in the past	45	11	27	17	-34
It has very little chance of winning this election	63	6	16	15	-57

The Conservatives must plainly strive for a far more positive image over the next three or four years if they are to have any chance of achieving the kind of lead in the popular vote they need to win power. Part of this quest must involve shedding their reputation for being right-wing. In another survey for the Daily Telegraph, YouGov asked respondents to place themselves, the three main party leaders and Gordon Brown on a left-right scale.

The table below sets out the responses:

<i>Where would you place ... on this scale?</i>								
	Yourself- Lib Dem voters	Yourself - Lab voters	Charles Kennedy	Gordon Brown	Yourself - all	Tony Blair	Yourself - Con voters	Michael Howard
Very left-wing	6	3	4	4	3	2	0	2
Fairly left-wing	13	15	10	13	9	6	3	2
Slightly left-of-centre	24	26	18	24	16	17	4	2
Centre	31	25	27	17	25	17	23	7
Slightly right-of-centre	8	7	6	7	13	17	28	12
Fairly right-wing	0	2	2	5	8	12	25	27
Very right-wing	1	0	0	1	3	3	8	19
Don't know	17	22	34	30	23	26	10	29
AVERAGE SCORE	-23	-22	-20	-20	-2	7	35	53
<i>Average is mean score, counting "very left-wing" as -100, "fairly left-wing" as -67, "slightly left-of centre" as -33, "centre" as 0, "slightly right-of-centre" as +33, "fairly right-wing" as +67, "very right-wing" as +100; fieldwork April 19-21</i>								

As can be seen, the ideological profiles of Charles Kennedy, Gordon Brown and Labour and Liberal Democrat voters are all remarkably similar, clustered between “centre” and “fairly left-wing”. Few responses were either “very left-wing” or anywhere to the right of centre.

Tony Blair’s ratings are more spread out: 25% placed him to the left of centre, 17% in the centre and 32% to the right of centre. He was out of kilter with many Labour voters – but not with floating voters, who tend to congregate near the centre.

The Conservatives were very differently placed. Whereas just 18% of Labour voters said they personally were “very” or “fairly” left-wing, 33% of Conservative voters say they were “very” or “fairly” right-wing. And as many as 46% of the electorate regarded Michael Howard as “very” or “fairly” right-wing. In short, Britain seems to be divided between “Tory World”, clearly on the right, and “non-Tory world”, which spans the centre and modestly left-of-centre space on the ideological spectrum. And the non-Tory world is twice the size of Tory world.

(There is, of course, an important but separate debate about the meanings of “left” and “right” in a post-ideological world, in which traditional state socialism has disappeared from the political agenda. The point here is that “left”, “right” and “centre” are terms that still resonate with most voters, and contribute to the widespread public view that the Conservatives occupied the wrong political space in the 2005 general election.)

Given the responses to YouGov’s questions on image and the left-right scale, one might have expected a more crushing Labour victory than the party achieved on May 5. Why did Labour win the popular vote by only three points? Is there some deeper current running the Conservatives’ way, which might grow stronger by the time of the next election; or do the underlying forces in British politics point to the possibility – all else being equal – of a larger Labour majority next time?

The following table helps to explain what is happening. It compares the general election result with responses to the standard party identification question: “Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat, Scottish Nationalist, SNP or Plaid Cymru, or don’t you usually think of yourself as any of these things?”

	<i>Party ID</i>		<i>General election result %</i>
	<i>All %</i>	<i>All naming a party %</i>	
Labour	32	46	36
Conservative	24	34	33
Liberal Democrat	10	14	23
Other	4	6	8
None	27	-	
Don't know	3	-	

As can be seen, Labour led the Conservatives by a far larger margin on party ID than in the vote on election day. (The data in the above table is drawn from a combination of two YouGov polls between May 3 and 5, with a total sample of more than 7,000; the voting intention figures were within 1 point of the election result for all parties.)

What is clear is that Labour significantly under polled its natural strength, while Lib Dems over polled theirs. Put another way, Labour lost ground not because it had fundamentally alienated millions of voters but because it had angered many people who still thought of themselves as supporters of the party. Labour missing millions were sending a warning, not suing for divorce.

Where did Labour's lost voters go? Not surprisingly, many voted Liberal Democrat – but by no means all of them. 72% of Labour identifiers voted Labour, while 13% voted Lib Dem, 3% Conservative and 3% for some other party. 9% did not vote at all.

Plainly the biggest single issue was Iraq, and the associated loss of trust in Tony Blair. In Sky News's election-day poll, one in four people who voted Lib Dem told us that they would have voted Labour but for the Iraq war. That represents 5% of the total number of voters, and largely explains the actions of the 13% of Labour identifiers who voted Lib Dem. Had they voted Labour, then (with no other changes) the result of the election would have been: Labour 41%, Conservative 33%, Lib Dem 18% - virtually a rerun of the 2001 landslide victory.

Looking to the next general election, then, Labour and the Conservatives have very different tasks. Labour's challenge is to get over a lovers' tiff with many of the party's natural supporters. The Tories' challenge is to court millions of voters from scratch. It can be done; but it is not easy. Evidence of both halves of that proposition can be found in Labour's slow return to electability between the mid 1980s and the mid 1990s. In Margaret Thatcher's heyday, the Tories were well ahead of Labour on party ID as well as general election votes. Tony Blair's achievement, building on Neil Kinnock's reforms, was not simply to win three elections in a row for Labour, but to do this by converting many former Tories into people who, by 1997, thought of themselves as "Labour people". The next Tory leader must reconvert them – and convert many under 35s who have never voted Tory – into natural Conservatives.

As for the Liberal Democrats, they are vulnerable to any recovery by either main party. If Labour, post-Blair and post-Iraq-controversies, wins back many of its lost voters, while the Conservatives build up new sources of support, then the Lib Dems could find themselves squeezed. Charles Kennedy could justifiably claim that 62 seats creates the largest third-party bridgehead for around 80 years. For his party to advance further at the next election is a tough challenge – but one which, if mounted successfully, would be truly remarkable.