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The Post-war Premiership League

Kevin Theakston and Mark Gill

Who has been the best British prime minister since the Second World War? As David Cameron passes up and down the Grand Staircase in Number 10 Downing Street every day, the portraits of his predecessors as prime minister stare down at him. They are arranged in chronological order, with the most recent at the top of the stairs. If they were to be arranged in order of greatness, success or effectiveness in office, or policy achievement and legacy, the sequence would look very different.

We report here the results from the latest survey of academic experts polled on the performance of post-1945 prime ministers. Academic specialists in British politics and history rate Clement Attlee as the best post-war prime minister, with Margaret Thatcher in second place just ahead of Tony Blair in third place. Gordon Brown's stint in Number 10 was the third-worst since the Second World War, according to the respondents to the survey that rated his premiership as less successful than that of John Major.

The prime-ministerial 'ratings game' is widely played. Prime ministers rate each other. In quiet moments they often look back over their predecessors in the job and pass judgement on their records and achievements. Churchill, for instance, thought Asquith 'probably one of the greatest peace-time prime ministers we have ever had', but recognised that he was inadequate as a war leader compared to Lloyd George.ⁱ He also criticised the 'incompetence' of the inter-war Conservative businessmen-prime ministers – Bonar Law, Baldwin and Chamberlain – who 'had not been a success.'ⁱⁱ Both Harold Wilson and Margaret Thatcher rated Attlee highly. To Wilson, writing in 1977, 'no peacetime prime minister this century has

achieved more in his years of office.ⁱⁱⁱ Although opposing his policies and philosophy, Thatcher described herself as ‘an admirer’ of Attlee: ‘He was a serious man and a patriot. Quite contrary to the general tendency of politicians in the 1990s, he was all substance and no show. His was a genuinely radical and reforming government.’^{iv} Edward Heath praised Macmillan for possessing ‘the most constructive mind I have encountered in a lifetime of politics’, but wrote off Wilson as ‘a great political survivor, a fine politician if, perhaps, never truly a statesman.’^v Tony Blair reportedly had little time for Wilson or Callaghan as Labour premiers, and was dismissive of Major, but he admired Thatcher’s courage, determination and radicalism, and praised ‘the clear sense of an identifiable project she provided for her party’, wanting to be a leader in the same radical mould as her.^{vi}

When the general public are asked to rank prime ministers a few ‘big names’ tend to stand out and the rest come a long way behind. In a 2007 BBC ‘Daily Politics’ poll about the peace-time prime ministers since 1945 (excluding Churchill), Thatcher came top with 49 per cent of the votes, Attlee was second with 32 per cent, Blair was third with 9 per cent, while Wilson was in fourth place with just 4 per cent of the votes. The other post-war premiers got insignificant amounts of support: Major 2 per cent, and Eden, Macmillan, Douglas-Home, Heath and Callaghan only one per cent each.^{vii} A 2008 BBC ‘Newsnight’ online poll registered more than 27,000 votes and ranked the post-war prime ministers as follows: (1) Churchill, (2) Attlee, (3) Thatcher, (4) Macmillan, (5) Wilson, (6) Blair, (7) Heath, (8) Major, (9) Callaghan, (10) Douglas-Home, (11) Eden, (12) Brown.^{viii} (The high Churchill vote probably reflects public evaluations of his performance as wartime leadership rather than his post-war ‘second innings’ premiership.) In a 2010 YouGov survey (with 1900 respondents), looking only at prime

ministers who had served five years or longer since the Second World War, 36 per cent voted Thatcher as the best prime minister, Blair was second with 20 per cent of the vote, Wilson third (11 per cent), Attlee in fourth place (6 per cent), Major fifth (3 per cent) and Macmillan ranked in sixth place (2 per cent). However, Thatcher was also ranked as the worst post-war prime minister by 31 per cent of respondents, with Blair as the second-worst (25 per cent).^{ix} While political partisanship may explain some of this polarisation of opinion, it is also arguable that (as in the USA) public comparative ratings of political leaders are heavily influenced by 'presentism', uneven levels of historical knowledge, and the mediating and filtering role of elite and media opinion regarding leaders' achievements and reputations.^x

As far as 'elite' opinion is concerned, a 2005 Populus Network survey of 216 'opinion-formers' – senior executives and chairmen of private and public sector bodies – ranked Thatcher, Blair, Attlee, Churchill and Macmillan in that order as the most successful post-war premiers. The net votes for these five prime ministers (percentages saying they were successful minus those saying unsuccessful) were: Thatcher +82, Blair +75, Attlee +59, Churchill +58 and Macmillan +26. Wilson was narrowly rated on balance as unsuccessful (-7), but the other prime ministers had large overall negative ratings: Major -46, Douglas-Home -52, Heath -55, Callaghan -59, Eden -68. Whereas 90 per cent of the opinion formers rated Thatcher a success and only 8 per cent as unsuccessful, only 7 per cent rated Eden's premiership as successful and 75 per cent as unsuccessful.^{xi}

Recent media rating exercises include journalist Francis Beckett's use of a five-point ratings scale to give his own rank ordering of 20th century prime ministers in 2006, with vision and 'effectiveness as change managers' being his key criteria for judging them. Thatcher and

Attlee shared the top rating of '5'. Among the post-war prime ministers, he gave Churchill, Macmillan and Heath a '4' rating; Wilson and Blair a '3' rating; Callaghan '2'; Douglas-Home and Major '1'; and Eden a humiliating 'nil points'.^{xii} Martin Kettle, writing in *The Guardian* in 2007, divided the 'outstanding' prime ministers into three ranks (but only his verdicts on post-war PMs are noted here). The first rank ('prime ministers doing great things in great times') included Churchill, Attlee and Thatcher; the second rank ('achieving great things in less compelling times') included Macmillan and Heath; the third rank ('some great things but a more mixed record') included Wilson and Blair. The other post-war premiers were excluded from his list.^{xiii} In a 2007 BBC4 television programme about the 20th century's prime ministers a panel of journalists and historians (Andrew Roberts, Peter Hennessy, Anthony Howard, Polly Toynbee and Simon Jenkins), chaired by Andrew Marr, picked Churchill as the best prime minister, with Thatcher, Attlee and Lloyd George sharing second place, followed (in order) by Blair, Asquith and Baldwin; Eden was rated the worst prime minister. Most ambitious of all, a panel of six senior journalists, commentators and editors on *The Times* in May 2010 ranked all 52 British prime ministers from Robert Walpole to Gordon Brown. Overall, they thought, Churchill was the best prime minister in British history and Lord North the worst. Just picking out the post-war prime ministers from their list, the *Times* panel ranked them in this order (overall ranking in brackets): Churchill (1) – Thatcher (5) – Attlee (7) – Macmillan (15) – Blair (16=) – Wilson (20) – Heath (23) – Callaghan (27) – Major (28) – Douglas-Home (36=) – Brown (36=) – Eden (47).^{xiv}

There have been many surveys, starting in the 1940s, of American academics – political scientists and historians – producing league tables of presidential performance and

rankings of the 'best' and 'worst' presidents. But this sort of research lagged behind in Britain until the present authors conducted the first large-scale survey of academics to rate and rank British prime ministers in 2004, when 258 university academics, specialising in British politics and history, were asked to rate the performance in office of all 20th century prime ministers (139 answering the questionnaire in full, a response rate of 54 per cent). The top-ranked prime ministers were (in order): Attlee, Churchill, Lloyd George and Thatcher, with Chamberlain, Balfour, Douglas-Home and Eden rated as the worst prime ministers of the century. Blair (still in office at the time of the poll) was rated in sixth position.^{xv} Earlier surveys (in 1990, 1999 and 2000) had been based on much smaller samples and/or covered a narrower time period and range of prime ministers.

With Tony Blair's departure from office in 2007 and Gordon Brown's three-year stint as prime minister ending after the 2010 general election, we organised a new survey of academics. The survey was designed to follow a similar approach to our 2004 research, in particular by ensuring that those invited to take part were specialist academics teaching and writing about British politics and/or history over the time period covered, and with a sample size large enough to ensure the results were statistically robust. For the 2010 research it was decided that rather than covering all prime ministers since 1900 the questionnaire would focus instead on rating those who held office since 1945. The survey included Gordon Brown and respondents would have the chance to rate Tony Blair's full tenure in office. But David Cameron, having been prime minister for only a few weeks at the time of the survey, was excluded from the study.^{xvi}

The 2010 Woodnewton/University of Leeds survey

As in our 2004 survey, respondents were asked to rate the performance of each prime minister during their tenure in Number 10 after 1945 on a scale of zero to 10, with zero representing 'highly unsuccessful' and ten 'highly successful'. A mean score was then calculated for each prime minister, which was used as the basis for the prime ministerial performance ranking (table 1). As with the US presidential polls and the 2004 prime-ministerial poll, the standard was not achievement or record over the full political/ministerial career, but performance in the top job, as prime minister (thus excluding, for example, Brown's performance as Chancellor of the Exchequer in the ten years before he became prime minister). We also followed the practice of the US academic surveys in not defining or specifying criteria for evaluating overall prime-ministerial performance and success or failure – respondents were left to make their own decisions.

Table 1: Post-war prime-ministerial rankings

Ranking	Prime Minister	Mean score
1	Clement Attlee (Lab. 1945-51)	8.1
2	Margaret Thatcher (Con. 1979-90)	6.9
3	Tony Blair (Lab. 1997-2010)	6.4
4	Harold Macmillan (Con. 1957-63)	6.3
5	Harold Wilson (Lab. 1964-70, 74-76)	5.9
6	Winston Churchill (Con. 1951-55)	5.3
7	James Callaghan (Lab. 1976-79)	5.1
8	John Major (Con. 1990-97)	4.6
9	Edward Heath (Con. 1970-74)	4.4
10	Gordon Brown (Lab. 2007-10)	3.9
11	Alec Douglas-Home (Con. 1963-64)	3.7
12	Anthony Eden (Con. 1955-57)	2.3

Source: Woodnewton/University of Leeds. Base size: 106 academics.

Clement Attlee completes the double in the sense that, following on from his designation as the best prime minister of the 20th century in our 2004 poll, he is rated as the most successful of all the twelve occupants of Number 10 since 1945. Attlee's performance is rated somewhat higher than the second highest rated PM, Margaret Thatcher, who despite winning more general elections than Attlee (three rather than two) and holding office for a longer period (eleven rather than six years) is given a lower rating of 6.9. Thatcher is placed just ahead of Labour's Tony Blair, with a rating of 6.4, who himself is only narrowly ahead of the Tory Harold Macmillan (6.3).

The average prime ministerial rating since 1945 is 5.2, with Winston Churchill (5.3) and James Callaghan (5.1) being closest to being rated as 'average'. Churchill's apparent low rating is due to the fact that academics were asked to rate the performance of the premiers during their time in office after 1945. Churchill is the only post war leader to have also served in Number 10 before 1945, as Britain's wartime premier between 1940 and 1945. In our 2004 survey, Churchill had been ranked as the second most effective 20th-century PM (with a rating of 7.9). In this poll, he slips down to a 'mid-table' position, based on evaluations of his 1950s administration only. The great war-leader was judged by respondents to be less successful as a peacetime leader in his 'Indian Summer' administration of 1951-55.

The lowest rated prime ministers are Alec Douglas-Home, who lasted in Downing Street for only a year, and Anthony Eden, whose premiership, and reputation were destroyed by the Suez crisis. Both of these premiers also languished at the bottom of the prime-ministerial league table in the 2004 survey. Gordon Brown is rated the third least successful prime minister since 1945, with a mean score of 3.9. Like his Labour predecessor but one,

James Callaghan, his term in office lasted only three years, both were prime ministers at times of economic crisis, and both followed successful election-winning leaders from their own political party (Blair before Brown and Wilson before Callaghan). Callaghan and Brown each lost the only general election they fought as party leader. Yet Callaghan is rated more highly than Brown and is in a higher position in the table (7th rather than 10th).

Table 2: 2010 and 2004 rankings

Ranking	2010 survey	2004 survey (excluding pre-1945 PMs)
1	Attlee (8.1)	Attlee (8.3)
2	Thatcher (6.9)	Churchill (7.9)
3	Blair (6.4)	Thatcher (7.1)
4	Macmillan (6.3)	Macmillan (6.5)
5	Wilson (5.9)	Blair (6.3)
6	Churchill (5.3)	Wilson (5.9)
7	Callaghan (5.1)	Callaghan (4.7)
8	Major (4.6)	Heath (4.4)
9	Heath (4.4)	Major (3.7)
10	Brown (3.9)	Douglas-Home (3.3)
11	Douglas-Home (3.7)	Eden (2.5)
12	Eden (2.3)	

Sources: 2010: Woodnewton/University of Leeds; 2004: MORI/University of Leeds.

For the most part, the respondents to the 2004 and 2010 polls gave broadly similar assessments of the post-war prime ministers. The top six post-war prime ministers are the same in both polls though the exact ratings and relative positions change in some respects. The bottom two prime ministers – the clear ‘failures’ - are the same in both polls. As noted above, Churchill’s rating is quite different but this is down to academics being asked to rate two different periods in office. And as seen in the US presidential polls, reputations can go up as well as down. John Major’s rating has improved a little since 2004 - up from a 3.7 score to

4.6 - and he has overtaken Edward Heath in the league table. The survey was conducted soon after Gordon Brown left office and in a longer time perspective (and in future surveys) it is conceivable that his ranking and relative position could change.

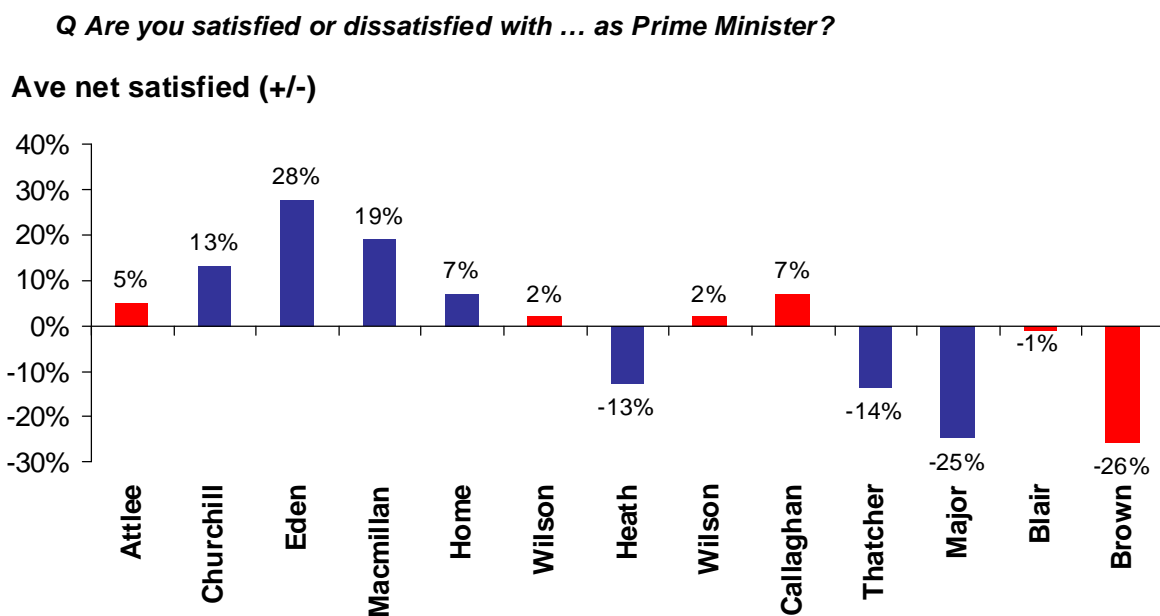
Roy Jenkins once argued that 'it is essential to have a cumulative period in office of at least five years to rank as a prime minister of major impact. No-one of the last one hundred years [he wrote in the 1980s] who does not fulfil this criterion has achieved the front rank.'^{xvii} In line with our 2004 poll, the top-rated post-war prime ministers all served at least six years in Downing Street. In the bottom half of the league table only Major had two terms in office, serving for seven years. A cumulative period of at least six years in office – requiring re-election at least once - seems to be a necessary but not sufficient condition for having an impact, leaving a policy legacy and enhancing a prime-ministerial reputation. The top five prime ministers between them won thirteen of the eighteen general elections between 1945 and 2010, the bottom five PMs winning only three elections in total. Moreover, the top three (Attlee, Thatcher and Blair) won the big post-war landslide victories – a factor also associated with high rankings in the US presidential polls.^{xviii}

Academic and public rankings of prime ministers

Comparing public and academic opinion and rankings of prime ministers is useful because it can reveal different judgements, perhaps based on different evaluative criteria and priorities. Chart 1 shows the average 'net satisfaction' scores given by the general public for each prime minister covered in this survey. The 'net satisfaction' score is calculated by subtracting the

percentage of the public 'dissatisfied' from the percentage 'satisfied' in each survey, and the average score is based on working out the average of these net scores for every survey conducted by either Gallup or MORI during the tenures of each prime minister. These are therefore 'real time' contemporaneous ratings from the general public rather than the post-performance evaluations in the surveys of academics.

Chart 1: Public average 'net satisfaction' ratings of each prime minister since 1945



Source: Gallup (Attlee to Callaghan) and MORI (Thatcher to Blair); c.1000 GB adults

Table 3 shows the ranking position of each prime minister from the point of the view of the general public and from the academics in our poll. It is striking that for several premiers the public and academics almost completely disagree on their performance. Eden is ranked in first place in terms of the average of his public approval ratings during his time in office,

whereas he is seen by academics as the least successful post-war prime minister. Based on the public's rating, Thatcher is the third least popular prime minister, yet she is the academics' second-ranked prime minister. Attlee falls from pole position in the academics' survey to mid-table (sixth) based on public opinion during his years in office.

To a large extent these discrepancies may be a result of length of tenure. Eden was a popular prime minister but Suez quickly destroyed his premiership and he was not able to continue to govern the country over a longer period of time when public disapproval with his performance may have been registered. Thatcher held office for longer than any prime minister since 1945 and was successful despite facing fairly constant public disapproval, though despite this she was still able to win three successive general elections. The difference may also be explained by changing public attitudes to politicians and prime ministers. The four highest rated prime ministers by the general public are from the first five post-1945 office holders. Three of the last four office holders are the three lowest rated since 1945 by the general public, perhaps reflecting a less deferential assessment of leaders from the modern voting public.

Nevertheless there are some similar judgements from the public and academics. Heath is placed in ninth position by academics and by the public, and Wilson, Callaghan and Brown are all roughly in the same position in both league tables (separated by no more than two positions). Major and Brown are given almost identical ratings by the public, Brown with an average minus 26 'net satisfaction' and Major a minus 25, though academics are more positive about Major's performance than Brown's.

Table 3: Public vs. Academic rankings of prime ministers

	Public Ranking	Academic Ranking
Clement Attlee (Lab, 1945-51)	6th	1st
Winston Churchill (Con, 1951-55)	3rd	6th
Sir Anthony Eden (Con, 1955-57)	1st	12th
Harold Macmillan (Con, 1957-63)	2nd	4th
Sir Alec Douglas-Home (Con, 1963-64)	4th	11th
Harold Wilson (Lab, 1964-70, 74-76)	7th	5th
Edward Heath (Con, 1970-74)	9th	9th
James Callaghan (Lab, 1976-79)	5th	7th
Margaret Thatcher (Con, 1979-90)	10th	2nd
John Major (Con, 1990-1997)	11th	8th
Tony Blair (Lab, 1997-2007)	8th	3rd
Gordon Brown (Lab, 2007-2010)	12th	10th

Thatcher to Brown: detailed analysis

To go beyond the overall performance ranking, our academic respondents were asked to provide more detailed ratings on the performance of the four prime ministers since 1979: Margaret Thatcher (1979-90), John Major (1990-97), Tony Blair (1997-2007) and Gordon Brown (2007-10). Not only does these four prime ministers' collective tenure comprise almost half the post war period, they also represent the two ends of the performance league table with Thatcher and Blair taking two of the top three places, and Major and Brown two of the bottom five.

In terms of performance ratings over their time in office, Major and Blair share a similar pattern in that their first terms are regarded by the academic community as their most successful. Tony Blair's first term was rated at 6.9 but his score then fell significantly for his

second term (2001-2005) to 5.0, and further still during his last two years in office between 2005 and 2007 to 4.1. John Major's decline was less steep across his two terms, falling from 5.1 to 3.6, though of course he started from a lower base than did Blair.

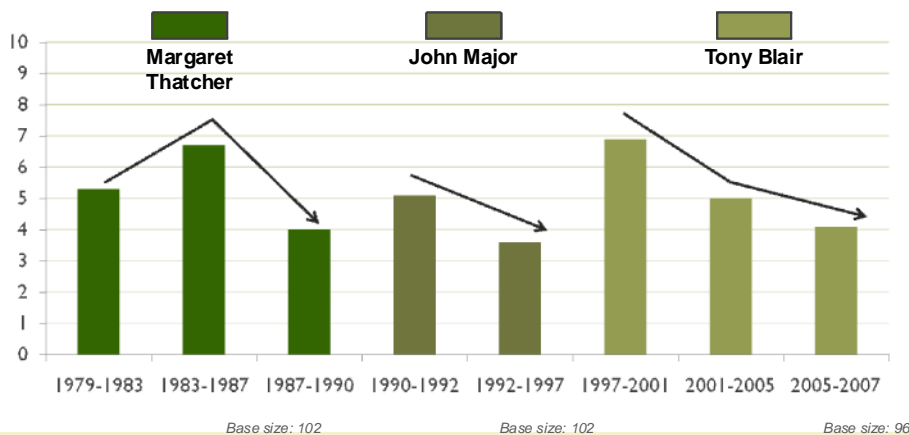
In contrast, Margaret Thatcher's second term (1983-1987) is rated as her most successful (6.7), higher than her first (5.3) and much higher than her third (4.0). Both Thatcher's and Blair's final terms in office resulted in the same ratings by academics. Major's final term (3.6) and Brown's only term (3.9) were judged even less successful.

Chart 2: Performance rating by term in office (Thatcher, Major and Blair)



Performance Rating By Term In Office

Q Please indicate on a scale of 0 to 10 how successful or unsuccessful you consider the following to have been as Prime Minister in office during the following periods. (with 0 being highly unsuccessful and 10 being highly successful)



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Respondents were also asked to identify the greatest successes and failures of each of our post-1979 prime ministers. These were given as open comments on the survey and the answers were then coded into relevant themes. The results for each prime minister are shown in the following charts.

One of the most striking findings is the high level of consensus among academics about the single biggest failure of Tony Blair and the single biggest achievement of Gordon Brown. There is much more agreement on these two factors than about the relative performances of the other prime ministers. Almost two-thirds of respondents (63 per cent) highlighted the Iraq War as Blair's biggest failure. A further one in ten of the respondents (10 per cent) identify other foreign policy issues and/or the relationship with the USA as Blair's key failure, which for the most part will be tied up with the decision to invade Iraq in 2003. It may take some years or even decades to be able to provide an objective assessment of the longer-term impact of the US-led and UK-supported Iraq war, and how historians and politicians learn the lessons of this history may well impact on future ratings of Tony Blair as prime minister. But for now, the verdict of the academic community is close to being consensual and damaging to Tony Blair's reputation.

Gordon Brown is unique among the four past prime ministers in that most academics agree on his greatest achievement as prime minister, with 69 per cent identifying this as his 'response to the banking/financial crisis'. No other leader has one issue singled out by so many academics as their core achievement. However, few academics are prepared to identify any other main achievement of the Brown premiership, and a significant proportion also believe his main weakness was also related to the economy and public debt. While Brown

may be regarded by history as playing a decisive role in 'saving the world' during the 2008-09 financial crisis, historians and political scientists also seem intent on ensuring he gets a share of the blame for allowing the crisis to happen and for the debt burdens the fallout has left. Economic policy/the state of the economy is not the only weakness academics see in the Brown premiership – several also highlight his failure to call a General Election in 2007 as his biggest weakness, as well as his inability to communicate well enough with the voting public.

For Brown's three predecessors there is no majority academic view on a single key achievement for each of their premierships. Margaret Thatcher's two key achievements are seen as 'curbing the powers of the trade unions' (27 per cent) and 'economic revival/transformation' (18 per cent). Major's achievements tend to be less about what he or his government did for the country and more about being able to maintain power, with 'winning the 1992 General Election' (22 per cent) and 'party management/length of time in office' (21 per cent) being seen as his two most impressive accomplishments. But as with Brown, one of Major's main successes is also perceived to be one of his main weaknesses in that more academics rate 'party management' (27 per cent) as his key failure over anything else, though closely followed by his failure on the economy (23 per cent).

With the exception of Blair, the economy is given as one of the top two weaknesses of each of the post-1979 prime ministers. Almost a quarter of respondents (23 per cent) think that Thatcher's 'economic policy/impact on the economy' was her main failure as prime minister with as many saying the 'poll tax' (21 per cent) was the single biggest failure; however more identify her 'impact on society/social divisions/social inequality' (34 per cent) as her biggest failure.

Chart 3: Margaret Thatcher successes and failures

Q What do you consider to be the single greatest success/failure of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister?

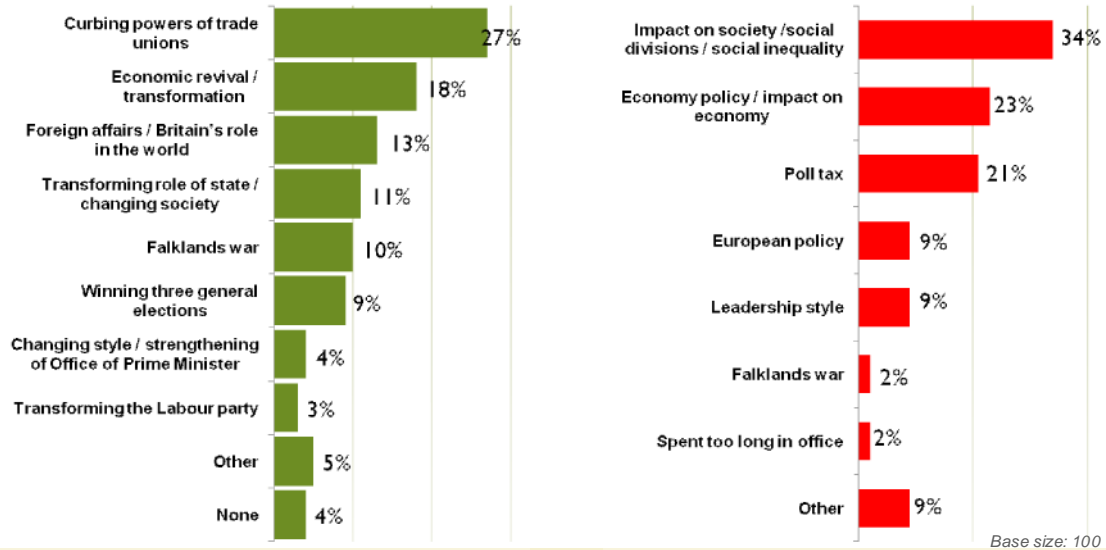


Chart 4: John Major successes and failures

Q What do you consider to be the single greatest success/failure of John Major as Prime Minister?

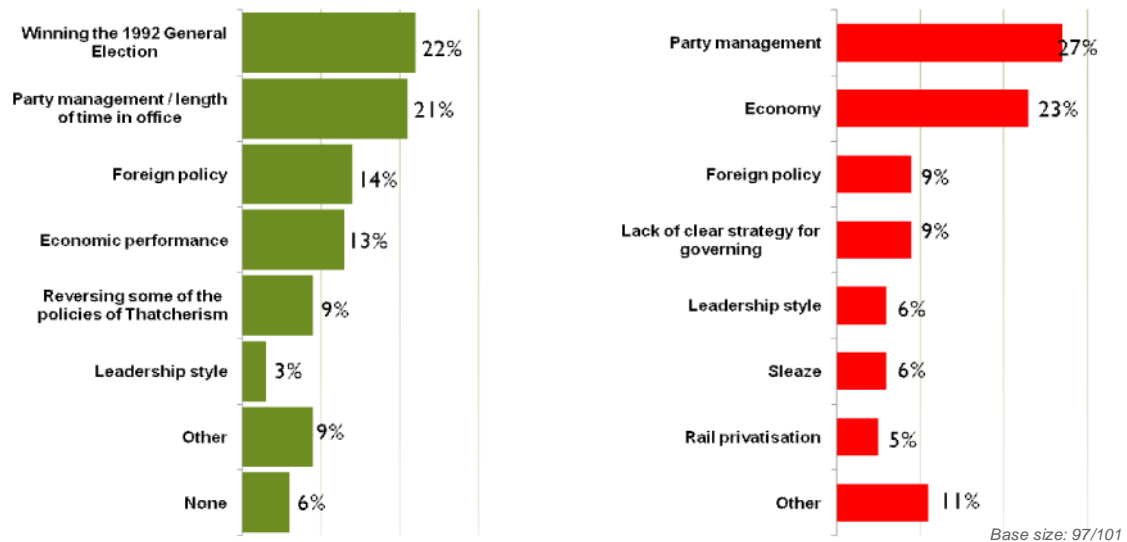


Chart 5: Tony Blair successes and failures

Q What do you consider to be the single greatest success/failure of Tony Blair as Prime Minister?

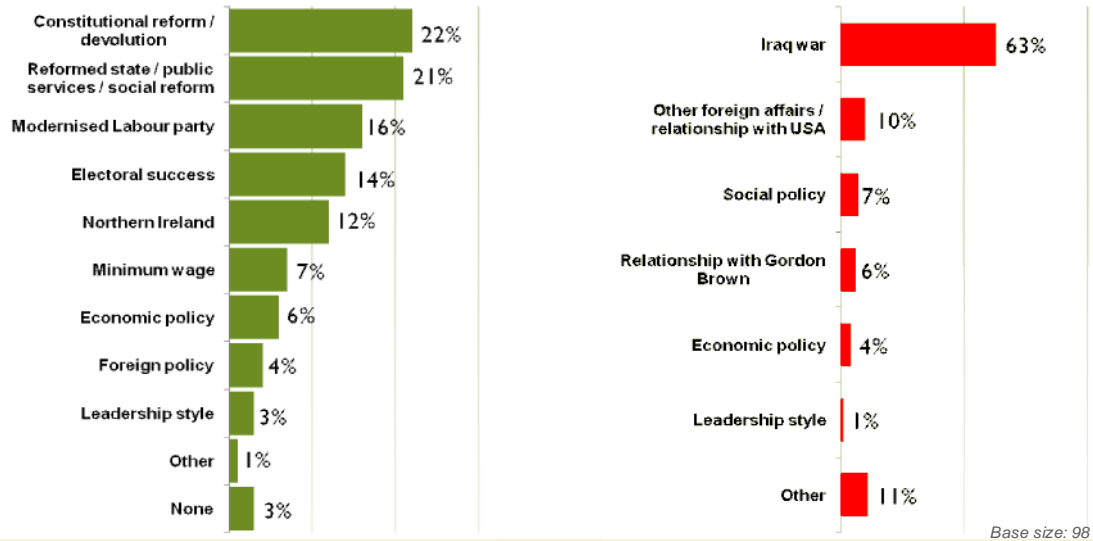
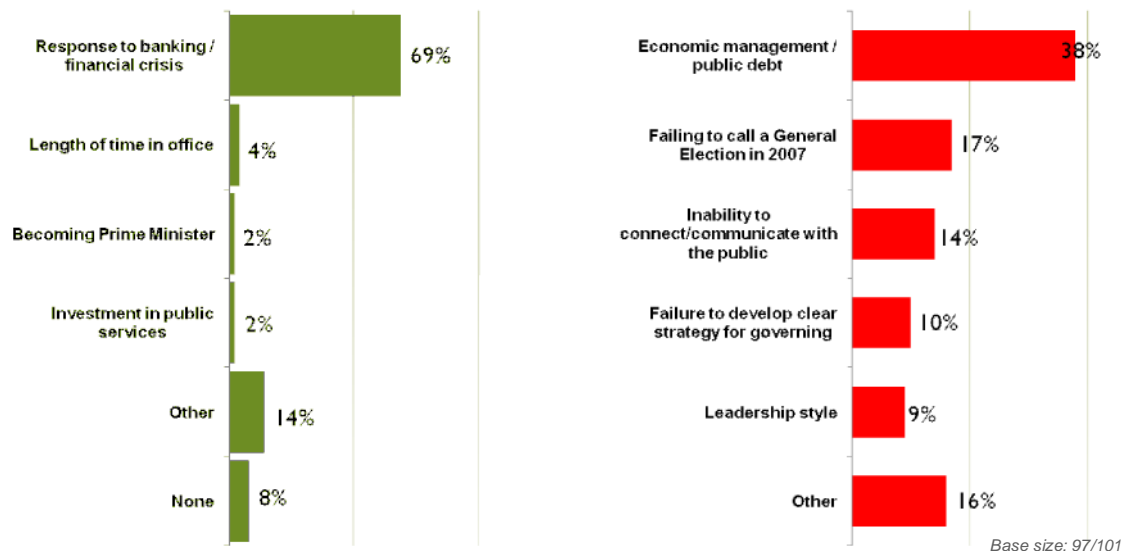


Chart 6: Gordon Brown successes and failures

Q What do you consider to be the single greatest success/failure of Gordon Brown as Prime Minister?



To enable a more detailed statistical analysis of the impact of the past four prime ministers, respondents were asked to rate the impact (positive or negative) of each of these prime ministers across five policy areas. Table 4 summarises the 'net impact' scores given by academics. This is calculated by working out the difference between the proportion saying 'very or fairly positive' and 'very or fairly negative'. A positive sign means more respondents say the PM had a positive impact than a negative impact on that policy area; a negative sign shows the reverse. The five policy areas covered are impact on: (a) British society, (b) British economy, (c) Britain's role in the world / foreign policy, (d) their own political party, and (e) British democracy / the constitution.

No prime minister is rated positively in all five areas. Blair is rated positively overall in four of the five, with his only negative rating being his impact on 'foreign policy/Britain's role in the world' where he receives a -35 score – the lowest score in this policy area of any of the four prime ministers (64 per cent of respondents thought he had a negative impact here compared to 29 per cent rating his impact as positive). Blair's most positive overall rating is on 'impact on society' with a +39 and this is the highest positive score of any prime minister on any area of policy. He also scores well on 'impact on democracy/the constitution' (+29) – the only prime minister to receive a positive score on this subject - and also on 'economic impact' (+30). Blair's 'economic impact' rating is higher than that of any other prime minister. Brown is the only one to receive a negative score in this area of policy (-9 overall: 39 per cent rating his record as positive, 48 per cent as negative), even though it could be argued that Blair's

positive rating on the economy reflects Brown’s record as Chancellor of the Exchequer, as Brown was in the economic driving seat not Blair.

Table 4: net policy impact ratings of prime ministers

	Thatcher	Major	Blair	Brown
Impact on Society	-62	-25	+39	-3
Economic impact	+15	+7	+30	-9
Foreign policy/role in the world	+24	-12	-35	-8
Impact on own party	-8	-60	+12	-72
Impact on democracy/constitution	-56	-28	+29	-28

The economy is far from the lowest rating academics give Brown. His -72 for his ‘impact on his own party’ is the lowest score for any prime minister on any area, though Major (on -60) also fares badly on this indicator. Academics are also critical of Brown’s impact on ‘democracy/the constitution’, despite his coming into office in 2007 pledging a new round of constitutional reform. His rating on this theme is the same as Major’s though relatively better than that given to Thatcher (-56).

Thatcher is the only prime minister with an overall positive score on ‘Britain’s role in the world/foreign policy’ (+24) but her score on ‘impact on society’ (-62) is the lowest of any of the four prime ministers on this indicator and the second lowest rating for any of the themes. Despite the economic problems his government faced, Major manages to be rated

positively on his 'impact on the economy' with a +7 rating. His weakest rating is the 'impact on his own party' (-60), much more harshly judged than the perceived impact of Thatcher on the Conservative party (-8).

Conclusions

When initial survey results were announced it was not surprising that Gordon Brown's low rating captured the headlines. 'Gord "3rd worst PM"' gloated *The Sun* (3 August 2010). 'Brown languishes among the bottom three of postwar premierships league' announced the *Financial Times* (2 August 2010). The *Daily Mail* (3 August 2010) pointed out that the survey meant that 'Brown is considered by experts to be the biggest prime ministerial failure for more than 45 years.' Pundits and commentators swiftly claimed that the academics taking part in the survey had got it wrong. Bernard Ingham, writing in the *Yorkshire Post* (1 September 2010), insisted that Thatcher should be in the number one slot and that the academics who voted to put Blair third in the league table 'must be out of their tiny little minds'. Blair, he argued, properly belonged in the bottom three with Brown and Eden – 'all of whom in their way corrupted Britain'. Historian Dominic Sandbrook, writing in the *Mail* (4 August 2010), argued that Churchill, Attlee and Thatcher were in a class of their own – 'the first division of modern leaders', he labelled them – and asserted that Blair simply did not measure up beside them. Craig Brown used his column in the *Mail* (5 August 2010) to argue that Callaghan was for his money 'the most disastrous prime minister of them all' and that the under-estimated Douglas-Home should have a higher place in the prime-ministerial charts.

Ben Pimlott once argued that ‘lack of distinction has been the rule, and high achievement the exception, among British prime ministers’ (*Independent on Sunday*, 4 April 1993). Dominic Sandbrook, reflecting on our survey results, agreed: ‘For every giant who walked through the famous black door [of Number 10], there have recently been all too many political pygmies . . . [S]o many of our modern prime ministers have been . . . ineffectual’ (*Daily Mail*, 4 August 2010). The best prime ministers, *The Times* political team argued in their 2010 ranking exercise, are those who ‘really swung history’, were the great war leaders, successfully handled ‘a big national crisis’, changed the country with ‘important and radical domestic achievements’, or ‘transform[ed] the political landscape, as opposed to just holding office’. Many of the post-war prime ministers, assessed by these standards, had mixed records at best, may have promised a lot but left office unfulfilled, and often faced adverse political circumstances.

Polls like ours, and the regular US presidential polls and ranking exercises, are sometimes dismissed as ‘pseudo-serious . . . fun [but] silly and pointless’ and involving much ‘absurdity’.^{xix} The ‘game’ of ranking presidents – or prime ministers – has, Tom Kynerd argued, ‘no systematic, objective or scientific basis.’^{xx} Questions can be asked about the yardsticks, the criteria and the measures of success; there will always be arguments about what constitutes greatness in political leaders. Can success or failure in office be boiled down to a simple score out of ten or a three or four-point scale (‘great’, ‘near-great’, ‘average’, ‘failure’)? Are we comparing the non-comparable? No two incumbents are ever dealt the same hand and they confront different situations, problems, constraints and opportunities. Moreover, a range of factors can feed into academic opinions and judgements about political leaders, including

differences in knowledge and information, trends in recent scholarship and fashions in interpretation, the current atmosphere, and – to some degree – partisan factors. Of the academics responding to the 2010 prime-ministerial survey who volunteered a party allegiance, 49 per cent were Labour, 17 per cent Conservative and 10 per cent Liberal-Democrat. But it would be going too far to claim that these polls reveal more about the professors, as it were, than the premiers.^{xxi}

Prime-ministerial (and presidential) rankings undoubtedly have their subjective aspects, but they are not meaningless. They tie in to judgements about what has gone wrong and what has gone right in a country's history and in its politics.^{xxii} And they provoke and stimulate reflection on the skills, qualities and abilities political leaders have – or should have. Fred Greenstein argues that there is at least as much to be learned from the failures and limitations of leaders as from their successes and strengths – there are, in that sense, positive lessons that may sometimes be taken from leaders ranked low in the ratings scale and negative lessons that can be derived from the so-called 'greats' at the top of the league tables.^{xxiii}

If David Cameron is thinking about his own historical reputation and whether he will eventually be judged as a successful prime minister – ranking high in future prime-ministerial 'league tables' - the lessons from our survey would seem to be that he must win at least another term in office (preferably with a landslide victory) and be prime minister for at least six years, that his government needs to get the economy right, that he needs to avoid controversial or unsuccessful wars, and that he must keep his party united. He will surely want more than for future academics to score him as four out of ten.

Notes

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- ⁱ Winston S. Churchill, *Great Contemporaries*, London, Odhams Press, 1947, p.116.
- ⁱⁱ Kevin Theakston, *Winston Churchill and the British Constitution*, London, Politico's, 2004, p.181.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Harold Wilson, *A Prime Minister on Prime Ministers*, London, Michael Joseph and Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1977, p.301.
- ^{iv} Margaret Thatcher, *The Path To Power*, London, HarperCollins, 1995, p.69.
- ^v Edward Heath, *The Course of My Life*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1998, pp.182, 557.
- ^{vi} Anthony Seldon, *Blair*, London, The Free Press, 2004, pp.441-2, 444-5.
- ^{vii} 'Your Favourite Prime Minister', [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/the_daily_politics/6242715.stm].
- ^{viii} 'Churchill tops PM choice', [<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/newsnight/7647383.stm>].
- ^{ix} <http://www.today.yougov.co.uk/sites/today.yougov.co.uk/files/YG-Archives-Pol-Sun-Blair-010910.pdf>
- ^x Thomas A. Bailey, *Presidential Greatness*, New York, Irvington Publishers, 1978, pp.21-2; Meena Bose and Mark Landis (eds), *The Uses and Abuses of Presidential Ratings*, New York, Nova Science Publishers, 2003, pp.9-11; James W. Endersby and Michael J. Towle, 'Perceptions of Presidential Greatness and the Flow of Evaluative Political Information: From the Elite to the Informed to the Masses', *Politics & Policy*, vol. 31, no.3, 2003, pp.383-404.
- ^{xi} *The Times*, 3 August 2005.
- ^{xii} Francis Beckett, 'Who was the best 20th century PM?', *BBC History*, vol. 7, no. 9, 2006, pp.40-3.
- ^{xiii} *The Guardian*, 22 May 2007.
- ^{xiv} <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/politics/article7116455.ece>
- ^{xv} Kevin Theakston and Mark Gill, 'Rating 20th-century British prime ministers', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, vol.8, no.2, 2006, pp.193-213.
- ^{xvi} A sample of 176 UK-based academics specializing in British politics and/or British history since 1945 was compiled using information available on the websites of 67 UK universities. Email addresses for the full list of respondents were collated and an online survey was developed. Each respondent was invited to take part through an email invitation which contained a secure personalised link to the survey website. Invitations were sent out on 9 June 2010 and the survey closed on 10 July 2010. Throughout this period attempts were made to contact all those not responding to the survey to encourage their participation. In total 106 academics completed the survey, producing a response rate of 60 per cent.
- ^{xvii} Roy Jenkins, *Gallery of 20th Century Portraits*, Newton Abbot, David & Charles, 1988, p.204.
- ^{xviii} Patrick J. Kenney and Tom W. Rice, 'The contextual determinants of presidential greatness', *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol. 18, no.1, 1988, pp.163-4.
- ^{xix} Richard Adams Blog, 'George Bush: Worst. President. Ever?', <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/richard-adams-blog/2010/jul/01/george-bush-worst-us-president> [last accessed 16.09.2010].

^{xx} Tom Kynerd, 'An analysis of presidential greatness and "president rating"', *Southern Quarterly*, vol.9, no.3, 1971, p.326.

^{xxi} Bailey, *Presidential Greatness*, p.33.

^{xxii} Bose and Landis, *The Uses and Abuses of Presidential Ratings*, p.112.

^{xxiii} Fred I. Greenstein, *The Presidential Difference: leadership style from FDR to Barack Obama*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2009, p.220; Bose and Landis, *The Uses and Abuses of Presidential Ratings*, p.99.