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The Results: How Britain Voted

For many months before it happened, the overwhelming majority of media commentators and academic specialists were united in suggesting that the General Election in May 2015 was the most unpredictable in living memory. The reason for this was the extraordinary evolution of party popularity after the 2010 election. The days have long gone when inter-election cycles followed a fairly simple and familiar pattern—the government would become unpopular and opposition parties more popular until about the middle of the term and then the governing party would gradually recover, while the others faded. Even by recent standards, however, the course of opinion between 2010 and 2015 was remarkable.

1. The inter-election cycle of party support

Trends in General Election voting intentions over the period are shown in Figure 1.1. As usual, the new government's honeymoon with the electorate was short-lived. Despite falling behind Labour by the end of 2010, however, Conservative support remained relatively buoyant until April 2012. The significant slump in that month followed an ill-judged and poorly received Budget delivered by the Chancellor, George Osborne, which was characterised by Ed Miliband as an 'omnishambles'. This was later named 'word of the year' by the *Oxford English Dictionary* and began to be applied to various aspects of the government's performance. The electorate appeared to agree with Miliband. After the Budget, according to Ipsos MORI, Osborne had the poorest satisfaction ratings (–30) of any Chancellor since Kenneth Clarke in 1994. The effects were felt in the local elections in May, when the Conservatives lost over 400 seats and fell to 33% of the 'national equivalent' vote share, well behind Labour on 39%.

From April 2012 through to March 2015 support for the Conservatives varied within very narrow limits. On these data, the party's share of voting intentions fell (just) below 30% only once and never exceeded 33.6%. The reasons underlying

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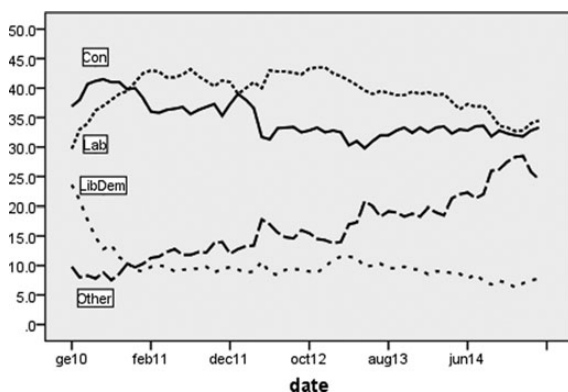


Figure 1.1 Trends in party support, 2010–March 2015.

Note: The data shown are the mean monthly voting intentions reported in YouGov's weekly polls for the *Sunday Times*.

the party's failure to move any higher in the public's estimation—even when there were clear signs of economic recovery and the next election approached—are explored elsewhere in this book but it is worth mentioning here that 'modernisers' at the top of the party appeared to go out of their way to alienate their own core supporters. Heavy cuts in expenditure on defence and the police combined with significantly increased spending on overseas aid were hardly likely to rally the Tory troops. The same applies to the withdrawal of child benefit from families paying the higher rate of income tax and the legalisation of same-sex marriage. These sorts of policies were intended, no doubt, to 'decontaminate' the Conservative brand and broaden the party's appeal. Upsetting core supporters is risky at the best of times, however. When there is a viable alternative party for the disaffected to turn to—and no evidence of new supporters being attracted—then the strategy looks distinctly unwise. In February 2013, just three weeks after the Commons vote on same-sex marriage, the Conservatives came third behind the Liberal Democrats and the UK Independence Party (UKIP) in a parliamentary by-election at Eastleigh, a seat which they initially had hopes of gaining. Nigel Farage, UKIP leader, subsequently highlighted the 'disconnect' between traditional Conservative supporters and their party in typically colourful terms: 'Tory voters are historically used to a party of free enterprise and wealth creation, but all it wants to talk about is gay marriage, wind turbines and metropolitan Notting Hill claptrap'.¹

It is perhaps surprising that the 'omnishambolic' Conservatives were not even further behind Labour in the polls for most of the Parliament. The latter spent the first few months of opposition electing a new leader and Ed Miliband defeated

¹*Daily Telegraph*, 16 March 2013.

the favourite—his elder brother David—to take the position, largely on the basis of the votes of affiliated trade unions. The younger Miliband struggled to make a positive impact with the electorate but for a time Labour was doing reasonably well in the popularity stakes. The party had a comfortable lead in the opinion polls, took the seat of Corby from the Conservatives in a by-election (November 2012) and made sweeping gains in the 2012 and 2013 local elections. On the other hand, Labour suffered a bad defeat in the 2011 Scottish Parliament election, falling from 46 to 37 seats and leaving the Scottish National Party (SNP) with an overall majority.

Labour support peaked in the latter half of 2012 but then drifted gradually downwards throughout 2013 and 2014 to a point where the two major parties were neck and neck as they entered the election year. It seems likely that this trend is explained by the increasingly negative view of Miliband held by the electorate. Whereas during 2011 his personal ratings according to YouGov (% satisfied with his performance minus % dissatisfied) had averaged -22.3 , this fell to -29.8 in 2012, -30.7 in 2013 and -41.8 in 2014. In the latter year Labour's performance in the local elections was very modest and Miliband's reputation was not enhanced by a much-criticised speech at the party conference in which he failed to mention the deficit in public finances or immigration—two of the biggest issues worrying the electorate.

The big losers in this inter-election period, however, were the Liberal Democrats. As Figure 1.1 shows, their support plummeted as soon as they joined the Coalition—reflecting, no doubt, the disappointment of those who had voted for them as an anti-Conservative Party. Particularly damaging was the party leadership's agreement to the tripling of university tuition fees—breaking a clear campaign promise to oppose any move in that direction. From December 2010, the Liberal Democrats only occasionally exceeded 10% of voting intentions—less than half of their support in the 2010 election. In the last six months of 2014 they averaged only 7.2% and in December fell to fifth place behind both UKIP and the Green Party. The party leader, Nick Clegg, bore the brunt of the electorate's displeasure. Having risen dramatically in public estimation during the 2010 election campaign, his reputation then fell like a stone. Starting with a positive satisfaction rating of $+40$ in May 2010 he was in negative territory by the end of the year, averaged -42.8 during 2011 and thereafter never had an annual average score better than -50 . For comparison, David Cameron's worst annual average was -19.5 in 2013.

The poor showing of Clegg and his party in the opinion polls was borne out in mid-term elections. The 2011 Scottish Parliament election was a disaster with only five seats won (compared with 16 in 2007). Local election results went from bad to worse. The party's national equivalent vote shares fell from 16 to 11% between 2011 and 2014, and more than 1700 council seats—over two-fifths of the number held in 2010—were lost. In parliamentary by-elections—in which they used to be the party to watch—the Liberal Democrats lost their deposit in 11 of the 19 contested.

Indeed, in Rotherham in November 2012, the party contrived to come eighth behind an assortment of other candidates while in Rochester and Strood in November 2014 their candidate failed to reach 1% of votes. In the European Parliament elections in May 2014 the Liberal Democrats won less than 7% of votes and lost 10 of their 11 seats. To add insult to injury, the pet project of the Liberal Democrats—to reform the electoral system used for Westminster elections—was dealt a severe blow when a proposal to adopt the Alternative Vote (AV) system was comprehensively rejected in a national referendum in May 2011 by 68–32%.

If the Liberal Democrats were the clear losers after the 2010 General Election, then the unmistakable winners were the ‘others’. By December 2010, the assorted other parties had overtaken the Liberal Democrats in the polls and the lead stretched as they maintained an unparalleled level of support.

Despite its success in the Scottish election, the SNP generally lagged behind Labour in voting intentions for Westminster until the aftermath of the independence referendum in September 2014. Independence was clearly rejected by the electorate, but there was then a surge in support (and in membership) for the SNP which led to talk of it all but sweeping the board in Scotland come the General Election—and thereby seriously damaging Labour’s chances. In Wales, however, Plaid Cymru made little progress. The Green Party mustered only 1% of votes in the 2010 election (although it did win a seat) and for most of the inter-election period performed unimpressively, hovering around 2% in opinion polls and making no headway in by-elections or local elections. Things changed around the time of the 2014 European Parliament elections. In that contest, the Greens won almost 8% of the vote and increased their representation from two to three seats. Thereafter, their support in the polls remained steady at 7% by December, but during the first three months of 2015 it eased back to stand at 5% in March.

The main driver of variations in support for ‘others’, however, was UKIP. The party won 3.2% of the Great Britain vote in 2010 but afterwards, at first, appeared to make little progress. In a clutch of by-elections in November 2012, however, there were encouraging results. Increases in vote shares were generally larger than before, the Liberal Democrats were pushed into fourth place in two contests—Corby and Croydon North—while in another two (Middlesbrough and Rotherham) UKIP came second. The attendant publicity for the party helped to increase their poll ratings in late November and December. Another sharp improvement came in March 2013 following the Eastleigh by-election where an impressive second place ensured yet more valuable publicity for the party and Mr Farage.

Even better was to come, however. In the county council elections in England and Wales in May 2013, UKIP won almost 150 council seats and had a national equivalent vote share of 22%—an unheard of achievement for a ‘fourth’ party. Subsequently, UKIP rose to more than 17% of General Election voting intentions in June. A year later, the party came out top in the European Parliament election,

winning 27.5% of votes and 24 seats. This was the first time in more than a century that a nationwide election did not result in either the Conservatives or Labour coming first in terms of popular support. There was a further sting in UKIP's tail, however. Late in 2014, two Conservative MPs resigned from the House of Commons, fought by-elections on behalf of UKIP and were comfortably re-elected. By January 2015, the party stood at 16.5% of voting intentions but then declined a little to end at 14.0% in March. Although both UKIP and the Greens had fallen back from their peak by the time that the election campaign was getting under way, there was certainly no sign of their support evaporating rapidly as had been the experience of minor parties in the past.

The unpredictability of the General Election outcome arose, then, not just from the fact that the two major parties were almost equal in (un)popularity by the first months of 2015. In addition, there was uncertainty surrounding the impact of a decline in Liberal Democrat support, as well as the prospects for the SNP, Greens and UKIP and how the performances of the latter would affect the votes of the big two.

2. Trends in party support during the 'short' campaign

Although parties nowadays engage in more or less continuous campaigning, there is clearly an increase in activity when an election is in the offing. Everything reaches a climax in the final few weeks of the 'short' campaign (which on this occasion was rather less 'short' than usual) since there always remains much to play for. In 2010, almost 40% of voters said that they made up their minds about which party to support during the campaign and the televised debates between the party leaders clearly had a dramatic impact on public opinion. In 2015, however, the parties and broadcasters found it difficult to agree on the timing and format of leaders' debates. In the end, there was only one debate in which both David Cameron and Nick Clegg participated (on April 2) and this was something of a farce since it involved the leaders of no fewer than seven parties.

Figure 1.2 charts the trend in voting intentions for the four leading parties from March 30 (the date of the dissolution of Parliament) on the basis of the (almost) daily polls undertaken by YouGov. As can be seen, apart from a slight improvement for the Liberal Democrats, little changed during a campaign which was variously described by commentators as 'turgid', 'antiseptic', 'sham', 'bloodless' and even 'sysiphean'.² On these data, after the first week, the Conservative share of voting intentions was always between 33 and 35% while Labour fell outside that range just once. Throughout, UKIP held steady at between 12 and 14% while, although

²Like Sysiphus in Greek mythology, the parties laboured mightily (during the campaign) only to end up where they started (according to the polls).

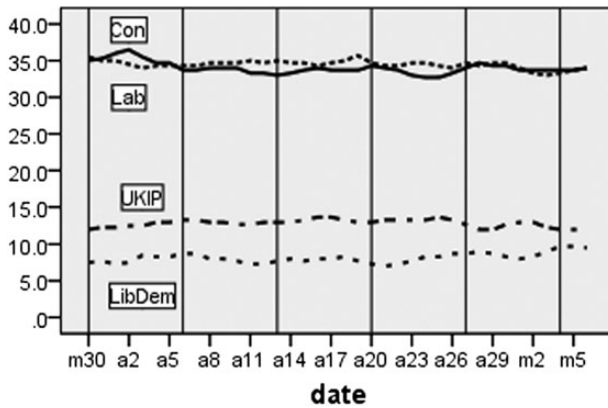


Figure 1.2 Trends in voting intentions during the 'short' campaign.

Note: The data are three-day moving averages of figures reported in YouGov's polls for the *Sun* and *Sunday Times*. The vertical lines mark each Monday of the campaign.

not shown in the figure, the percentage intending to vote Green also hardly changed, hovering around 5%. In Scotland, meanwhile, campaign polls continued to suggest that there would be a massive swing from Labour to the SNP.

The final predictions produced by the polling companies did nothing to dispel the widespread expectation that, in terms of votes at least, the election was too close to call. Five of them predicted a dead heat between the Conservatives and Labour; four gave the Conservatives a one point lead; two put Labour in a narrow lead. In the event, it did not turn out that way.

3. The national result

The shares of votes and the number of seats won by the major parties in 2015 (in Great Britain) and changes from 2010 are shown in Table 1.1. The electorate confounded the pollsters and pundits by giving the Conservatives a significant lead over Labour in the popular vote and, as a result, they emerged to general surprise with an overall majority in the House of Commons. Less unexpectedly, the Liberal Democrats slumped dramatically in popular appeal and were left with just eight seats. They were replaced as third party among the electorate by UKIP which advanced by almost ten points but won just one seat—a poor return for almost four million votes—while taking second place in 120 constituencies. The Green Party also improved its vote share, if less dramatically, but there were no additions to the single seat already held. In Scotland the SNP took 50% of the votes which yielded 56 of the 59 seats. Labour, having won 41 Scottish constituencies in 2010, was reduced to just one. This was an unparalleled thrashing for Labour in an election in Scotland.

Table 1.1 Share of votes and number of seats won (Great Britain) and changes from 2010

	Share of votes (%)	Change 2010–2015	Number of seats	Change 2010–2015
Conservative	37.7	+0.8	330	+24
Labour	31.2	+1.5	232	–26
Liberal Democrat	8.1	–15.5	8	–49
UKIP	12.9	+9.7	1	+1
Green	3.8	+2.8	1	0
SNP/Plaid Cymru	5.5	+3.2	59	+50
Other	0.9	–0.6	1	0

Note: The Speaker, who was not opposed by the Conservatives, Labour or Liberal Democrats, is treated as an ‘other’.

3.1 Regional and constituency variations in changes in party support

Table 1.2 shows changes in party shares of votes across English regions and in Scotland and Wales. Outside Scotland, Labour increased its support everywhere, doing best in London (+7.1) and least well in Wales (+0.7). The Conservatives declined a little in the North West and Yorkshire/Humberside but managed to improve elsewhere. The Liberal Democrats, in contrast, experienced very steep falls across the country while UKIP achieved what would in normal political times be seen as spectacular improvements, even in London, the party’s weakest ‘region’ in England. The election result in Scotland was clearly exceptional. In the face of the SNP onslaught, all three of the other major parties dropped back while the slightly increased share obtained by UKIP is largely explained by the fact that the number of candidates put forward by the party rose from 28 to 41.

Much greater variation in both the direction and extent of changes in party support would be expected at constituency level, since General Elections are more than simply national contests between party leaders (notwithstanding the impression conveyed by media reporting of the campaign). Local personalities, issues, events and traditions as well as constituency campaigning at the grass roots all have a part to play. There is, of course, an impressive level of continuity in the distribution of votes across constituencies. This is verified by the correlation coefficients measuring the strength of the association between the parties’ shares of votes in 2010 and 2015. Excluding Scotland, these are 0.97 for the Conservatives, 0.96 for Labour and 0.89 for the Liberal Democrats ($N = 572$ in all cases). Support for UKIP and the Greens was rather less predictable on the basis of their performance in 2010, the relevant coefficients being 0.58 ($N = 529$) and 0.76 ($N = 306$), respectively.

Despite these strong relationships there remains considerable variation in the extent of change and, in some constituencies, its direction. Outside Scotland, Conservative support declined in 203 constituencies and rose in 369. Despite generally

Table 1.2 Changes in party shares of votes in regions

	Con	Lab	Lib Dem	UKIP	SNP/PC
North East	+1.6	+3.3	-17.1	+14.0	-
North West	-0.5	+5.3	-15.1	+10.5	-
Yorkshire/Humber	-0.2	+4.7	-15.8	+13.2	-
East Midlands	+2.3	+1.8	-15.2	+12.5	-
West Midlands	+2.3	+2.3	-15.0	+11.7	-
Eastern	+1.9	+2.4	-15.8	+11.9	-
London	+0.4	+7.1	-14.4	+6.4	-
South East	+1.5	+2.1	-16.8	+10.6	-
South West	+3.7	+2.3	-19.6	+9.1	-
Wales	+1.1	+0.7	-13.6	+11.2	+0.8
Scotland	-1.8	-17.7	-11.4	+0.9	+30.1

making progress, Labour's vote share fell in 101 English and 23 Welsh seats. There was no constituency where the Liberal Democrats managed an improvement, however, and none where UKIP declined. Nonetheless, even when changes were in the expected direction their magnitude varied hugely. Liberal Democrat decreases, for example, ranged from fewer than five percentage points in two cases (Cambridge and Bradford East) to more than 30 in three (Brent Central, Sheffield Central and Hereford and Herefordshire South). UKIP meanwhile rose by 20 points or more in 13 constituencies but by fewer than two points in four.

Although specifically local factors explain many constituency variations and thus make it difficult to generalise, it is worth looking for systematic patterns. A first step is to consider how changes in support for the various parties were inter-related and Table 1.3 reports the relevant correlation coefficients (again excluding Scotland). Negative coefficients indicate that where one of the parties concerned did better, the other had poorer results and *vice versa*. It can be seen that both the Conservatives and Labour benefited from the decline in Liberal Democrat support—the more the latter fell in a constituency, the better the major parties did. It was thought by many before the election that an advance by UKIP would be bound to hurt the Conservatives more than Labour. In fact, the figures suggest that although better UKIP performances were indeed associated with worse results for the Tories, the effect was actually stronger when changes in the UKIP and Labour vote shares are analysed. Changes in support for the Greens were not significantly related to Conservative performance and tended to mirror the pattern for Labour. It is striking, however, that the coefficient measuring the relationship between changes in vote shares for the Greens and the Liberal Democrats is the most strongly negative of all in the table. The collapse in Liberal Democrat support clearly helped the Green Party to its best ever General Election result.

It might reasonably be expected that the nature of party competition in different constituencies would affect changes in party support—as a consequence of tactical voting, for example. Table 1.4, which is restricted to England (due to the

Table 1.3 Correlations between changes in vote shares (England and Wales)

	Change % Con	Change % Lab	Change % Lib Dem	Change % UKIP
Change % Lab	-0.16	-	-	-
Change % Lib Dem	-0.38	-0.39	-	-
Change % UKIP	-0.30	-0.36	0.13	-
Change % Green	0.02	0.26	-0.53	-0.23

Note: The *N* for coefficients involving Conservatives Labour Liberal Democrats only is 572; for these parties and UKIP 529; for these and the Green Party it is 306 and for UKIP and Greens 280. All coefficients are statistically significant except that for the Conservatives and Green Party.

Table 1.4 Changes in overall vote shares in different electoral contexts (England only)

	Top two parties in 2010					
	Con—Lab	Con—LDem	Lab—Con	Lab—LDem	LDem—Con	LDem—Lab
Con	+2.5	+2.8	-1.3	+0.4	+2.0	-2.9
Lab	+0.7	+3.0	+4.1	+8.3	+4.3	+12.5
Lib Dem	-13.7	-18.4	-13.2	-19.6	-16.7	-18.4
UKIP	+11.3	+10.2	+12.5	+9.5	+7.7	+7.0
Green	+2.1	+3.6	+2.5	+5.0	+3.5	+5.3
(N)	(129)	(166)	(127)	(63)	(33)	(10)

complexities of the party systems in Scotland and Wales), presents data enabling us to check this suggestion. The Liberal Democrats clearly lost most where they had more votes to lose—in constituencies where they had been in first or second place in 2010. Conversely, Labour did best where they were in competition with the Liberal Democrats while the Conservatives had above average increases in vote share where the Liberal Democrats were their main opponents. The Green Party improved most in Labour v Liberal Democrat seats. Presumably these constituencies would contain relatively large numbers of leftish-inclined voters who would be attracted to the Greens. For the same reason, UKIP had relatively poor results in these seats. The latter's advance in constituencies held by the Liberal Democrats from the Conservatives was below average, and this might suggest an element of tactical voting by potential UKIP voters.

As already noted, the election result in Scotland was spectacularly different from the outcome in the rest of Britain and the Scottish story is explored by James Mitchell in a later chapter. It is appropriate, nonetheless, to make a few comments here. First, despite the electoral upheaval, support for the 'British' parties was distributed across constituencies in much the same way that it had been in 2010. Correlating constituency shares in Scotland in 2010 and 2015 yields coefficients of 0.93 for the Conservatives, 0.90 for Labour and 0.86 for the Liberal Democrats ($N = 59$ in all cases). Strikingly, however, the figure for the SNP is only 0.57. So, although the geographical distribution of SNP support in this election was broadly similar to that in the previous one, the element of continuity was much weaker than is normal. This is mainly because the SNP recorded large votes in constituencies where it had previously been relatively weak.

Second, the increases in SNP vote shares varied widely—there were six constituencies (five of them SNP-held) where it was under 20 points; 23 where it was between 20 and 30 points; 27 where it was between 30 and 40 points and three Glasgow constituencies (South West, North and North East) where it was more than 40 points.

Third, when we inter-correlate the changes in the parties' vote shares there are only four statistically significant results. As elsewhere, both the Conservatives and Labour did better where the Liberal Democrats lost more (coefficients of -0.36 and -0.51 , respectively). Also reflecting a trend in the rest of the country, the Green Party appears to have benefited from the Liberal Democrat collapse. Although only 16 seats are involved, the correlation between the changes in the two parties' vote shares is an impressive -0.75 . The performances of the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats were unrelated to that of the SNP, but the rivalry between the latter and Labour as the leading parties in Scottish politics is underlined by the fact that changes in their vote shares were strongly negatively related (coefficient = -0.71). As even a cursory reading of the election results would reveal, the greater the gain by the SNP across the constituencies, the bigger was Labour's loss of support.

Finally, all elections throw up perplexing results and in the Scottish case this time it came from Edinburgh South. Here, the SNP increased its vote share by 26 points but quite how the incumbent Labour member managed to increase his share by four points and emerge from the wreckage as the sole Scottish Labour MP remains something of a mystery. It may be significant, however, that the SNP candidate received much adverse publicity for having referred to opponents of Scottish independence as ‘Quislings’ while, in the election itself, the slump in the Liberal Democrat vote (–30 points) was well above average (see also the later chapters by Curtice and Mitchell for brief discussions of this constituency).

4. Patterns of party support in 2015

When we focus on variations in absolute levels of support for the parties rather than change between elections, we would usually be on territory that is much more familiar in that patterns are normally very similar from one election to the next. In this case, however, the rise of UKIP, the relative success of the Greens, the demise of the Liberal Democrats and, of course, what Alex Salmond called an ‘electoral tsunami’ in Scotland make matters somewhat less familiar than usual.

Nonetheless, regional variations in party support (Table 1.5) show that, with the exception of London, there remains a broad north–south division in England. Labour’s strongest areas outside London remain the three northernmost English regions, although the party’s lead over the Conservatives is now relatively slim in Yorkshire and Humberside. The three southern regions (Eastern, South East and South West) recorded very large leads for the Conservatives with Labour not even reaching 20% of votes in two of them. Scotland, of course, was a disaster area for Labour but even Wales can no longer be counted as particularly strong Labour territory. The north–south party division in England is even more apparent in terms of seats won. In the three northern regions the Conservatives won only 44 seats compared with 110 for Labour and 4 for the Liberal Democrats. In the Eastern, South East and South West regions, in contrast, the tally was 181 for the Conservatives, 12 for Labour, 5 for the Liberal Democrats and 3 for others (including the Speaker).

As usual, the Liberal Democrats had a relatively even spread of votes across regions but on this occasion it was at an abysmally low level. They failed to reach 10% of votes outside the South West—even in Scotland where they previously held 11 seats. In the South West itself—frequently referred to as a ‘heartland’ for the party—they scored 15.1% of votes but failed to win a single seat.

UKIP performed well everywhere—although less so in the South East and South West—except for London and Scotland. In the case of London, this is probably due to the cosmopolitan nature of the capital which contains large concentrations of recent immigrants. Finally, it is worth noting that the Green Party had stronger

Table 1.5 Party shares of votes and seats won in regions (row percent)

	Con	Lab	Lib Dem	UKIP	Green	SNP/PC	Other
North East	25.3	46.9	6.5	16.7	3.6	–	0.9
	3	26					
North West	31.2	44.7	6.5	13.7	3.2	–	0.7
	22	51	2				
Yorkshire/Humber	32.6	39.1	7.1	16.0	3.5	–	1.6
Seats	19	33	2				
East Midlands	43.5	31.6	5.6	15.8	3.0	–	0.6
Seats	32	14					
West Midlands	41.8	32.9	5.5	15.7	3.3	–	0.8
Seats	34	25					
Eastern	49.0	22.0	8.2	16.2	3.9	–	0.5
Seats	52	4	1	1			
London	34.9	43.7	7.7	8.1	4.9	–	0.8
Seats	27	45	1				
South East	50.8	18.3	9.4	14.7	5.2	–	1.5
Seats	78	4			1		1
South West	46.5	17.7	15.1	13.6	5.9	–	1.2
Seats	51	4					
Wales	27.2	36.9	6.5	13.6	2.6	12.1	1.0
Seats	11	25	1			3	
Scotland	14.9	24.3	7.5	1.6	1.3	50.0	0.3
Seats	1	1	1			56	

Note: The Speaker is counted as 'Other'.

results in the South of England (including London where they have a lengthy record of contesting local elections) than elsewhere.

In order to explore variations in party support across constituencies, Table 1.6 shows correlation coefficients measuring the associations between the shares of the vote obtained by the parties in constituencies in England and Wales and a standard set of socio-demographic variables drawn from the 2011 census. The data reveal no surprises in respect of the Conservatives and Labour. It is not exactly news to report that the former had larger shares of the vote in constituencies where there were more professional and managerial workers, owner occupiers, older voters, people with degrees and in more rural areas. They performed less well where there were more manual workers, social renters, younger people, those having no educational qualifications, students, those not owning a car, people belonging to ethnic minorities and in more urban areas. These patterns were clearly reversed in Labour's case.

The distribution of Liberal Democrat support is normally a paler reflection of that for the Conservatives in that the relationships tend to be in the same direction but weaker. Despite the slump in support for the former, in broad terms the same

Table 1.6 Bivariate correlations between party shares of vote in 2015 and constituency characteristics (England and Wales)

	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat	UKIP	Green
% Professional/managerial	0.53	-0.43	0.31	-0.57	0.28
% Manual workers	-0.50	0.41	-0.30	0.57	-0.33
% Owner occupiers	0.58	-0.62	0.09*	0.34	-0.34
% Social renters	-0.65	0.69	-0.22	-0.07*	0.14
% Aged 18-24	-0.46	0.40	0.04*	-0.25	0.41
% Aged 65+	0.45	-0.60	0.17	0.37	-0.20
% In agriculture	0.31	-0.47	0.22	0.07*	0.03*
Persons per hectare	-0.42	0.53	-0.06*	-0.44	0.27
% With degrees	0.30	-0.22	0.31	-0.74	0.39
% No qualifications	-0.48	0.40	-0.34	0.65	-0.38
% Students	-0.40	0.36	0.09*	-0.41	0.45
% With no car	-0.70	0.75	-0.17	-0.26	0.24
% Ethnic minority	-0.35	0.52	0.12	-0.44	0.11*
(N)	(572)	(572)	(572)	(573)	(537)

Note: Coefficients not statistically significant at the 0.01 level are asterisked. The Speaker's seat is excluded in the case of the three 'major' parties.

still applies. Two points are worth noting however. First, in 2010 the Liberal Democrat vote tended to be slightly stronger the more students and young people there were in a constituency. This time, the correlation coefficients involving these variables are not statistically significant. Second, whereas the Conservatives have consistently done worse the larger the ethnic minority population in a seat, this was not true of the Liberal Democrats in 2015. If anything, indeed, they held up better (or lost less) where there were more ethnic minority voters.

The coefficients for UKIP and the Green Party are an unusual mixture but suggest that these two parties appeal to different sorts of communities. UKIP did best where there are more manual workers, older voters and people lacking educational qualifications but also, rather paradoxically, their vote share was positively related to the proportion of owner occupiers in a constituency. On the other hand, the party did worse in areas where there were more professionals, students, young people, residents with degrees, people with no car and ethnic minorities. Except for the ethnic minority variable, the relationships between the level of support for the Greens and these socio-demographic characteristics were the reverse of those for UKIP.

In sum, despite changes in the fortunes of the two major parties, the geographical and hence social bases of their support remained much as they have been in the past. The situation as far as the Liberal Democrats are concerned is a little more fluid

Table 1.7 Bivariate correlations between SNP share of vote in 2015 and constituency characteristics

% Professional/managerial	−0.68	% Social renters	0.67
% With degrees	−0.63	% No qualifications	0.57
% Owner occupiers	−0.41	% Manual workers	0.51
% In agriculture	−0.38	% With no car	0.41
% Aged 65+	−0.30		
% Church of Scotland	−0.24		

Note: $N = 59$. All coefficients are statistically significant at the 0.01 level.

while the profiles of the votes won by UKIP and the Greens suggest that the two find support in different sorts of areas. In interpreting the data in Table 1.6, however, it must be remembered that, on their own, these figures tell us nothing about the party choices of the people belonging to the various groups involved—for that, surveys and polls are required. Rather, correlations provide information about the relationship between the characteristics of *constituencies* and levels of party support in those constituencies.

Within Scotland, variations in Conservative and Labour strength were associated with the characteristics of constituencies in much the same way as in the rest of Britain. Interest centres, rather, on the SNP. Did that party's huge advance affect the socio-economic bases of its vote? The relevant data are shown in Table 1.7. In 2010, only five variables were significantly associated with SNP vote share—% professional and managerial (−0.40), % with degrees (−0.30), persons per hectare (−0.30), % manual workers (0.40) and % with no qualifications (0.29). Moreover, the strength of the correlations was modest. In 2015, the picture was somewhat different. As can be seen, the distribution of SNP support was much more clearly structured by occupational class and the class-related variables of education, housing and car ownership. In addition, the SNP did relatively less well where there were more older people and Church of Scotland adherents. In 2010, the five significant variables mentioned above accounted for 18% of the variation in SNP support; in 2015, the same five explained 65%. Despite winning 50% of Scottish votes, then, the SNP is no longer a 'catch all' party without a distinctive social base. Rather, in this election at least, it has taken over what were formerly the bases of Labour dominance in Scotland.

4.1 Turnout

Turnout in Britain is measured as the percentage of the eligible electorate which casts a ballot. Properly, therefore, it includes those who voted but whose ballots

were rejected for one reason or another and that practice is followed here.³ Although it might appear a rather obscure technical point, it is worth noting that before this election the system of electoral registration was altered. Rather than the appropriate form being completed by the ‘Head of Household’ on behalf of all residents at an address, each individual was required to register separately and also to provide proof of identity. Since those who were unwilling to undertake this slightly more complicated registration process—or simply never got round to it—are disproportionately likely to have been non-voters in any event, one might have expected that the new system would lead to slightly higher reported turnout figures.

On the day of the election, there was the usual wild speculation in the media about the level of turnout. In the next day’s *Daily Telegraph*, for example, which was published after only a few results had been declared, it was reported that ‘turnout was forecast to be at its highest for almost two decades’. It was also reported that a betting firm had already paid out on bets that turnout would exceed 68.5%. If true, this proved to be premature generosity on the part of Paddy Power since the overall British turnout was 66.6%. Despite the fact that the outcome was expected to be very close and claims that UKIP was able to mobilise previous non-voters, this was an increase of just 1.3 points on the figure for 2010. On the positive side, 2015 was the third General Election in succession that turnout has increased; on the other hand, it remains lower than at any election between 1950 and 1997.

Table 1.8 shows that, as with support for the main parties, there remains something of a north–south divide in England with respect to turnout. The three northern regions had relatively poor turnouts—worse, even, than the figure for London. Wales used to be a high turnout country but it is now a little worse than average. At 71.1%, an increase of more than seven points since 2010, the turnout in Scotland stands out as exceptional. The independence referendum in September 2014 clearly engaged the Scottish electorate to a remarkable degree and this carried over into the post-referendum period, as polls began to indicate the likelihood of a major improvement in the fortunes of the SNP and a sharp fall in Labour’s popularity. Nonetheless, to keep matters in perspective and as with Britain as a whole, even in Scotland 2015 turnout failed to match the levels seen in elections between 1950 and 1997.

As usual, the level of turnout varied considerably across constituencies in 2015. At the bottom end, Stoke-on-Trent Central propped up the table with a turnout of 51.5%. At the other extreme, Scottish constituencies occupied the top three places. The highest turnout was in East Dunbartonshire (81.9%), which was the scene of a

³The constituency electorate figures used are from the House of Commons Library Briefing Paper number CBP7186.

Table 1.8 Regional turnout 2015

	Turnout 2015	Change 10–15
North East	62.0	+0.9
North West	64.4	+2.1
Yorkshire/Humber	63.3	+0.4
East Midlands	66.8	0.0
West Midlands	64.2	−0.5
Eastern	67.8	−0.2
London	65.6	+1.1
South East	68.8	+0.6
South West	69.7	+0.7
Wales	66.0	+1.2
Scotland	71.1	+7.3

Table 1.9 Bivariate correlations between turnout in 2015 and constituency characteristics (Great Britain)

% Professional/managerial	0.57	% Manual workers	−0.55
% Owner occupiers	0.54	% Social renters	−0.55
		% Private renters	−0.29
% In agriculture	0.35	Persons per hectare	−0.40
% With degrees	0.46	% No qualifications	−0.51
% Aged 65+	0.42	% Aged 18–24	−0.34
		% Ethnic minority	−0.35
		% With no car	−0.57
Constit. marginality 2010	0.05*		

Notes: All coefficients are significant at the 0.01 level except the one asterisked. $N = 632$.

very hard-fought battle between the incumbent Liberal Democrat (Jo Swinson) and the SNP, followed by East Renfrewshire (81.1%) and Stirling (77.7%).

As with the distribution of support for the major parties, in examining turnout variations across constituencies we encounter—for the most part—a highly predictable and familiar pattern. Table 1.9 shows correlations between the level of turnout in 2015 and census variables indicating the socio-economic characteristics of constituencies as well as their marginality (100—the winning party's percent majority) in 2010. In general—and it is nothing new—the coefficients for the social variables indicate that, despite the slight overall increase in turnout, Britain continues to be divided into relatively low turnout and relatively high turnout constituencies and the two are very different in social terms. The former are mainly urban, working class and poor; the latter rural and suburban, middle class and relatively affluent. As before, it is worth stressing that this analysis does

not tell us the extent to which people in the various groups listed turned out to vote. Rather, it tells us that the more professionals, owner occupiers, people with degrees, people employed in agriculture and older people there are in a constituency, the higher was its turnout.

There is one unexpected result in Table 1.9, however. The closeness of the contest in a constituency in the previous election (marginality) has been regularly associated with turnout levels for many years. Parties put greater campaign efforts into more marginal seats (paying little attention to those that are either very safe or hopeless for them) and, unsurprisingly, these efforts usually bear fruit in higher turnouts. In 2015, indeed, there were frequent complaints that the parties were focusing more than ever on their target seats—and even on target voters within these seats. On this occasion, however, differential campaigning did not pay off in better turnouts—the relevant correlation coefficient is not statistically significant. There is no obvious reason for this surprise development. It may be that voters in marginal seats became so fed up with the constant stream of leaflets, direct mail, telephone calls and so on during the campaign that they turned off from the election altogether. In any event, this is clearly a question that requires further research.

5. Explaining the outcome

There is little difficulty in accounting for the poor performance of the Liberal Democrats in the election. This was merely the latest in a series of electoral disasters stemming from the decision to enter a coalition with the Conservatives and the subsequent evaporation of respect for the party leader, Nick Clegg. Explaining why the Conservatives defeated Labour so soundly is rather more difficult. In the immediate aftermath of the elections, politicians and media commentators put forward a variety of suggestions, including Labour's alleged move to the left over the previous five years, the 'innate conservatism' of the English electorate and the apparent arrogance of the SNP leadership in constantly claiming to be able to 'lock the Tories out of 10 Downing Street'. A full evidence-based account must await publication of the British Election Study report. But there are grounds for thinking that, to a considerable extent, the Conservative victory was a vindication of the 'valence voting' approach that has been emphasised by academic electoral analysts in recent years.

This suggests, first, that electors are concerned more about 'valence' issues—those on which there is general agreement on the ends to be pursued—than about ideology or the positions that parties take on more divisive issues. Second, electors make judgements about which party is likely to be more competent on the key valence issues. Third, as a shorthand way of determining the relative competence of the parties, they assess the relative merits of the party leaders and that judgement often determines which party they will support.

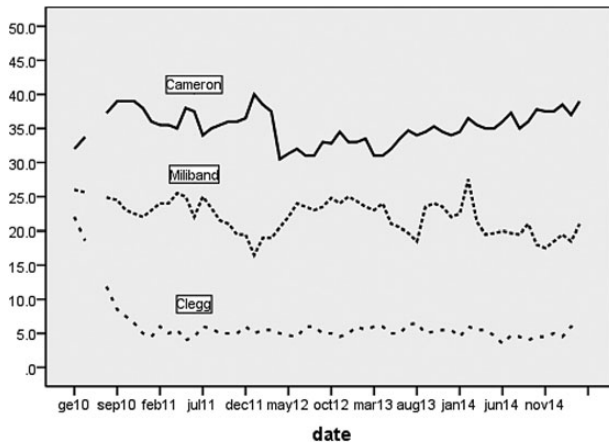


Figure 1.3 Best person for Prime Minister, 2010–March 2015.

Source: YouGov polls for *The Sunday Times*

According to YouGov, the three issues considered most important by the electorate in 2015 were the economy (mentioned by 52% of respondents), immigration (51%) and the National Health Service (45%). These easily outstripped other issues and can be defined as valence issues because everyone wants a healthy economy and a first-class health service while the great majority of people favour controls on immigration. As to the party judged best to handle these issues, although Labour led the Conservatives by 14 points on the National Health Service, the Conservatives were ahead by 18 on the economy and 6 on immigration (an issue on which a significant proportion of respondents preferred UKIP). Overall, then, the Conservatives appear to have had the edge on the key valence issues in the election.

When it comes to assessments of the party leaders, however, there is no room for doubt. David Cameron heavily outscored Ed Miliband. As Figure 1.3 shows, the latter never once headed the former from the time he became Labour leader until the start of the campaign. During the campaign itself, somewhat surprisingly, YouGov asked the ‘best Prime Minister’ question only a few times and, although there was some improvement in Miliband’s position he still lagged well behind Cameron. On the eve of poll, Ipsos MORI reported that Cameron was thought to be the most capable Prime Minister by 42% of respondents compared with 27% thinking this of Miliband. The last time that a General Election was not won by the party of the leader preferred as Prime Minister was in 1979, when Margaret Thatcher’s Conservatives defeated Labour under James Callaghan. In that case, however, although Callaghan was preferred by 44% to 33%, Thatcher nonetheless received reasonably good personal ratings. Unhappily for Labour and Mr Miliband, the latter not only lagged Mr Cameron in the electorate’s estimation of who would be

the best Prime Minister but the proportions thinking that he was doing a good job were consistently smaller than those who judged his performance bad. Had pundits and the media paid a little more attention to the background data produced by the polls on party preferences on issues and preferred Prime Minister, rather than being obsessed by the 'horse race', they might have been a little more cautious in accepting the 'headline' messages that the election result would be close to a dead heat.

Finally, how is the success of the SNP to be explained? Thankfully that is a question to be considered later.