



| The Labour Party surpassed expectations in the UK general election in June.

WHAT CAN PROGRESSIVES LEARN FROM THE UK GENERAL ELECTION?

by Deborah Mattinson

The UK election result on June 8th confounded politicians, commentators, local activists and pollsters alike. Although expectations of a Conservative landslide had subsided as their campaign ran into difficulties, very few anticipated anything less than a comfortable Tory win. In the end, while the Conservative to Labour swing was only 2% and Labour fell short by 56 seats, the Conservatives were denied their overall majority and Theresa May was humiliated. What can we learn from the campaign and its outcome?

Mistaken assumption about who would vote

Firstly, the expected result was based on an erroneous assumption about who votes – or, more

specifically, an assumption that ‘didn’t vote in the last election’ means ‘won’t vote’ in the next one. This has been historically reliable but this time led to pollsters underweighting younger voters and people who did not

vote in 2015, arguably overcompensating for mistakes made in that election. Local activists from both parties, too, tended to focus on people who had previously voted and reported tales of Tory gains and Labour losses from the

frontline. We now know that, with the right incentive, people who don’t usually vote can be motivated to do so to devastating impact.

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The importance of campaigns and manifestos

The second learning challenges another conventional wisdom: that campaigns and manifestos don’t make much difference. On this occasion, perhaps because the start point was voters having unusually low knowledge of the candidates, the campaign really did change minds. The manifestos, too, were noticed. Labour’s benefitted from a double public relations hit due to being leaked a few days before publication, while the Tories’ foxhunting pledge, announced on its own, a week before anything else, also cut through. Scrapping tuition fees – a direct appeal to those younger voters stood out in Labour’s manifesto, while the ‘dementia tax’ – and its U-turn – were the best remembered promises from the Conservatives, and may well have given otherwise loyal older voters pause for thought.

The role of the economy in the election

Thirdly, long-standing presumptions about the importance of the economy (It’s the economy, stupid!) were also questioned. Work done by BritainThinks, an international consultancy, for Labour’s post 2015 inquest revealed how lack of trust on economic management had been a major obstacle to choosing Labour. In 2017 it was the dog that didn’t bark. Having tumbled down the ranking in polls on drivers of vote choice, the economy was rarely

discussed by either party. Labour knew it to be a weakness and were unlikely to force the debate, while the Conservatives, trying to edge Philip Hammond out, preferred to exclude the Chancellor from the campaign by simply not referencing his topic. That said, voters certainly voted in their own self interest, and, in doing so, reinforced the divisions by age, educational attainment, working status and attitudes that were first highlighted by the EU referendum.

Leadership matters

Fourthly, a campaigning truth held good: that leadership matters above all else. It was the conceit behind calling the election in the first place, the rationale for the Conservatives’ “strong and stable” positioning and, ultimately, the reason for Theresa May’s humiliation. But leadership in a campaign context is a relative thing. As May’s popularity plummeted, so Corbyn’s rose. Although initially he was seen as “weak or as “a geography teacher” (not a compliment), Corbyn grew in stature. As we first noticed in the 2015 Labour leadership contest he has a knack of making his opponents seem lacking in passion: stilted and wooden. Referring to May, one voter in a focus group observed: “She talks as if she’s swallowed her party’s manifesto”. By the end, the consensus amongst voters and commentators alike was that Corbyn’s campaign had triumphed, while May could hardly put a foot right.

The fifth and final lesson is the hardest for progressives and especially for Labour in the UK with

our ‘first past the post’ electoral system. Despite the campaign ‘triumph’, Labour did not win. It did well, really well, amongst young, urban, educated people with progressive views, but much less well amongst older, less well educated people living in small towns and villages with ‘small c’ conservative views. The 2017 campaign and its outcome tells us how hard it is to win without forging a coalition between these groups: a coalition that can unite our divided country.



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Deborah Mattinson was pollster to Gordon Brown when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer and when he was Prime Minister. A leading commentator on public opinion, she frequently writes and broadcasts about the mood of the nation. She is a co-founder of a strategy consultancy called Britain Thinks.