

JAMES PRENTICE

Labour's lost decade

*Why Labour loses.*



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# 1

## Introduction

This book has been made to explain the key reasons why the Labour Party lost every general election held in the 2010s. Using survey and polling data from the 2010s it evidences how voters felt about Labour and why key voters chose not to support the party in general elections. Therefore, this book is aimed at individuals interested in answering political questions using an evidence-based approach. As this book is designed to answer this complex political question using infographics and without using jargon, it will also be suited to a wide range of individuals interested in understanding politics and political events. It will also be very much suited to all politics students as it has been designed partly to introduce politics students to core concepts within the study of voting behaviour (psephology). This includes outlining the importance of party leaders, economic thoughts, value-based feelings and perceived party competence in individual's voting decision-making process. It is also designed for those interested in Labour (both members and non-members) to provide such people with factual material. Therefore, the purpose of this

books is party to install greater factual information into the debate around Labour's electability and electoral strategy, a discussion that can often be driven by factionalism, ideology and emotion.

With the devastatingly large loss the Labour Party experienced in December 2019, this debate was again reignited. In 2019, the debate centred around the question of how Labour could have so badly lost an election despite the Conservative Party's difficulties over Brexit. For example, even before all the votes had been counted there were several heated discussions on television between different Labour Party factions, all of whom were seeking to persuade the wider membership that their faction's theory of why Labour lost was the most credible one (Morgan 2019).

Historically, when the Labour Party loses an election different sections of the party fight to establish their narrative as the one to believe in order to fight a proxy war over which faction should be given control of the party. As Labour has spent long periods out of office, this has been a long standing debate within modern British politics since the 1950s. This type of debate is a particular problem for parties in British politics as political parties can be quite broad coalitions of a range of ideological groupings. The Labour Party, in particular, has groups that sit in the centre ground, left of centre and far left of British politics. For example, in 2019, the left of the Labour Party was keen to emphasise Brexit as the cause of the party's downfall. Alternatively, Labour members in the centre had motives to state that poor leadership decisions were to blame for the defeat.

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As the 2019 election defeat marked Labour's fourth election defeat in a row and another lost decade, the debate as to why Labour appears unelectable has been around for a while now. However, this discussion needs addressing now as it has become very prominent in contemporary British politics through the 2019 election defeat, the 2020 Labour leadership contest and Starmer's premiership. Labour have decided to elect Keir Starmer most probably due to his ability to exude competence and be a safe pair of hands. Starmer was the steady pair of hands needed to steer the Labour ship after it had been through some choppy waters under Corbyn's leadership. Alongside this, Starmer's message of ending factionalism and internal division appears to have cut through to the wider membership, allowing Starmer to secure centrist and middle-ground Labour member support. With this, Starmer had more than enough votes to take the leadership and take control of the party. Yet, this dominance will also likely raise long-term questions over how long the party can be electable under this more moderate approach and how long party members will tolerate such a strategy.

With these pressing questions, the book aims to provide a guide to where Labour may have been going wrong and identify likely causes for these problems. However, in order to do this the study needs to identify what the most likely causes could be. The book will do this by analysing opinions of the two main parties and their respective leaders across the last decade. This particular section uses IPSOS MORI and YouGov archived polling data from the last decade to calculate the average opinion of the two main parties and how they were perceived to perform on key issues of the day.

## Decade (2010-2019) Polling Trends

The book calculates polling trends by taking a quarterly average of all the polls published by organisations that are registered with the British polling council. Polling trends for the main parties, defined as Conservative, Labour, Lib-Dem and 4th parties (which contains pro-independence parties' total support), demonstrate that Labour didn't had a convincing lead in the polls going into every general election since the 2010 election. In fact, figure 1.1 demonstrates that in every election apart from the 2015 election they were clearly a distant second place in the polls as the election approached. It is worth noting that the polls got it wrong in 2015 due to methodological changes to how the polls were conducted, meaning Labour was probably behind in voting intention going into the 2015 election. The average polling figures also show Labour struggled to maintain a lead since the 2007 financial crisis, an event that was of great importance in the party's inability to come across as credible in the first half of the last decade.

However, the polls also show that Labour at points in the decade did have a clear lead over the Conservative Party, indicating that the public was willing to give Labour a chance when the government experienced tough times. It would therefore appear that Labour had a tough time capitalising on chances they were given throughout the decade. One example was in 2012 when Labour had a 10-point lead in the polls and gained many councillors in local elections, but by the time of the 2014 EU election Labour had lost their strong position. Indeed, by 2015 their lead had gone.



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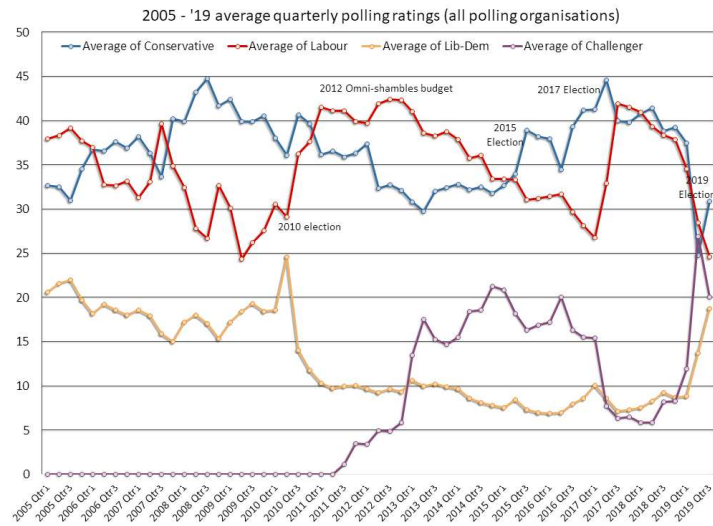


Figure 1.1: UK, Average quarterly polling for main parties from polling council organisations.

Interestingly, the points when Labour lose its lead appear to coincide with important events across the decade. For example, the lead the party lost in the 2010–2015 parliament coincides with the rise of UKIP and the biggest issue of the day becoming the socially divisive topic of immigration. Importantly, this highlights how events that developed across the decade may have not favoured the party's ideological positions.

Labour's inability to have a poll lead going into many elections is even more problematic when considering that the government had been poorly rated at most election points within the 2010s. The positive note for Labour is that the evidence suggests that the government had vulnerabilities the

party could exploit. This book outlines that the government consistently had a negative approval rating for their performance across the decade, showing that the government's hold on power is not insurmountable. However, the deeply worrying thing for Labour is that they have lost poll leads and elections to very unpopular governments, indicating that the voters did not think Labour will perform any better.

The exception was the 2015 election where an improving economy appears to have allowed the government to come across as more competent than they did for most of the decade. Yet, it must be noted how incredibly poorly the government was rated going into the 2017 and 2019 elections as it indicates Labour has not been able to beat a very weak government. This again raises the question of why Labour could not capitalise on their poll leads.

### The Deeper Story the Polls Tell

When analysing other trends often monitored by polling organisations, there are reasons behind why Labour may have struggled to maintain leads typically given to the main opposition party during government mid-term problems. These highlight deeper problems, such as image problems, concerns over the party's competence, a lack of representation on important cultural questions and concerns over the ideological positioning of the party.

The Tories' better party image:

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### *Best leader for the role of Prime Minister (PM):*

One such reason Labour may have struggled to capitalise in times they were beating the Conservatives was because selected Labour leaders were not seen to be as credible as the Conservative Party leader. When comparing the number of voters who believed the Tory Party leader was the best candidate for the role of Prime Minister to those who thought the Labour Party leader was best, this study found that the Labour Party never had a lead over the Conservatives. This means that Labour's leadership was seen as less favourable during the recession in 2012, the crises during the May government and during Boris Johnson's chaotic reign. Therefore, this is an indication that at no point in the 2010s did the public clearly perceive the Labour Party to be providing a better alternative PM. Consequently, whilst having a lead in the polls mid-way through a parliamentary cycle is advantageous to have, it is not a lead that is based in times when voters are thinking of what type of government they want for the next five years. Approaching the general election the electorate started to think about the type of Prime Minister they would want to run the country. With more voters feeling the Conservatives provided the better candidate to run the government, Labour's polling lead closed, or their deficit grew wider.

Worryingly for Labour, this was the trend for successive leaders, with Brown, Miliband and Corbyn all faring worse than their Conservative Party counterpart. These trends often exist throughout the entire tenure of a Labour leader, indicating Labour has real problems in selecting leaders that are deemed highly electable by the public.

*The Tories' better party image:*

On top of Labour's inability to come across as providing a better leader, the party also had fewer voters stating they found the Labour Party to be more favourable than the Conservative Party. Figure 1.2 demonstrates that this was especially the case after Corbyn took over the party and began to mould Labour in his image post-2017 (when his faction finally had complete control of the party). This indicates that Labour as a brand is not seen to have anywhere near as much government potential as the Tory brand. Importantly, in the last decade, this gave the Conservative Party a natural advantage over the Labour Party as they could rely on narratives that only they could be trusted with important matters of state and that allowing Labour back in would risk stability. This allowed the Conservatives to paint their main rivals as the party of chaos and uncertainty, which made it harder for Labour to advocate the changes in society the party naturally wishes to bring. In 2015, this was particularly problematic as it made Labour cautious in their policy platform, which neither satisfied their base nor convinced Conservative-leaning voters to back them over the Tories.

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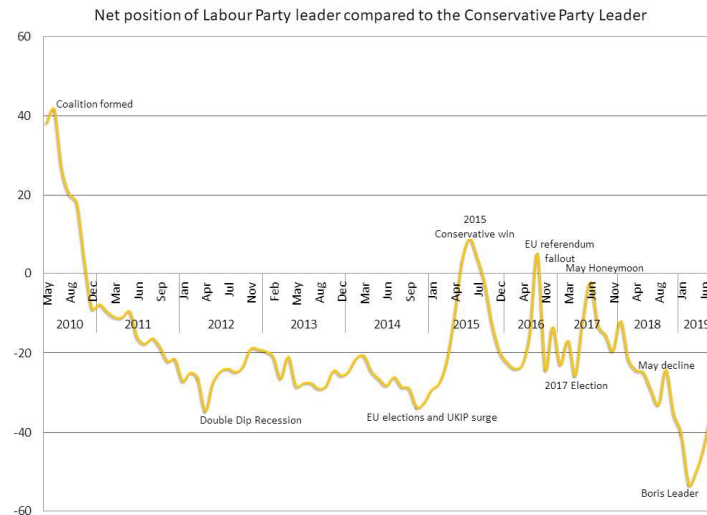


Figure 1.2: UK, Net position of Conservative & Labour Party favourability ratings, according to YouGov archives, 2010 – 2019.

### *Tories have more ability and toughness than Labour?*

In terms of perceived overall party competence, YouGov polling found that the Conservatives have a higher proportion of the electorate thinking their organisation had capable people leading the party than compared to Labour throughout the 2010s. For example, approaching the 2015 election the Tories had a 10% lead over Labour in perceived competence. This again highlights how the Labour Party brand is not seen to be as competent as the Tory Party brand. Therefore, this presents how Labour might be losing to the Tories as their image is not as credible compared to their Conservative rivals.

This is not just down to one individual leader, but instead a widespread perception the entire leadership team is not up to the job, possibly indicating the public fear Labour's problems run deep within the party.

Further, YouGov polling also found that Labour also recorded much higher fears that their party in a future government would not make the tough decisions all governments have to make. Instead, 30% of the electorate thought Labour would make emotional decisions that would harm the nation even if their heart was in the right place. Moreover, there was also little difference between the two main parties regarding the extent voters felt that they were trying to construct a society that voters want. This indicates Labour is wrong in assuming people naturally want the type of society they are offering. This was particularly a problem during the Corbyn era when the party made a growing list of pledges whilst the voters at the same time feared their ability to deliver and make tough spending decisions. This left the public with a feeling that Labour was at times well-meaning but wrong.

*Party Leader attributes:*

Another long-running theme across the last decade was that Conservative Party leaders were seen to have more desirable attributes and fewer less desirable ones than compared to Labour leaders. For instance, Boris Johnson was seen to be more trustworthy, decisive, strong, likeable, competent, authentic and in touch with the voters than Corbyn was. 40% more of the electorate perceived Johnson to be more decisive than Corbyn and 30% more thought Johnson was stronger than Corbyn. Johnson even led Corbyn in perceived

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trustworthiness by 1%. Crucially, 25% more of the electorate thought Boris was more likeable than Corbyn, making it easier for the Conservative Party leadership to win people over. This again shows that poor perceptions of leadership might have been one reason why Labour was unable to hang onto and gain poll leads going into a general election.

### Competence on the big issues:

It should also be noted that other trends show possible reasons why Labour has been unable to win elections. Other such trends involve general performance on the biggest issues of the day. The biggest issue of the day changed as the British political debate moved on, but broadly the 2010s were dominated by the issues of the economy, immigration and the EU, which later morphed into Brexit.

### *Labour not as trusted on the economy:*

Historically, many political researchers and commentators have stressed the importance of how parties are perceived to perform on the economy can greatly affect the chances of a party winning. Election strategists once believed this so much that in one 1990s US presidential election, they coined the famous phrase “it’s the economy stupid.” Since then many studies have found a great deal of evidence that shows how economic credibility can either make or break the Conservative and Labour Party’s chances of winning an election (Clarke 2004).

Figure 1.3 shows that if this is true then it presents a major difficulty to Labour. Both YouGov and Ipsos Mori polling

data demonstrated the public felt Labour, on average, had less credibility on the economy than compared to their Tory counterparts. To put it simply, fewer voters perceived Labour as the best party to deal with the issue. Alongside this, fewer voters also trusted Labour to manage the economy than compared to the Tories. For example, in 2015 and 2019 18% fewer voters favoured Labour on the economy than the Conservatives. In 2017, Labour was 10% behind, which potentially helps to explain why they lost these three general elections. Further analysis found that Labour had lost their former economic credibility title to the Tories in the financial year of 2007/08, the start of the great recession. Crucially, this indicates that Labour had very much struggled to regain the narrative on the economy post-recession, highlighting how many voters still blamed Labour for the country's economic problems. Moreover, Labour failed to regain the economic debate during Corbyn's tenure, suggesting that Labour breaking with Austerity made no headway in overcoming this credibility problem, and may have made the problem worse.

Consequently, if economic credibility had a noticeable impact on the outcome of any of the four elections within the 2010s, Labour's perceived lack of credibility on this issue probably has been a large barrier to the party's chances of winning elections. As a result, the Conservative Party's perceived credibility on the issue has probably helped them close the leads Labour gained in the mid-term parts of a parliamentary cycle, thus partly explaining Labour's electoral woes.



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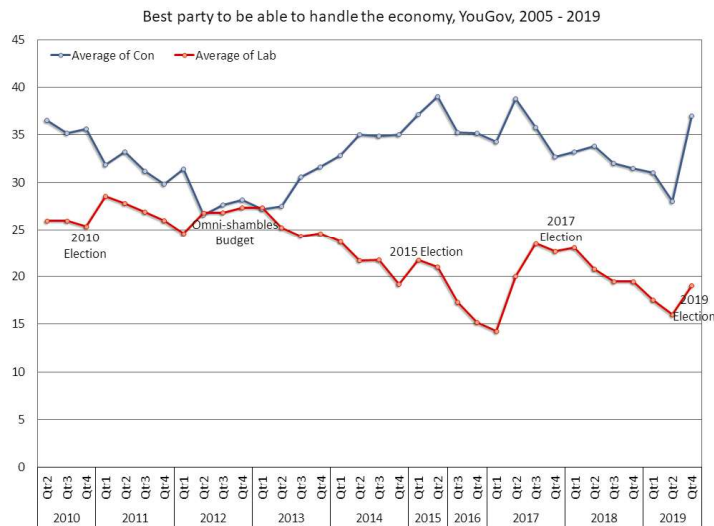


Figure 1.3: UK, party ratings on the ability to handle the economy, Sources: YouGov archive trends 2010-19 & Ipsos Mori polling data confirms these trends.

### Labour's cultural problem:

The Labour Party in the last decade has experienced a particular problem regarding performance on issues that can be argued to be mostly cultural. These topics mostly tap into what type of society people want and what individuals believe Britain's place in the world should be. These are commonly known as values-based questions.

Firstly, the Labour Party has struggled to beat the Tories in being the party voters most trusted to be able to handle the migration issue. The Labour Party often does not want

to talk about cultural issues, with some strategists reportedly telling Labour to avoid discussing such issues during election campaigns. For instance, Labour struggled to talk about the migration issue in 2015 as its culturally liberal membership abhorred talk of greater controls on migration, whilst the public simply did not trust them to deal with the issue. In fact, in 2015, Labour was behind the Conservatives on the immigration issue, with the Tories beating them by 9%. In 2010, the Tories beat Labour by 23%, meaning that in these elections many voters who had concerns about migration numbers naturally favoured the Tories over Labour.

UKIP occasionally overtook Labour into second place on being seen as the best party to deal with the issue. This gives an indication of how far off Labour was in being able to persuade people they were the best party to place in control of managing migration flows. The migration issue was listed as the most important issue in the 2015 election by a majority of voters and Labour being unconvincing on this topic could have been a factor that cost Labour the 2015 election. Moreover, attempts by Miliband to create an image around Labour being a party that wanted to control migration numbers only annoyed its strongly left-liberal membership, of which sparked the new movement of Momentum and led to further internal party problems.

Moving into the latter part of the decade, Labour can also be said to be consistently behind on the issue of Europe, especially post-referendum. Further, figure 1.4 shows that this deficit had been quite consistent since 2005. Europe can also be argued to be mainly a cultural issue and again was something that Labour was very reluctant to address. In 2017, Labour's middle-ground position on the EU seemed to work

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in Labour's favour. However, with a further two years of gridlock, the public had likely grown tired of Labour's non-committal approach to Brexit. Consequently, the party was rarely perceived to be the one most able to handle the issue.

As a result, as with migration, the Tories opened up a commanding lead over Labour in being seen as the more competent main party on the key issue of the day. In 2019, the Conservatives had an 18% lead over Labour as being seen as the most able party on the issue, whilst in 2017 they had an 11% lead. Interestingly, in 2010, the Tories had a 30% lead over Labour on the European question, indicating this may have been a long-term problem for Labour.

Critically, as Brexit was such a prominent topic in the electorate's thinking in both the 2017 and 2019 elections, Labour's unwillingness to address the issue and provide a credible alternative to the government's deal potentially could have cost Labour the election. Significantly, this raises the prospect of poor leadership on the Brexit issue and a willingness to maintain party unity both being factors as to why Labour keeps losing.

## LABOUR'S LOST DECADE

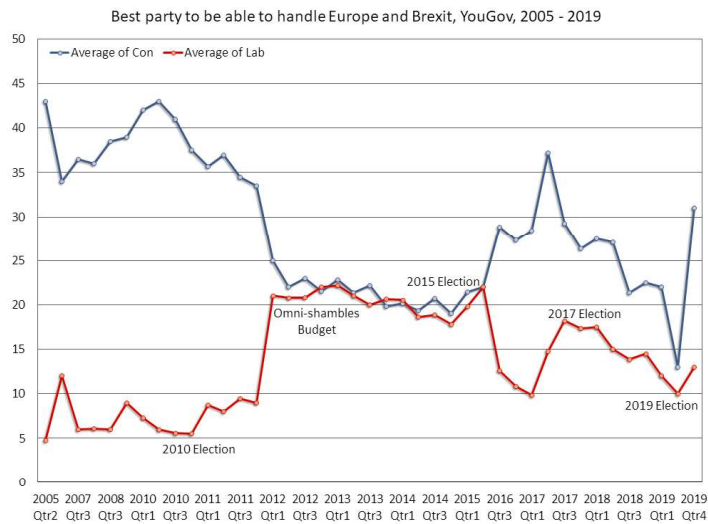


Figure 1.4: UK, Ratings on the two main parties' ability to handle Europe, YouGov archive trends, 2010-19.

These trends on cultural issues could be very important as there has been a great deal of past research that has shown how a party performs on the key issues of the day directly impact that given party's chances of winning votes and with this, the election (Clarke 2004). The most important issue, outside times of economic crisis, in the first half of the decade was immigration. After the 2015 election and the vote to Leave the EU had taken place, the most important issue for the rest of the decade was the issue of the EU/Brexit. This means that across the 2010s cultural issues dominated voters' thoughts, judgements and behaviour and as Labour was behind on these matters this put them at a natural disadvantage. Therefore, according to past research, it is highly likely how

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parties were judged on handling the issues of immigration and Europe/Brexit throughout the last decade impacted Labour's ability to win elections.

However, why was a potential future Labour government thought to be less desirable and credible than compared to current administrations? Why were Labour leaders seen to be less competent and effective than Tory leaders? Why was Labour unable to convince the voters they could handle the biggest issues of the day? Answering these questions and explaining the above trends is essential in answering this book's central question: Why does Labour keep losing?

### Theories to Why These Trends Exist

As stated earlier, there are multiple competing theories as to why Labour has not been able to compete and is behind on vital opinion poll measures. Each theory often has two competing versions that frequently have different motivations behind them. As stated earlier, this is due to factional rivalries. This book will identify where each faction places itself within each given theory.

The most credible theories and explanations that might be able to explain these trends are as followed:

1. Labour is perceived as not being able to competently handle the biggest issues of the day due to a lack of credible policies.

This theory states that Labour has failed to convince the public it can deal with the biggest issues of the day as it has not convinced the public it has spending policies that can keep public finances under control. Labour did not demonstrate