

The UK Election: Where Did It All Go Wrong for Theresa May?

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Yes, I was one of the many who totally failed to predict the outcome of the UK General Election. Why did we get it so wrong and what are the challenges now facing the UK Government – not least in relation to Brexit?

Theresa May went into the General Election she chose to call, with a substantial lead in the opinion polls. Labour was seen as a divided party with a weak and unpopular leader. So how did a huge lead become a hung Parliament – with the Tories now relying on Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) for a wafer-thin majority in order to stay in government?

The Conservatives' poor campaign

The Conservatives ran a bad campaign, focused on Theresa May being able to deliver 'strong and stable' leadership, which would be needed in the Brexit negotiations. This focus on the person and not the Party began to run into trouble when May proved herself to be uncomfortable in interviews, reluctant to engage with the general public and refusing to take part in leaders' debates. May's manifesto commitments began to fall apart when proposals to fund care for older people proved enormously unpopular with just those core, Conservative voters and the Party had to pull back, saying 'this was just an idea and there will be a discussion paper!' This policy disaster was quickly dubbed 'the dementia tax' by Labour and the right-wing press. It certainly didn't make the Tories look 'strong and stable'. People began to ask whether May was, in fact, 'weak and wobbly'.

Tragic events in Manchester and London

The horrendous terrorist attacks in Manchester and London, which would have usually been seen as giving the Tories an advantage as the party of 'law and order' and national security, instead served to remind the public that May had been Home Secretary for her time in Government. Labour was quick to point out the cuts she had made to police numbers and, thus, public security. This reinforced the arguments Labour had been putting forward about the effects of the Tories' austerity agenda and cuts to public services, not least the NHS – probably the most popular British institution.

The return of the Labour Party

Labour's campaign had been gathering strength on the familiar ground of challenging austerity, rather than talking about Brexit. The early 'leaking' of the Labour manifesto allowed the policies to be discussed in the press for a few days before the Labour leadership presented them – and the Party did not back-track on them. Corbyn decided to attend the main leadership debate, which allowed him to explain his position on, for example, nuclear disarmament, directly to the people and showed him as someone being willing to defend his ideas – especially powerful in the absence of the Prime Minister! There was also a very powerful social media campaign being waged by Labour support-group Momentum, especially directly targeting young voters. Corbyn held mass rallies, which made good local coverage and were widely disseminated on social media.

A new generation of voters

We saw a significant increase in young people (18-25) registering to vote – maybe having learned the lesson of last-year's Referendum campaign where, while many voted – many others had not registered and therefore could not vote.

The significance of that youth vote plus many who had voted UKIP at the last election returning to vote for their usual parties (about 50% Labour) rather than all moving to support the Tories, as many had predicted, were crucial in the outcome. As was the increase in seats taken from the SNP in Scotland, not least the 13 now-Tory seats (up from 1 in the last Parliament) – mainly won on opposing the idea of a second Scottish Independence Referendum. Tactical voting also played a role, backed by organisations such as Gina Miller's *Best for Britain*, which wants a meaningful vote on any Brexit deal.

Ups and downs for the Greens

The Greens were squeezed, as always, by the UK's disproportional election system of single-member seats (France, without a second round!) and have maintained our single seat of Brighton Pavilion, where Caroline Lucas now has an even bigger majority. Caroline is also seen as having had a very good election - 'winning' the Party leaders' debate and being described as a 'big beast' of politics in the election night coverage (this is a compliment!). Our co-leader, Jonathan Bartley, was also deemed to have made a positive impression. However, Greens failed to win our target seat of Bristol West and our overall vote and percentage halved from 2015 to 525,371 and 1.6%.

However, Greens had a potentially wider effect in that, before close of nominations, we worked to develop a Progressive Alliance¹, where parties would agree to stand down in certain seats to open the way for a candidate supporting proportional representation amongst other factors. Greens did this in some 30 seats, generally benefitting a sitting Labour MP with a small majority. The Lib Dems decided not to stand against Caroline Lucas; the Women's Equality Party also engaged in this process. This was generally viewed as serious and sensible politics, but Greens may be less happy to do this again if Labour sees itself as the automatic beneficiary. We will be doing some serious thinking about our role in this current situation.

What happens next?

Given the fragile state of the Westminster Parliament, we may have a chance to revisit a Progressive Alliance sooner rather than later. Progressive parties in the North of Ireland might also want to consider their co-operation in any future election, given that the DUP is currently almost the only voice from the North (there is an independent).

We do not have a 'strong and stable' Government, yet the Brexit clock is ticking. One outcome of the election is that we may see a more positive tone and content in the UK's negotiations with the EU. The Leader of the Scottish Conservatives, Ruth Davidson, has already made it clear that the economy and free trade should be the focus of discussion and not immigration. The DUP has no desire for a hard border between North and South in Ireland. There are more calls for cross-party agreement for the negotiations. It is clear that Progressives in Westminster must co-operate to hold the Tories to account – and possibly to replace them.

¹ <http://www.progressivealliance.org.uk/work-together?splash=1>