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Introduction: The Mislaying of a Majority

Jonathan Tonge, Cristina Leston-Bandeira and Stuart Wilks-Heeg

The 2017 General Election added considerably to the rich political drama evident in the UK in recent years. A contest supposed to be one of the most one-sided of all time confounded most predictions in yielding only the third hung parliament of the 20 UK post-war general elections. ‘May heads for election landslide’ trumpeted The Times on 19 April, the day after the election was called – and few demurred. Theresa May began her campaign in Bolton North East, where Labour had been in charge since 1997 and enjoyed an 8.4% lead over the Conservatives in 2015. The message from the Prime Minister was clear; this would be a rout in which the governing party would extend its majority and crush a left-wing Labour Party. The Conservatives assumed that many Labour voters would defect and that most of UKIP’s vote – which had fallen by 20% in the previous month’s council elections – would head their way.

This volume analyses an extraordinary election, one which defied at least five supposed orthodoxies: firstly, that a campaign does not really matter; secondly that the Conservatives are adept at running such campaigns; thirdly, that a left-wing Labour manifesto is inevitably a ‘suicide note’; fourthly that the combined Conservative-Labour share of the vote is in inevitable, long-term decline; and fifthly, that most young (18-24) people do not vote. Given these apparent truths, and the huge advantage Theresa May was recording in her personal ratings relative to Labour’s Jeremy Corbyn, most commentators abandoned any previous caution in their interpretation of opinion polls. Yes, the polls had been wrong in 2015, but that was in the context of a tight race. The margins in 2017 were so wide, anything other than a Conservative majority was seen as unimaginable. Yet, opinion pollsters were keen to learn from the debacle of 2015, and were quietly experimenting with new methods and approaches.

The tendency for ‘crowding’ among polling agencies was less evident in 2017. Accompanied by much derision, Survation polls predicting a hung-parliament were dismissed as outliers. A YouGov model using multilevel regression with post-stratification was also widely dismissed for suggesting that the prospect of a hung parliament was more likely than outlandish. In the final event, the YouGov model correctly predicted the outcome in 93% of the 632 constituencies in Great Britain.

Arguably, the certainty of a clear Conservative victory should have been more rigorously challenged at the outset. As John Curtice articulated on BBC News Channel within an hour of the election being announced on 19 April, Theresa May’s snap decision was ‘not a risk-free enterprise’. With the Conservatives having required a 6.5% lead over Labour merely to obtain their 12-seat majority in 2015, Theresa May’s party would need a huge poll lead to be truly confident of annihilating opponents. Whilst the polls offered encouragement in terms of the raw lead, it was unclear exactly where seat gains were likely for the Conservatives.

As events transpired, many of those gains were made where the Prime Minister was least involved, Ruth Davidson leading the Conservative campaign in Scotland. Had May been patient, she might have fought the next election on more favourable constituency boundaries. Notwithstanding the considerable flaws in the idea of reducing the number of Commons seats to 600 (an idea now dropped) and thus increasing the workload of already-busy remaining MPs, the principle of equal sized constituencies was logical and may have assisted her party. That said, John Curtice shows in this volume that increased turnouts in Labour seats meant that bias against the Conservatives disappeared in 2017, in terms of how many votes were required to elect an MP from the main two parties.

Davidson's verve and enthusiasm served merely to highlight the incompetence of the broader Conservative campaign. May's robotic approach, unconvincing style and unexciting policies ensured that the Conservatives failed to generate enthusiasm, or even reassurance. Saddled with articulating a Brexit policy she had opposed only a year earlier, the Prime Minister's 'strategy' appeared to rely upon her delivering successfully an EU withdrawal she had thought wrong. Beyond that, the belief that Jeremy Corbyn was hopeless and therefore the Conservatives would win big anyway acted as a substitute for ideas or coherence. The assumption that May would always outperform Corbyn in voters' assessments of competency ensured that the Conservative campaign was built around its leader to a remarkable degree. It seemed like the safest of bets. But it turned out to be a fatal mistake.

There was neither a clear justification for the election offered by the Conservative leader, nor a clear articulation of why voting Conservative was essential. The calling of the contest followed months of denials that it would take place. Voters had been informed regularly that the Prime Minister was 'getting on with the job', a reasonable contention given that it was indisputable that she had the most difficult in-tray of any recent Prime Minister. May's u-turn in opting to trigger an election immediately created a question of trust (as did her subsequent u-turn on a manifesto commitment during the campaign, a scenario without precedent in UK elections). Her mantras were untrue. The political, as distinct from electoral, logic offered for an election appeared spurious. It consisted of the remarkable objection that the opposition were opposing the Conservatives, as if Labour's real role was to operate as an annexe of the government. Invited to offer even a modicum of rationale, May's assertion that Labour was attempting to thwart Brexit was extraordinary. In February 2017, only 52 of Labour's 232 MPs

voted against the Third Reading of the Bill triggering Article 50 to begin the Brexit process. Most Labour MPs accepted, however reluctantly, that the referendum result had to be respected. For ardent supporters of an EU Remain position, the lack of Labour opposition to Brexit was the problem. In offering a risible, implausible basis for the country going to the polls, the Prime Minister neutered her potential assets of reliability and trustworthiness from the outset. Most observers were fully cognisant of the real rationale underpinning the election; Labour's very poor county council results only a few weeks earlier. This appeared the sole motivation.

The UK entered an election that few voters were demanding, aware that no outcome would alter the pre-eminence of Brexit as the dominant item on the agenda. What followed was a campaign punctuated by two terrorist atrocities and otherwise marked by growing Labour momentum and consistent Conservative haplessness. The slide of the Scottish National Party, the failure of Liberal Democrat Europhilia to gain traction and the demise of UKIP, now surplus to requirements, were three other major developments. Despite the ineptitude of the Conservative campaign and growing confidence of Corbyn's Labour, the exit poll on election night still shocked many. This volume analyses how and why parliament was hung.

The plan of the volume

Britain Votes 2017 covers the election results, analyses the campaign that helped bring them about, assesses why each party performed as it did, explores the roles of party finance and new and traditional media, before perusing the implications for the future. It begins with David Denver's outline of the results and the polls from which erroneous predictions of the outcome were frequently made. As his analysis shows, most opinion polls broadly called the

Conservative percentage share correctly; what was seriously underestimated was Labour's projected share.

John Curtice examines the operation of the electoral system in 2017 and concludes that, as with other recent elections, it is failing to deliver when measured against its own supposed merits. The classic defence of the single member plurality (SMP) system of elections is that it ensures that the largest party secures a healthy working majority and facilitates the easy replacement of one single party government with another. Yet Theresa May sacrificed her party's slender majority, necessitating a post-election deal with the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) to remain in power. As Curtice notes, this is the third election in succession that the electoral system has failed to deliver a safe majority for the largest party, a stark contrast to how SMP operated for most of the period from 1945-2005.

The volume then moves to a detailed exploration of the campaigns of each party. Tim Bale and Paul Webb use data from the Economic and Social Research Council party members project to demonstrate that Conservative activism dropped on virtually every indicator in the 2017 campaign, compared to 2015. They also indicate how the ancient adage of success having many midwives and failure being orphaned was applicable to the culprit whose idea was the calling of the election. Admissions of responsibility were as frequent as summer snow.

In contrast to the diminished level of Conservative activism outlined by Bale and Webb, Eunice Goes' assessment of Labour's campaign charts the online activism of an army of eager party members. Their enthusiastic backing of Corbyn contrasted with the 'guerilla war' as she describes it, between the parliamentary Labour Party and the Corbyn leadership which

preceded the election. With Labour articulating policies designed to interest previous non-voters and new voters and Corbyn dealing well with the tough questioning about his past (at the expense of fuller scrutiny of Labour's economic policies) the party's campaign was a case of Momentum gathering momentum.

In contrast, the Liberal Democrats' campaign failed to develop, despite the election offering seemingly highly propitious circumstances. David Cutts and Andrew Russell show why the party failed to harness more than a fraction of the 48% pro-EU vote on offer from a year earlier, highlighting the lack of positive reasons to endorse the Liberal Democrats. Issues of a lack of identity and absence of clear leadership ensured that only a modicum of the damage wreaked in 2015 was repaired. The party struggled to retain its 2015 vote even among EU 'Remainers'.

James Dennison examines the fate of UKIP and the Greens, the two parties which lost most votes in 2017. Both parties had increased their vote share in 2015, UKIP dramatically so, and had returned one MP each. However, the UKIP vote share plummeted from 12.6% in 2015 to just 1.8% in 2017. Not only did UKIP fail to return a single candidate to the Commons, it also forfeited all 120 of the second places it claimed in 2015. By comparison, the collapse of the Greens was less dramatic. The Greens also saw their 2017 share fall to 1.8%, compared to 4.1% in 2015. The party comfortably retained Caroline Lucas's Brighton Pavilion seat but performed disappointingly everywhere else, claiming only one second place, in the Speaker's seat of Buckingham which, by convention, was not contested by the principal rival parties.

Following the examination of the campaign and performances of the UK-wide parties, Britain Votes 2017 assesses the distinctive elections in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Ailsa

Henderson and James Mitchell demonstrate how a revived Scottish Conservative Party under Ruth Davidson fused Scottish distinctiveness with uncompromising unionism, on the back of the nationalists' 2014 referendum defeat, to take the Conservatives to their highest Scottish vote share since the advent of Thatcherism in 1979. Nonetheless, their contribution also indicates how Labour, who also benefited from the downward trend of SNP support, might be better positioned to prosper from such a trend. Jonathan Bradbury shows how Wales remained solidly Labour. Despite early polls suggesting as many as ten Conservative gains, May's election, apparently a plan hatched on a North Wales walking break, turned sour as the Conservatives lost three Welsh seats. The significance of Northern Ireland was obvious in the immediate aftermath, the DUP's ten MPs assuming an importance few might have imagined – although the DUP, having unnecessarily prepared for a Conservative minority government in 2015, had a shopping list ready. Nationalist representation disappeared from Westminster for the first time ever as the SDLP lost its remaining three seats, one to the DUP and the other two to abstentionist Sinn Fein. The DUP's success and the bargain struck by the party are both examined.

In addition to exploring the election context across the constituent parts of the UK, *Britain Votes 2017* assesses the broader European context. Never has an election taken place so overshadowed by an earlier political decision, as Brexit loomed over the contest. Theresa May's election justification was that she was seeking to strengthen her hand in the Brexit negotiations with the EU. As Sara Hagemann notes, the UK was not the only EU member state to go to the polls in 2017. The timing of the French and German elections in 2017 had previously been seen as a critical consideration for Theresa May's government in determining when to trigger Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union to formally commence the process of UK withdrawal from the EU. This wider European electoral context was of clear significance

for the Brexit negotiations. The 2017 elections in the Netherlands, France and Germany were all closely watched for signs of surging support for populist parties and politicians and for a possible contagion of anti-EU sentiment emanating from the Brexit vote. Yet in all three countries, populism, although a significant force, was contained. Britain's Brexit was a solo and friendless run for the election victor to manage.

The next section of the volume analyses key aspects of the election campaign: the financing of the battle, digital campaigning strategies, the use of traditional and social media and the degree of political engagement elicited by these efforts. Justin Fisher's chapter on party expenditure before and during the campaign outlines important regulatory changes during the short 2015-17 Parliament, which affect the way parties are financed. Fisher analyses the trends in party income and expenditure, and how this impacted on the parties' levels of preparation for the unexpected general election. He then outlines the number and extent of donations to parties, to finally analyse parties' expenditure during the electoral campaign, identifying the differing types of activities favoured by the different parties. Labour and the Liberal Democrats found themselves in far stronger financial positions than was the case in 2015 and were well prepared financially for the snap election. Yet by the time of polling day, normal service was resumed, with the Conservatives able to raise significant sums in a relatively short period. However, the snap election influenced the extent to which the parties could exploit their financial position and how campaign expenditure was allocated.

Some of that campaigning was relatively cheap, conducted via Facebook. Katharine Dommett and Luke Temple consider this in their contribution on digital campaigning. They analyse in detail the type of messages used through this platform and the extent to which this reached

potential voters. They then outline the way non-party organisations supported the main parties' campaigns, particularly in the case of Labour, developing what the authors label online 'satellite campaigns' conducted by organisations beyond a particular party, but sympathising with one. The authors suggest that Facebook campaigning has been normalised and the potential impact of the expansion of 'satellite campaigns' appears considerable.

Dominic Wring and Stephen Ward assess traditional and newer forms of media coverage of the election. They identify the key elements that failed in the Conservatives' campaign strategy, not least Theresa May's refusal to participate in the leaders' debates – although given the Conservatives' poll lead, the lessons of Cameron's useful aversion to such showpieces in 2015 and the lack of dexterity of May, avoidance might possibly have been the best tactic anyway. Wring and Ward show how the digital sphere and mainstream media increasingly overlap and feed off one another. As such, traditional media, television and even the press, are far from dead, but Labour's use of social media helped reach their target audience of young and new voters on perhaps the first occasion that social media was at the heart of a party election campaign. Given that the internet works best for the swift mobilisation of oppositionist movements and social media, its value was apparent for the reinvigorated grassroots networks of Corbyn's Labour Party.

In considering the extent and depth of political engagement generated by these different campaigning techniques, Matthew Flinders focuses on what he sees as the paradoxical anti-politics of the 2017 general election. He argues that its most astonishing feature was the success with which a mainstream party, Jeremy Corbyn's Labour, deployed a form of hybrid populism to channel anti-political sentiment. In effect, Corbyn repositioned the party by adopting

techniques more readily associated with contemporary populist movements, thereby recasting Labour as an anti-establishment ‘outsider’ force. Flinders argues that this strategy was made possible by the reconfiguration of the UK party system following the Brexit vote, particularly the demise of UKIP. He also suggests that this approach was central to the gains Labour made in 2017. For Flinders, Labour’s adoption of populism enabled it to cultivate the broad appeal needed to bridge the growing economic, social and cultural divides between the ‘cosmopolitan’ and ‘backwater’ constituencies in which its core sets of potential supporters live.

The final two contributions consider the election from the perspective of two categories of voters: women and young people. Emily Harmer and Rosalynd Southern explore the gender dimension of the first election contested by a female Prime Minister since 1987. They argue that women’s issues received scant media coverage. Parties offered a range of policies aimed at women in competing for female electoral support, but there were few radical policy proposals. The chapter examines the roles of women both in terms of supply (politicians, media, candidates) and demand (manifestos and women voters). It starts by analysing the extent of women’s presence in the campaign, potentially high given several women party leaders.

Finally, Sarah Harrison considers whether the much-vaunted ‘youthquake’ was a reality at the election, with a majority of 18-24 year olds voting, a phenomenon not seen since 1992. Harrison outlines the key challenges usually associated with youth participation, acknowledges the combined efforts of a number of organisations to promote voter registration and assesses the specific contextual factors in the 2017 contest, the key to understanding the way young people participated in this election, notably the EU referendum. A detailed analysis of three sample constituencies is offered in identifying the key motivations behind the youth vote in the 2017 election.

The sum of these parts is a comprehensive analysis of a remarkable, dramatic election, whose outcome pleased the second-placed party more than the winners, confounded almost all commentators and did little to resolve the problems confronting the UK.