UK politics

What can we learn about voting behaviour from the 2019 general election?

The Conservative Party won a confident majority in the 2019 general election, against the expectations of some in the media and many Labour Party supporters. Given the size of the majority in contrast to the previous general elections of 2010, 2015 and 2017, shifts in voting behaviour must have taken place. The Conservatives won 43.6% of the vote, with Labour gaining only 32.2%. The Labour vote was down by 7.8% and the Conservative vote was up only 1.2%, so this is in large part a story about the Labour vote collapsing rather than a major increase in Conservative Party support. The result was particularly surprising given that the Conservatives have been in power, or part of a coalition, since 2010 and have implemented major spending cuts. For the Labour Party, it was their worst result, in terms of seats won, since 1935.

Geography

Before the election, Labour had held seats in the north of England that were described as a 'red wall', stretching from Newcastle to Liverpool and then Manchester and incorporating Sedgefield, a former mining constituency in County Durham that had been the seat of Labour prime minister Tony Blair. This wall was seemingly impregnable, including seats where voters remembered the damaging impact of Margaret Thatcher's policies and mine closures, yet in 2019 a number of them turned blue. The constituency of Workington voted in a Tory MP for the first time since 1979. The Labour Party lost seats throughout the country in areas that had previously been strong Labour seats, including south Wales and the Midlands. This suggests a significant change in the link between voting behaviour and geography. Labour can no longer rely on winning northern seats, although it is not yet clear whether this is a blip or a long-term trend.

Education

Continuing a trend first apparent in the 2016 EU referendum and then repeated in 2017 and 2019, education appears to be a key indicator of voting behaviour, but not in the way we might expect. The higher the educational qualifications of the voter, the more likely they are to vote Labour or Liberal Democrat, with 60% of those educated to degree level or higher voting for one of those two parties in 2019, compared with only 29% voting Conservative. For those educated to GCSE level or below, the reverse was the case, with a combined vote share for Labour and the Liberal Democrats of 33% versus 61% for the Conservative and Brexit parties. This is a change in voting behaviour as less well-educated voters traditionally voted Labour, and now appears to be a trend.

Impact of the EU referendum vote

In the 2019 general election it was the Remain vote that fragmented most significantly. The Labour Party only managed to retain 49% of those people who had voted to remain in the European Union. The remainder moved largely to the Liberal Democrats or the Conservative Party. This may be because both of these parties were clearly on one side of the referendum result or the other, whereas Labour's position was seen as more ambiguous. The Conservative Party's slogan of 'Get Brexit Done' clearly chimed with Leave voters, as the party was able to win 74% of those who had voted to leave in the 2016 EU referendum. Brexit has had a significant impact on voting behaviour.

Age

A key determinant of voting behaviour is age, with voting preference based upon age becoming stronger since the 2015 general election. In 2019, the average crossover from being a Labour to a Conservative voter takes place at the age of 39, and for every ten years older a person is their likelihood of voting Conservative increased by nine percentage points. Voters aged 18–24 are four times more likely to vote Labour, SNP, Green or Liberal Democrat then they are to vote Conservative. If only 18–24-year-olds had been allowed to vote, there would be no Conservative seats in the country at all apart from parts of Essex and The Wash. Conversely, if only those aged 65 or over had been allowed to vote, the only Labour seats would have been in parts of London and other towns in the Midlands and the northwest of England. Age now clearly has a much more significant impact on voting behaviour than many other factors, and this may also be linked to Brexit, where older voters were much more likely to vote Leave.

Social grade

In contrast to age, social grade (class) has become a less significant determinant of voting behaviour in recent years. At all social grades, voters were more likely to vote Conservative than Labour, although when combined with the Liberal Democrat, SNP and Green vote, the vote of those categorised as ABC1 was 11 percentage points higher than the Conservative vote. The 2019 general election was the first in recent years where those categorised as C2DE were less likely to vote Labour than Conservative. This is a significant development, but as with geography, it is not clear whether it will go on to be a long-term trend.

The popularity of the leaders

While Boris Johnson's clear position on Brexit was a significant factor in the Conservatives achieving a substantial majority, conversely Jeremy Corbyn's leadership seemed to hinder the Labour Party's chances of electoral success. The main reason why voters who had supported Labour in the 2017 general election did not support the party in 2019 appears to be because of Corbyn's leadership. Having been an electoral asset in 2017, Corbyn and his party's position on Brexit was an electoral hindrance 2 years later.

Activities

1. Develop profiles of the most typical Labour and Conservative voters.

2. Draw pie charts showing the relative proportion of influences on voting behaviour. Has this changed over time? Complete one for each of your three chosen elections.

Quiz

Which political party do you think each of the people listed below voted for in 2019? Complete the quiz on your own and then compare your answers with a partner. If you have different answers, try to work out why this is.

1. A 65-year-old voter, social grade D, educated to degree level.

2. An 18-year-old voter who hasn't gone to university, living in a town in the northeast, social grade C1.

3. A Leave voter in the EU referendum, who supported Labour in 2017.

4. A Remain voter in the EU referendum, educated to degree level, who is 55 years old.

5. A voter from London, aged 45, educated to degree level, social grade B.

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