
Observations

New Labour, new geography? The electoral geography of the 1997 British General Election

Charles Pattie¹, Ron Johnston², Danny Dorling², Dave Rossiter², Helena Tunstall² and Iain MacAllister², ¹Department of Geography, University of Sheffield, Western Bank, Sheffield S10 2TN; ²Department of Geography, University of Bristol, University Road, Bristol BS8 1SS

The British General Election of 1997 had geography written all over it, not only empirically, but also metaphorically. The result was a genuine landslide. In every sense, this was a record-breaking election. After 18 unbroken years in office, the Conservatives went down to one of their worst ever defeats. With only 165 seats in the new House of Commons, they have fewer MPs than at any time since 1906. Their share of the popular vote (32 per cent) was the worst for the party since 1832. Labour, meanwhile, won its first election in 23 years, handsomely. With 419 MPs, the party now has a working majority of 179, larger, even, than that achieved in 1945. Just over 44 per cent of voters supported the party, the best Labour vote since 1966, and better than the Conservatives achieved in any election between 1979 and 1997. The Liberal Democrats, too, did well. The third party vote fell for the third election in a row, to 17 per cent. But, thanks to careful targeting of efforts in key marginals, the party managed to increase its representation from 20 to 46 MPs, the highest number since Lloyd George in 1929. Targeting is, of course, an inherently geographical tactic. After the 1992 election, Labour needed a swing of around 4.5 per cent to win a bare overall majority (itself relatively large by post-war standards). In the event, the national swing was over 10 per cent, the largest since 1945 and well in excess of the average post-war swing of around 1 per cent.

A landslide foretold?

The 1997 election was remarkable not just in statistical terms. It also seemed to challenge the importance of economic voting in British elections. Conventionally, voters reward governments that deliver prosperity and punish those that produce recessions (eg Pattie and Johnston 1995). In previous elections, this has worked well (Sanders *et al* 1987; Pattie and Johnston 1995; Pattie *et al* 1994; Pattie *et al* 1995). Even in 1992, recession notwithstanding, there was enough of a 'feel-good factor' in the run-up to the election for the Conservatives to win once again, albeit with a much-reduced majority (Sanders 1992). On that basis, 1997 should have been good for the Conservatives, as a buoyant economy should have led to increased support for the government. For some commentators, therefore, the 1992 election seemed to be 'Labour's last chance' (Cornford *et al* 1995; Marquand 1992, vii; King 1992, 244 ff; for a discussion, see Heath *et al* 1994). Clearly, the opposite happened. Despite strong economic recovery since 1992, the Conservatives lost badly. Why?

Most dramatically, the 1992 ERM crisis dealt a severe blow to government economic policy, costing the Conservatives their reputation for economic competence. Without that, there was no electoral recovery. Voters felt that the economy was indeed improving after 1992, but in spite of government policy, not because of it (Sanders 1996). In addition, the Conservatives were divided over Europe (Ludlam 1996). As Labour found to its cost in the early 1980s, the British electorate does not take kindly to divided parties; in 1997, the Conservatives suffered for their splits. Furthermore, a series of scandals raised doubts about the probity of the Conservative government (Ridley and Doig 1995). Labour, meanwhile, reacted to defeat in 1992 by moving towards the political centre ground (Shaw 1996). The party was re-imaged and re-launched: New Labour, not Old Labour; the 'radical centre', not the left. The professionalization of Labour's campaign strategy continued (Rosenbaum 1997). While the Conservatives languished in the polls, Labour went from strength to strength (most dramatically after Blair became leader). At the same time, the Liberal Democrats' strong performance in local and by-elections belied their poll standing, suggesting both strong centre party support in some regions and an electorate willing to vote tactically against a deeply unpopular government. The Conservatives' fate was sealed very early in the 1992-97 parliament. The 1997 election was a landslide foretold (Crewe 1996).

And the geography: anatomy of a landslide

British elections have always been strongly geographical. The two major parties' support is concentrated in particular regions, Labour in the North and the industrial areas, the Conservatives in the South, the rural areas, and the suburbs. During the 1980s, that geography became more pronounced. Labour was pushed back into its northern fastnesses. The Conservatives, meanwhile, strengthened their hold over their heartlands and extended their hold on areas like the English Midlands. But they lost support in the areas where Labour predominated. Voters in southern areas benefited from economic growth and rewarded the government. Those in the North, who were stuck in recession, punished it (Johnston *et al* 1988; Pattie and Johnston 1995). The economy was an important contributor to the geography of the 1992 election too. While the North of the country was still recovering from the recession of the early 1980s, the South was suffering from the new recession of the early 1990s. Britain's economic geography became less polarized. Its electoral geography followed suit. The Conservatives lost support in the South. Labour, meanwhile, made inroads in the South and Midlands. Even so, the Conservatives managed to hold on: the party performed better than Labour in 10 out of the 22 *Economist* regions (based on the standard planning regions, these pick out the major urban areas, and are used by *The Economist*: see Table 1).

Contrast that with the 1997 result. Only in four regions (Devon and Cornwall, Wessex, the Outer Metropolitan area around London and the Outer South East) did the Conservatives perform better than Labour. The landslide that swept the Conservatives from office was a truly national affair. However, it was not uniform. The Conservatives did very badly everywhere, but they did much worse in some regions than in others. In Outer London, for instance, the swing against the Conservatives was particularly large. Michael Portillo was the most prominent victim of the anti-Tory surge in the capital's suburbs, losing supposedly 'safe' Enfield Southgate to Labour.

What of the parties' vote shares in each region (Table 1)? The basic underlying geography was retained in 1997. The Conservatives did better than average

Table 1 Percentage vote by region, 1997 (change since 1992 in brackets)

Region	% Conservative		% Labour		% Liberal Democrat		% Nationalist	
	1997	change	1997	change	1997	change	1997	change
Strathclyde	13.6	(-7.1)	56.9	(6.4)	7.1	(-1.0)	20.1	(0.2)
East Central Scotland	17.5	(-8.0)	50.2	(7.8)	11.3	(0.0)	20.0	(0.3)
Rural Scotland	22.8	(-10.0)	27.1	(7.1)	22.2	(0.6)	26.1	(0.9)
Rural North	34.5	(-11.8)	41.8	(9.3)	19.8	(-0.8)		
Industrial North East	18.9	(-11.0)	66.2	(10.8)	11.4	(-2.9)		
Merseyside	19.7	(-9.3)	61.9	(10.4)	14.4	(-2.4)		
Greater Manchester	25.1	(-11.6)	54.7	(9.1)	16.8	(0.5)		
Rest North West	31.8	(-11.0)	51.5	(9.2)	11.3	(-2.6)		
West Yorkshire	28.8	(-9.4)	54.0	(8.5)	12.9	(-2.1)		
South Yorkshire	16.7	(-9.1)	62.3	(4.3)	16.6	(0.9)		
Rural Wales	22.7	(-9.9)	42.6	(7.5)	14.9	(-1.4)	17.0	(1.6)
Industrial South Wales	17.5	(-8.4)	63.1	(3.9)	10.6	(0.8)	5.1	(0.5)
West Midlands conurb	29.8	(-12.3)	53.5	(9.4)	11.2	(-0.8)		
Rest West Midlands	37.4	(-10.0)	42.5	(9.0)	16.2	(-1.9)		
East Midlands	34.9	(-11.7)	47.8	(10.4)	13.6	(-1.6)		
East Anglia	38.7	(-12.4)	38.3	(10.3)	17.9	(-1.6)		
Devon & Cornwall	34.8	(-11.2)	23.1	(5.6)	35.3	(1.3)		
Wessex	37.6	(-10.7)	28.0	(7.9)	29.4	(-0.8)		
Inner London	24.4	(-11.8)	57.1	(10.4)	12.7	(-2.4)		
Outer London	34.5	(-15.3)	45.8	(13.4)	15.6	(-0.8)		
Outer Metropolitan	42.3	(-13.3)	32.6	(11.1)	20.0	(-1.6)		
Outer South East	40.2	(-13.0)	31.1	(11.1)	22.9	(-2.4)		
UK	31.5	(-11.3)	44.4	(9.2)	17.2	(-1.2)	2.6	(0.2)

throughout the South of England and the Midlands (excluding inner London and the West Midlands conurbation). They also did relatively well in rural parts of the North of England. They did relatively badly, however, in industrial northern England, in Wales and in Scotland. Labour, meanwhile, drew above average support in the industrial North of England and in urban Scotland and Wales, and the Liberal Democrats did best in the rural North, the South-West (they were the largest single party in Devon and Cornwall, for instance), and in the South-East outside of London.

Such underlying geography helped define the strategic choices facing the parties in the run-up to 1997. For the Conservatives, poor results in Scotland and Wales during the 1980s and early 1990s challenged their Unionist and One-nation credentials: Major's attempts to campaign on the Union in both 1992 and 1997 were symptomatic of this concern. Labour's northern urban heartland saved the party from annihilation in 1983, but to win office again the party had to win back voters in the Midlands and South: a large part of the party's reforms, especially under Blair, were devoted to achieving this. For the Liberal Democrats, the key was to avoid the Alliance's problem in 1983—an even spread of votes in all regions resulting in few seats: they needed greater regional and local concentration of support.

For the Conservatives, however, there was a 'double whammy' in the regional results in 1997. Playing the Union card failed to stop the rot in Scotland and Wales: the Conservative vote fell to new lows in both countries. Furthermore, the party performed even worse than average in precisely those southern regions where it had previously been strongest. In no region did it win the support of a majority of voters in 1997. Labour's regional strategy, meanwhile, paid off. Its vote rose substantially everywhere. The appeal to southern voters worked and did not alienate voters in Labour heartlands. It emerged as the largest single party in some key regions. The biggest increases in Labour's support occurred predominantly in the South and Midlands. The only areas of southern Britain which did not record above average increases in the Labour vote were in the South-West, where the Liberal Democrats were the main challengers to the Conservatives. Blair made strong inroads back into the southern skilled manual constituencies which Labour lost to Mrs Thatcher in the 1980s. The Liberal Democrats were much better able than were the Conservatives to hold onto their 1992 support. The party retained most of its previous vote and even managed to increase it in some regions. Furthermore, it continued to improve its ability to target effort on key seats, with better than average changes in support for the party in those regions where they were the main challengers to the Conservatives (such as the South-West, and parts of the rural North and Scotland).

The parties' electoral strategies were designed, of course, to win seats. 'First past the post' generally exaggerates winning parties' shares of seats at the expense of losing parties. 1997 was no exception. We have already outlined the size of the national landslide. At the regional level, too, there were dramatic shifts (see Table 2: because the 1997 election was fought in new constituencies, we have based the data on change in the number of seats on estimates of what the 1992 election would have been in the new seats: Rossiter *et al* 1997).

Most strikingly, the Conservatives lost their last seats in Scotland and Wales, and were ousted from the major urban regions in England: only in Greater Manchester and the West Midlands conurbation do a few hang on. Only 17 Conservative MPs survive north of the English Midlands. If, after the 1983 election, Labour was

Table 2 Seats won by region, 1997 (change since 1992 in brackets)

Region	Conservative		Labour		Liberal Democrat		Nationalist		Other	
	1997	change	1997	change	1997	change	1997	change	1997	change
Strathclyde	0	(-1)	31	(1)	0	(0)	0	(0)	0	(0)
East Central Scotland	0	(-2)	17	(1)	1	(1)	0	(0)	0	(0)
Rural Scotland	0	(-7)	8	(3)	9	(1)	6	(3)	0	(0)
Rural North	11	(-5)	15	(4)	2	(1)	0	(0)	0	(0)
Industrial North East	0	(-3)	27	(3)	0	(0)	0	(0)	0	(0)
Merseyside	0	(-4)	15	(3)	1	(1)	0	(0)	0	(0)
Greater Manchester	2	(-5)	22	(5)	1	(0)	0	(0)	0	(0)
Rest North West	4	(-10)	24	(9)	0	(0)	0	(0)	1	(1)
West Yorkshire	0	(-9)	23	(9)	0	(0)	0	(0)	0	(0)
South Yorkshire	0	(-1)	14	(0)	1	(1)	0	(0)	0	(0)
Rural Wales	0	(-5)	11	(4)	2	(1)	4	(0)	0	(0)
Industrial South Wales	0	(-2)	23	(2)	0	(0)	0	(0)	0	(0)
West Midlands conurb	4	(-7)	26	(7)	0	(0)	0	(0)	0	(0)
Rest West Midlands	10	(-12)	18	(11)	1	(1)	0	(0)	0	(0)
East Midlands	14	(-15)	29	(15)	0	(0)	0	(0)	0	(0)
East Anglia	14	(-5)	8	(5)	0	(0)	0	(0)	0	(0)
Devon & Cornwall	5	(-7)	4	(3)	7	(4)	0	(0)	0	(0)
Wessex	17	(-12)	11	(8)	7	(4)	0	(0)	0	(0)
Inner London	2	(-4)	24	(4)	1	(0)	0	(0)	0	(0)
Outer London	9	(-26)	33	(21)	5	(5)	0	(0)	0	(0)
Outer Metropolitan	42	(-20)	20	(19)	1	(1)	0	(0)	0	(0)
Outer South East	31	(-21)	16	(14)	7	(7)	0	(0)	0	(0)
UK	165	(-183)	419	(151)	46	(28)	10	(3)	1	(1)

Table 3 Tactical voting in Conservative-held seats: % vote changes by second placed party at previous election

Years	Party	Second		
		Labour	All/LD	UK
1983-87	Lab	3.7	1.8	2.4
	All	-4.8	-1.5	-2.6
1987-92	Lab	7.2	4.2	5.3
	All/LD	-6.4	-3.6	-4.7
1992-97	Lab	11.8	7.0	9.6
	LD	-3.6	-0.3	-2.1

pushed back to being primarily a party of the urban North, the Conservatives in 1997 are a party of the suburban and rural English South—a very serious blow for a Unionist party. Labour, on the other hand, managed to win further seats in its core areas. Most important for the party, it increased its parliamentary representation in the English Midlands and South. After the 1992 election, Labour would have held 3 of the 117 new parliamentary constituencies in the South-East outside of London: after 1997, it holds 36, all won from Conservative MPs. The party is back in the London overspill new towns. In suburban London, it won an additional 21 seats; Labour MPs are now the largest group among the capital's representatives. The Liberal Democrats, benefiting from targeting in key seats, made advances in several regions, but especially in the South-West, where they won a further eight seats. Even though the party's vote fell, therefore, its Parliamentary representation rose to a post-war record, because those votes were more efficiently spread.

Geography was important not just in terms of where the parties drew their support, but also in terms of how voters cast their ballots. Voters reacted to local electoral circumstances to vote tactically for the party most likely to oust the Conservative incumbent (Johnston and Pattie 1991). For instance, in Sheffield Hallam, the Conservative incumbent was unseated by a massive swing of 18.5 per cent from Conservative to Liberal Democrat (in second place after 1992): Labour, in third place after 1992, saw its share of the vote fall, against the national trend, as supporters voted Liberal Democrat.

The extent of tactical voting against the Conservatives can be suggested by looking at changes in support for the other parties in seats they would have won in 1992. Parties did better where they were in second place behind the Conservatives than where they were third (see Table 3: the relatively few Conservative seats where the nationalists were in second place have been omitted). In 1997, the percentage point increase in the Labour vote in Conservative-held seats where the party was in second place was a massive 11.8 per cent, almost double their increase where the Liberal Democrats were the challengers. The Liberal Democrat vote held almost constant, meanwhile, in those Conservative seats where the party had been second in 1992, but it fell by 3.6 percentage points where Labour was second. That said, many of the seats which fell to Labour would, under 'normal' conditions, be seen as 'safe' Conservative. In those seats, it would not have been a surprise had even the tactically minded decided that a tactical vote might be wasted: the bigger surprise, in some

respects, is that in so many 'safe' Conservative seats enough voters did decide to vote tactically to alter the result.

Conclusions

New Labour, New Geography! While the major parties still rely on their heartlands for their parliamentary base, the 1997 election has seen important and far-reaching changes. Labour has broken out of its northern heartland, while the Conservatives have been pushed back into a southern one. If Labour is no longer a working class party of the North, the Conservatives are now, largely, an English party of the South.

The sheer scale of Labour's victory means that it is likely, barring major disasters, that the Blair government will be the first Labour administration ever to win two full terms of office. The Conservatives need to win back 165 seats to win an overall majority of just one at the next election. In their 165th 'target' seat, Bristol North West, the margin between them and the winner in 1997 (Labour) is 20.6 percentage points. To overturn that would require a vote swing of similar proportions to that won by Labour in 1997. Swings of that size are 'once in a generation' occurrences. The chances of one occurring again in four or five years time seem slim. The 1997 election may yet prove to be a watershed.

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