



RESEARCH NOTE

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The British General Election 2001 at a Glance

The Blair Labour Government retained office with a record second term majority of 167 at the British General Election held on 7 June 2001. The Conservative Party, under William Hague, achieved a swing of about 1.8 per cent but only managed a net gain of one seat in the 659 member House of Commons.

The poll had been expected to coincide with local council elections initially scheduled for 3 May 2001 but both contests were deferred when a foot and mouth epidemic devastated large parts of the British countryside. The decision to delay the general election appears to have been taken by Prime Minister Blair against the views of the majority of his Cabinet, many of whom favoured the earlier date to conserve party finances and avoid the hazards of a ten week campaign.

Election Scorecard June 2001

Party	Seats	Gains	Losses	Net
Labour	413	2	8	-6
Conservative	166	9	8	+1
Liberal-Democrat	52	8	2	+6
Others	28	8	9	-1

Low turnout however, tarnished new Labour's win with fewer than one in four potential voters actually casting a ballot in favour of Blair's government.

1997 Revisited

The General Election of 1 May 1997 had ended 18 years of Tory rule. That election saw Labour returned with its largest ever number of seats—419, the Conservative Party was reduced to 165 seats and the Liberal Democrats also benefited at the Conservatives' expense with the best third party seat count since 1929 with 46 seats.

Labour's successful 1997 campaign has been attributed to an 'It's Time' factor, internal party reforms, a political image re-positioned closer to the centre of British politics, more 'people friendly' policies and Blair's personal appeal. By contrast, John Major's Conservative Government was perceived as weak, and divided

on key questions such as Britain's relationship with continental Europe. The Tory Government was also tainted by a so-called 'sleaze factor' attached to the public dealings and private lives of a number of prominent Tories.¹

Expectations

Not all the factors in play in 1997 were present during the 2001 campaign. Sleaze was no longer a strong Labour plus. Labour also did not enjoy the same political momentum going into the 2001 campaign that it had four years earlier.

Seventeen by-elections between the 1997 and 2001 polls had shown modest to moderate swings away from Labour though the usual beneficiaries of any swing were third parties or independents. By contrast, the Conservatives had failed to win any of the eighteen by-elections held between 1992 and 1997.

In 2001 new Labour was seen as competent, 'clean' and cautious. Some of the 1997 magic was gone but Labour's economic record, campaigning skills and capacity for news management—the mastership of 'spin'—still made it an almost 'unbackable' favourite to win a second term.²

Surveys gave Blair's administration a commanding lead over the Tories in voter approval in the key policy areas of education and health. Where Conservative leads would be normally expected—in defence and law and order—new Labour was either preferred or on a par with the Tories. Labour's lead on various economic management issues ranged from solid to spectacular.³

Leadership polls gave Blair significant leads over Hague, at times almost doubling the margin he had enjoyed in 1997 over Prime Minister John Major.⁴

Polls of voting intentions showed remarkably consistent Labour leads in the six months preceding 7 June. Labour's projected advantage rarely slipped below 10 per cent, sometimes nudging 25 per cent. However, Labour's anticipated vote declined slowly in the last weeks of the campaign with the actual result of 40.8 per cent being just below the bottom point identified in all opinion polls.

By holding to the centre, however, Labour had even retained the (albeit) grudging support of some Conservative-leaning commentators and journals. *The Economist* noted that: 'Tony Blair is the only credible conservative currently available'.⁵

Record and Campaign

Labour's campaign stuck resolutely to the theme of wanting the chance to build on the foundations laid in their first term in office. Successes in economic management (low inflation, falling unemployment, strong employment growth and low interest rates) provided a solid platform for a government standing on its record and promising a more activist approach if given another term. Labour managed to stay 'on message' throughout the campaign and even Deputy Prime Ministerial brawling with a protester did not sour the incumbent's chances.

The Conservatives offered further tax cuts and less intrusive government. Remarkably though, much time was expended on issues that failed to strongly connect with voters, e.g. the future of the pound and the handling of asylum seekers. Former Conservative Prime Minister Baroness Thatcher entered the fray—soon dubbed by Mrs Thatcher herself as 'The Mummy Returns'. This underscored Hague's limitations and reinforced impressions that the Tory party had not moved on from its 1997 loss.⁶

The Liberal Democrats attacked the Government as out of touch and for devoting inadequate resources to the maintenance of public services. The Liberal Democrats further argued that the Conservatives had now moved so far to the right of British politics that

they should be supplanted as the major opposition party. Liberal Democrat Charles Kennedy enjoyed a successful campaign appealing as the most 'spin-free' of the leaders.

In a post election survey, the Gallup Organization found that over 92 per cent of voters wanted more on achievements and less 'spin' from the Government. Reflecting campaign concerns over declining public services, 70 per cent of those polled supported increased taxes to enable greater spending on health and education.⁷

Winners and Losers

Despite a swing of about 1.8 per cent to the Tories, few of Labour's most marginal seats fell and there was even one Labour gain from the Conservatives.⁸ The Conservatives won one seat in Scotland⁹ and again went without success in Wales.

Liberal Democrat representation increased from 46 to 52 and their share of the vote increased from 17.2 per cent to 18.3 per cent. However, their Deputy Leader, Jackie Ballard, Member for Taunton was defeated.

Reflecting concern over the adequacy of public services, Labour lost the constituency of Wyre Forrester to retired doctor, Richard Taylor who campaigned principally against the closure of a local hospital. Sitting independent Martin Bell, having relinquished his seat of Tatton after one term, polled impressively but could not wrest Brentwood and Ongar from the Tories.

In the 18 Northern Ireland seats, results favoured 'hardliners' on both sides with Sinn Fein doubling its representation to four. Moderate Protestant David Trimble's Ulster Unionist Party lost four of their 10 seats with the Protestant anti-Good Friday agreement, Democratic Unionists going from three to five members.

Over 10 per cent of voters in Oldham West¹⁰ and Royton and in Oldham East and Saddleworth supported the rightwing British Nationalist Party but Labour retained both seats.

Local Council elections saw swings to the Conservatives with Labour and the Liberal Democrats both losing ground.¹¹

The number of women MPs returned fell to 106 from the historic high of 117 in 1997. Labour endorsed 88 successful female candidates and the Conservatives 12.

Turnout

Between 1964 and 1997 voter turnout ranged from a low of 71.5 per cent (1997) to a high of 78.7 per cent (February 1974). In 2001, turn out plunged to the lowest level since 1918 and a drop of over 10 per cent since 1997. Turn out was lowest amongst 18–24 year olds (estimated at 38 per cent).

BBC polling ascribed the low turnout

Election Date	Government	Voter Turnout
15.10.1964	Labour	77.1%
3.5.1979	Conservative	72.0%
1.5.1997	Labour	71.3%
7.6.2001	Labour	59.2%

to:

- (a) belief that voting would change nothing—77 per cent
- (b) lack of trust in politicians—65 per cent, and
- (c) belief that 'Labour would win anyway'—53 per cent.

The figures suggest a combination of apathy and antipathy caused by the low turnout. What the near 'status quo' result also indicates is that large numbers of both Labour and non-Labour voters did not cast a ballot. As one commentator observed:

Healthy and prosperous people have turned away. ... Politics is little more than the leisure option of cranks—train spotting without the travel.¹²

Fallout

On 8 June William Hague announced that he would relinquish the leadership of the Conservative Party. A new leader will be selected before the Conservative Party's conference in October.

Prime Minister Blair announced his new Cabinet on the same day as Hague resigned, with Foreign Secretary Robin Cook being replaced by former Home Secretary, Jack Straw. Gordon Brown, sometimes touted as Labour's next leader, remains as Chancellor of the Exchequer.

There are four women in the inner Cabinet, including Australian-born Trade and Industry Secretary Patricia Hewitt, and 30 in the full Ministry.

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1. Dr John Hart, 'The British General Election', *Current Issues Brief* no. 29, Department of the Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 1997.
2. One firm of Internet bookmakers had Labour at 1/66 to win the most number of seats. Betting firm Ladbrokes even began paying out on a Labour win before the poll was conducted.
3. Gallup Poll data published in the *New Statesman*, 26 March 2001, p. 21.
4. http://news.bbc.co.uk/vote2001/hi/english/opinion_polls/newsid_1306000/1306664.stm
5. *The Economist*, 'The Choice is Clear', 2 June 2001, p. 13.
6. Professor Anthony King, 'Electors fed up with spin and soundbites', *The Telegraph*, 11 June 2001.
7. Gallup poll, loc.cit.
8. Dorset South where a high profile campaign encouraging 'tactical voting' led by singer/composer Billy Bragg saw the incumbent Tory defeated by 153 votes.
9. The Conservatives won Galloway and Upper Nithsdale from the Scottish Nationalist Party by 74 votes.
10. The site of recent race riots. 'Second vote for extreme right wing in Oldham', *Canberra Times*, 9 June 2001.
11. Labour and the Liberal Democrats each lost control of two of the 45 Councils. The Conservatives gained control of an extra five bringing their total to 18. Labour held 14 and a further 13 were not controlled by any single party.
12. Nick Cohen, 'Frankly I don't give a damn', *New Statesman*, 18 December 2000.