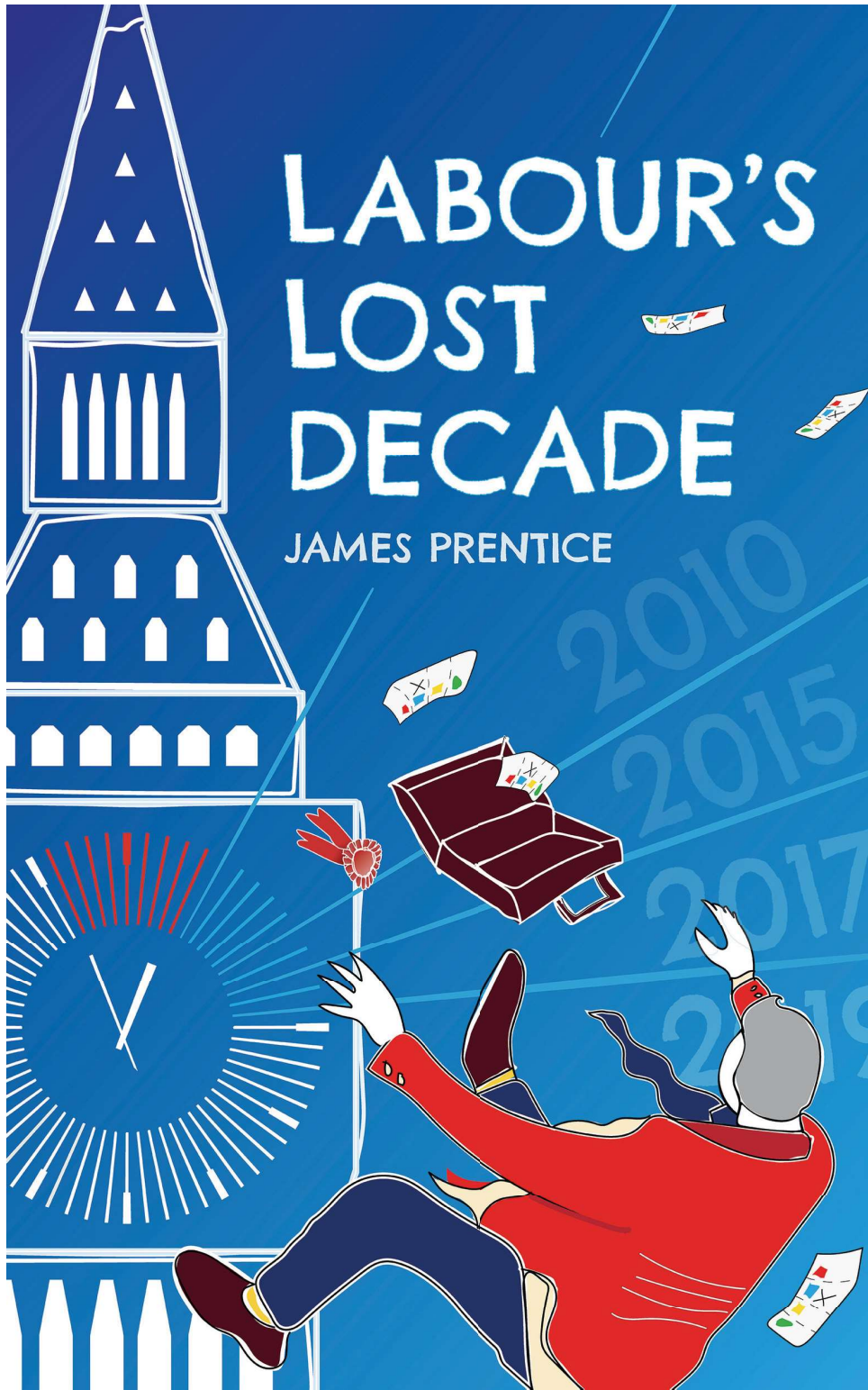


LABOUR'S LOST DECADE

JAMES PRENTICE



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Labour's lost decade

Why Labour loses and how it can win.



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James Prentice asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

First edition

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Introduction

This book is designed to summarise the reasons why the Labour Party lost every general election held in the 2010s. Therefore, this book is aimed at individuals interested in answering such a question, particularly those who like answering questions with an evidence-based approach.

With the devastatingly large loss the Labour Party experienced in December 2019, a debate quickly began 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. This is a particular problem for

parties in British politics as these groups can be quite broad coalitions of similar ideological groupings. The Labour Party, in particular, has groups that sit in the centre ground, left of centre and far left within British politics. For example, in this election, the left of the Labour Party was keen to emphasise Brexit as the cause of the party's downfall, whilst the centre of the Labour Party had motives to state that poor leadership decisions were to blame for the defeat.

As the 2019 election defeat marked Labour's fourth election defeat in a row, 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. 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, but this forces the question of what will Starmer need to do as Labour leader to overturn one of the biggest deficits to the Tories the party has ever faced, at least in terms of parliamentary seats and the swing needed to gain a majority of seats.

With these pressing questions, the book aims to provide a quick guide to where Labour may have been going wrong and what the likely reasons behind this are. However, in order to do this the study needs to identify what the most likely causes could

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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 perceive them 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 has never 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 needless 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

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they were given throughout the decade. One example was in 2012 when Labour had around 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, and by 2015 their lead had gone.

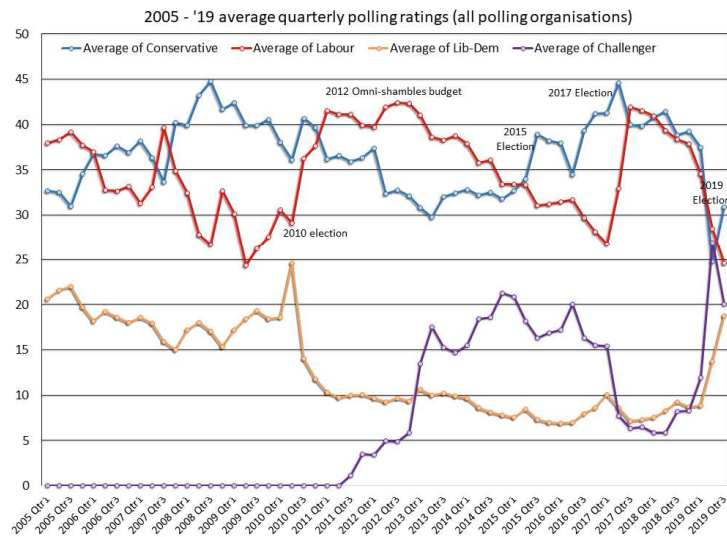


Figure 1.1: UK, Average quarterly polling for main parties from polling council organisations.

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

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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 has been poorly rated at most election points within the last decade. The positive note for Labour is that the evidence suggests that the government has vulnerabilities the party could exploit. This book found 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 do 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:

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 last decade 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. When it came down to this time 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 has been the trend for a few leaders in a row, with Brown, Miliband and Corbyn all faring worse than their Conservative Party counterpart. These trends

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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 in people's lives. 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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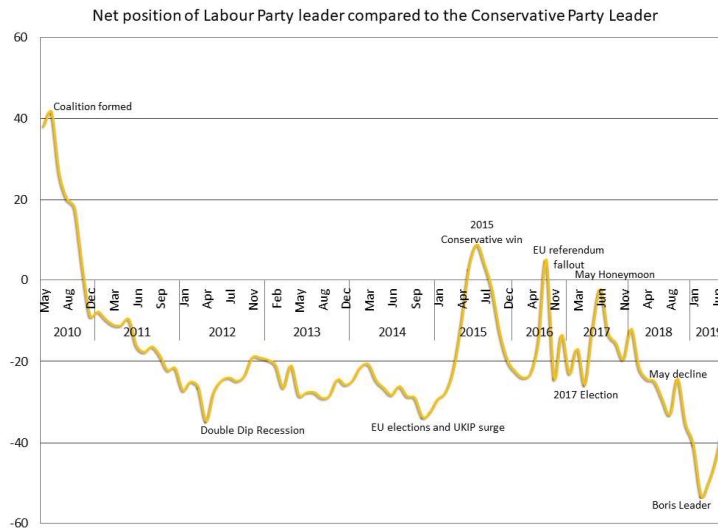


Figure 1.2: UK, Net position of Conservative & Labour Party favourability ratings, according to YouGov archives, 2010 – 2019.

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, and therefore 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

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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, indicating 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 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 as tracking from both YouGov and Ipsos Mori polling data showed the public felt Labour on average had less credibility on the economy than compared to their

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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, and 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 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 last decade it can be said Labour's perceived lack of credibility on this issue probably has been a large barrier to the Labour Party's chances of winning recent elections. As a result, the Conservative Party's perceived credibility on the issue has probably helped them close the leads Labour occasionally had gained over them in the mid-term parts of the parliamentary cycle, thus partly explaining Labour's electoral woes.

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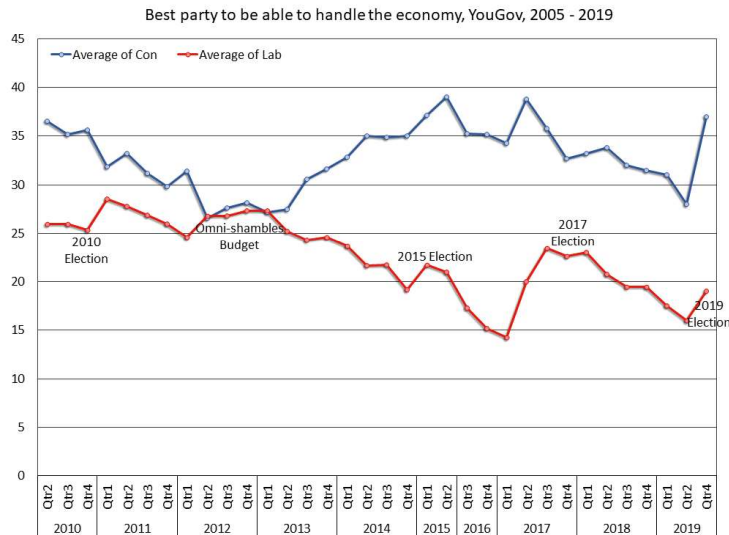


Figure 1.3: UK, party ratings on the ability to handle the economy, Sources: YouGov archive trends 2010-19 & Ipsos Mori polling data confirms these trends.

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 we are and what 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

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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% and 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, giving 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 protest 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 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 realistic 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.

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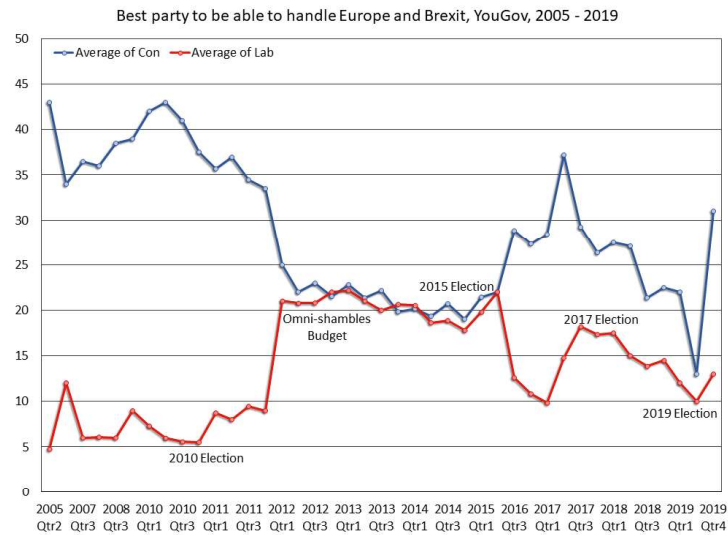


Figure 1.4: UK, Ratings on the two main parties' ability to handle Europe, YouGov archive trends, 2010-19.

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 this put them at a natural disadvantage. Therefore, according to past research, it is highly likely how 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 often 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 how their policies would make the economy better and failed to propose

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credible Labour market policies to keep migration flows under control. Once again, compare it with the original and see what you think. On top of this, Labour never managed to have a plan for Brexit once the UK voted to Leave the EU, resulting in positions that in the end were not credible. Within Labour circles, this argument is often made by moderates, whereas the left defends Labour's policies.

2. Party leaders are the main reason why Labour loses.

This theory states that Labour mainly loses because the party selects leaders that do not resonate with the public and are not capable of leading the party to an election victory. This theory tends to be advocated by Labour moderates, with the left of the party fiercely defending Corbyn.

3. Labour's neutral position on Brexit proved itself to work in 2017, whilst Labour lost the 2019 election by such a large margin due to its commitment to a second referendum.

This theory states that Labour lost the election due to their commitment towards a second referendum late on in the campaign. The theory argues that Labour lost its Leave-voting base because it abandoned its position of neutrality that was so successful in 2017. This theory is primarily argued by Labour's left factions, whilst moderate factions tend to stress other reasons, such as leadership and unpopular policies.

4. Labour is perceived to be unable to manage the day-to-day economic decisions and the public finances.

This theory states that the electorate thinks Labour has got its core economic policies wrong. In past times when Labour has struggled to win elections, one core problem was the inability to

get their tax and spend policy to match what the public thinks it should be. One key example was in the 1983 election where its radical spending policies contributed to Labour's long time out of office. This theory tends to be proposed by moderates and fiercely opposed by the left.

Moreover, Labour could also continue to be haunted by the 2007/08 financial crisis as voters still associate economic problems with a Labour government. Therefore, Labour's inability to communicate what they got wrong, what lessons were learnt and which economic policies they would implement to ensure stability could be a factor in why they are unable to win elections.

5. Labour has lost due to a lack of party unity.

This theory states that Labour has not been able to unite, and as a result, it comes across as not being able to form a united functioning government. This issue is also argued to hinder election campaign effectiveness and stop the party from communicating a winning message. A lack of unity has also been argued to have stopped the party from functioning internally, such as hindering the party's ability to crack down on anti-Semitism. This is a theory put forward by all sections of the party. In fact, both sides have accused the other side of sabotage, especially in dealing with anti-Semitism.

6. A realignment has occurred, causing Labour to be no longer able to connect with its base.

This theory argues that long-term factors have changed the electoral landscape and this changed electoral arena has not benefited left-wing parties. The realignment theory states that globalisation has brought great changes that have benefited some of Labour's base whilst hurting other parts of it. As a

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result, Labour's base has drifted apart partly in reaction to the effects of internationalism and globalisation.

For example, some of Labour's base is more cautious towards the growing influences of migration and the EU over their lives, whilst other parts of Labour's base have embraced such changes. As events across the last decade have brought these issues to the forefront of British politics parts of Labour's base have drifted apart, and this has made it harder for Labour to keep their base together. It has become tougher as no single set of coherent policies can appeal to both groups that have drifted apart with successive elections, and as a result, Labour has found it harder to secure a base large enough to win them an election. This is the problem Labour had in 2015 when addressing the migration issue, and in 2017 – '19 when confronting the EU issue.

Consequently, Labour's old electoral alliances no longer work and the Tories have been able to steal part of Labour's former base. This phenomenon has occurred in many EU political systems where many left parties have witnessed declines. This long-term trend has taken longer to develop in the UK due to the FPTP electoral system, but now these long-term trends have arrived they are probably here to stay, and therefore if nothing changes Labour's electoral problem is here to stay.

7. Labour loses as the party has moved away from the centre-ground of British politics due to its increasingly radical membership.

All the above theories can be argued to be linked with one factor, the problem of Labour becoming too left-wing and culturally liberal. The reason why the Labour Party can't be united is because the membership has drifted away from the centre ground, which puts the membership at odds with the

parliamentary party and wider public. It can also be argued that Labour can't hold popular positions as it takes too many extreme positions in order to satisfy its membership. It also can't take winning positions due to the membership backing leaders who tend to resonate more with the membership than they do the wider electorate.

Therefore, it is logical to argue that all of Labour's problems come from internal party democracy that favours more radical politics than the median voter perceives to be desirable. As a result, Labour elects leaders who push policy positions that the average voter often does not agree with, causing Labour to not be seen as credible on key issues. This also splinters party unity as MPs and their staff fear losing the next election and with this, their jobs and the chance to get into government. Therefore, the party being pushed in a radical direction causes multiple problems in Labour being able to win an election, consequently making this issue the key reason why Labour loses.

This book has put this theory forward as it is not that common in Labour Party politics but is a credible theory that could answer this important question. However, it should be noted that this theory is occasionally proposed by centrist forces within the Labour Party. The left mostly strongly opposes this theory as they argue radicalism is the way forward.

Now the long-term trends that present Labour problems and the theories that might explain these trends have been presented, the book now goes on to test each theory in subsequent chapters. The book will conclude by ranking each factor in order of its importance. This will allow the book to conclude what explanations are the most credible and which factors might be wrongly focused upon.

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The book will start this approach by analysing the 2010 general election, the election where New Labour finally lost and the party was cast deep into opposition.