

Can Labour recover to win in 2020? History says one thing, and the polls another

By Democratic Audit UK

*The 2015 General Election saw the Conservatives win a majority, seemingly against all odds, with Labour expected to perform much more strongly. **Alun Wyburn-Powell** looks at the historical precedent for Labour to recover and take the next election in 2020, arguing that while the polling suggests an insurmountable challenge, history suggests that it is possible.*



Following Ramsay's lead? (Credit: Nick Harrison, CC BY NC SA 2.0)

Before the 2015 election most people assumed that it would bear the strongest similarities to the previous election in 2010, with a close vote, a hung parliament and another coalition. The pollsters and, largely as a result, almost everyone else were wrong. With hindsight, it was nothing like 2010, with the SNP surge in Scotland, the Liberal Democrats' reduction to a rump no bigger than the party's position in the 1950s, Labour's failure to win the most marginal seat from the Conservatives and UKIP actually going down from two seats to one after dominating the headlines for most of the parliament.

The last election when the polls failed to predict the result was in 1992, an election which seems to have the most similarities with 2015. John Major won a surprise victory with an overall majority of 21 seats to keep the Conservatives in power.

If the opinion polls failed to give us a steer, could history have given us a better idea of what to expect at the 2015 election? There are some parallels with 1992, but then a Conservative leader was facing his first election, although his party had won the last three contests with an overall majority. The Labour leader in 1992, Neil Kinnock, was facing his second battle after losing his first, unlike Ed Miliband who was previously untested at the polls. If we looked for examples of elections at the end of coalition governments, we would have few examples and contradictory evidence. At the end of the wartime coalition in 1945, Labour, the junior coalition partner stormed to a landslide victory. Going back to the previous end-of-coalition election, the 1922 result was a victory for the larger coalition party, the Conservatives.

We have to face the uncomfortable reality that virtually every poll was wrong in terms of predicting the outcome of the 2015 election and that history offers no exact parallels for us to draw on. We have to accept that we cannot

know the future.

Perhaps the best approach is not to start at the top, worrying about the overall result, but to build up a picture from the component dynamics. Here, both history and the polls did have something constructive to offer.

The polls did predict the SNP victory. Scotland has had a more volatile political history than the rest of the mainland – from being a Liberal stronghold in Victorian times, to having a Conservative majority in the 1950s, to being a Labour heartland in the later 20th century and now with the SNP leaving only one seat each for Labour, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats (and all those with majorities of under 3,000). History records that when Scotland moves, it moves dramatically, and it doesn't tend to swing back again. This is not a promising outlook for the Labour Party.

The history of the SDP in the 1980s gave us a strong steer on the likely prospects (or lack of them in terms of seats) for UKIP. The peak opinion poll rating for UKIP was 25%. This compares to a peak figure of 34% for the Lib Dems before the 2010 election (when they lost seats) and 50.5% for the SDP/Liberal Alliance in 1981. At the following election in 1983 the SDP only won only one new seat.

The 2015 Liberal Democrat collapse was more extreme even than the 1924 result, when the Liberals went down from 159 MPs to just 40 at the end of the first Labour government. Liberal leader Asquith had stood aside and allowed Labour to form their first administration. Labour proved to be safe, competent and unadventurous in office and the Liberal Party looked redundant. The lesson in 1924 seemed to be to take power whenever possible. The lesson from 2015 seemed to be the opposite.

The consequences of prediction errors can be serious and the examples manifold. Paddy Ashdown admitted that his 2015 Lib Dem election campaign was completely 'blind-sided' by the polls. The polls gave a misleading picture of support for Scottish independence in 2014, which resulted in panic offers of more devolution. The UKIP surge in the opinion polls changed the other parties' stance on immigration. Neville Chamberlain achieved an 80% approval rating when he was following his appeasement policy before the Second World War.

Many commentators are now saying that Labour's challenge in winning in 2020 looks unsurmountable, with the required swing likely to be unachievable. Here the polls suggest one thing and history another. If 1992 was the most similar election to 2015, history suggests that David Cameron's majority may dribble away over the course of the parliament, as did John Major's larger 21-seat majority – in both cases with the issue of Europe at the heart of the debate.

In the election after 1992 the Conservatives lost by a landslide. From this perspective, the Labour Party's task at the next election does not look too onerous and history also records that the party did recover from only 52 seats in 1931 (fewer than the Liberal Democrats had earlier this month) to an outright majority just two elections later.

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Dr Alun Wyburn-Powell is the author of a biography of [William Wedgwood Benn, first Viscount Stansgate](#). He can be found on Twitter [@liberalhistory](#) and writes a [blog](#).

