**The Greens in the UK general election of 8 June 2017**

Neil Cartera and Fay Madeleine Farstadb

a Department of Politics, University of York

b Department of Politics, University of Sheffield

Corresponding author email: neil.carter@york.ac.uk

The 2017 general election represented a step backwards for the Greens, after a strong performance in 2015 had seemed to establish the party as a serious (if small) electoral force. In 2015, on the back of a ‘green surge’ that saw membership soar to over 70,000, the Green Party quadrupled its votes to 1.2m (a record 3.8% of the national vote), saved an unprecedented 131 deposits, came second in four seats, and saw Caroline Lucas re-elected as its sole MP (Carter 2015). Subsequently, however, the Greens were eclipsed by the ‘Corbyn effect’ – the sharp leftward shift of the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn and his personal appeal among young voters – and drowned out by the ‘Brexit’ debate. Despite making strategic readjustments, the Greens faced an uphill struggle to match their previous performance.

**The Corbyn effect**

Due to the Party’s success in recent years in positioning itself to the left of Labour, the Greens were particularly vulnerable to the Corbyn effect. The Greens fought the 2015 election on a strong anti-austerity and redistributionist platform considerably to the left of the Labour Party; indeed the 2015 Green manifesto was in several respects considerably more left-wing than Labour’s 2017 manifesto. Although Green membership held up reasonably well after the 2015 ‘surge’ (in July 2016, membership of the *Green Party: England and Wales* was 55,500, indicating a combined membership of UK green parties of around 60,000), the Greens slipped in the polls after Corbyn’s election as Labour leader. With Corbyn running a successful and personalised campaign, it was Labour’s anti-austerity policies that received attention in 2017.

**Strategic readjustments**

In response to the Corbyn effect, the Greens made several strategic readjustments. When Natalie Bennett announced that she would not stand for re-election as leader in 2016, the party, which shifted to a single leader in 2008, decided to reintroduce co-leaders. Caroline Lucas and Jonathan Bartley were duly elected as co-leaders with 86% of the vote. Lucas, the first Green sole leader, had stood down in 2012 explaining that she could not combine the onerous roles of both party leader and MP. The reintroduction of co-leadership allowed Lucas – the party’s best-known figure and most effective media performer – to return as its official spokesperson, as she could share the organisational burden with her co-leader.

With Bennett as leader, the party experienced a bumpy ride during the 2015 election campaign, with some underwhelming media performances contributing to the Greens’ failure to exploit the unprecedented media attention to the party. The 2017 campaign saw the Greens avoid media gaffes, and Lucas was widely judged a success in the televised leadership debates and other media appearances.

The Greens also began to re-emphasise their environmental credentials. They accused the Conservative Government of dismantling several elements of climate policy (notably, slashing subsidies for onshore wind, solar energy and biomass; dropping the commitment that from 2016 all new homes would be zero carbon; and abolishing the Department for Energy and Climate Change). In particular, the Greens had strongly criticised the Conservative government’s support for fracking and had been actively involved nationally and locally in ongoing grassroots anti-fracking campaigns in Lancashire and Yorkshire. The Green 2017 manifesto differed radically from 2015, which had been an uncompromisingly left-wing ‘tax-and-spend’ 86-page tome. This time the manifesto was short (26 pages) and set out 10 promises that formed ‘The Green Guarantee’. These included protection of the environment and a greener transport policy, alongside populist proposals such as plans for a four-day working week and a universal basic income, reversing the privatisation of the NHS, scrapping student tuition fees, democratic reforms and a referendum on the final Brexit deal. The Greens clearly saw their renewed emphasis on environmental issues as a way of differentiating themselves from the Labour Party. Despite promises to ban fracking, introduce a Clean Air Act and ensure that 60% of energy comes from zero-carbon or renewable sources by 2030, the Labour manifesto said very little about the environment and made far fewer pledges than the Greens. The Greens faced stiffer competition for environmental voters from elsewhere, however. The Liberal Democrat manifesto was almost as ambitious as the Greens’ on environmental issues, with a long shopping list of promises (including a greenhouse gas emissions target of zero by 2050, a diesel scrappage scheme and a re-balancing of farming subsidies towards environmental stewardship). Nevertheless, the Greens had a clear lead on the environment: one poll in the final week of the campaign reported 47% of respondents identifying the Greens as the party best able to address environmental issues, far ahead of Labour (23%), the Liberal Democrats (9%) and the Conservatives (5%) (Opinium 2017).

However, the Greens were unable to exploit this issue ownership because of the low salience of the environment before and during the election. Despite the threat of Brexit – with fears environmental policies will be dismantled and little certainty about how British environmental governance will look post-Brexit, the party manifestos all tried to reassure the public that environmental laws will not be weakened; but only the Greens promised unequivocally to retain or enhance ‘all existing environmental laws’. Yet the Greens were unable to shift the debate onto the environmental implications of Brexit and turn it to their advantage. Although at the outset of the election campaign environmental law group Client Earth successfully used the courts to force the government to publish its strategy for ensuring air pollution standards were compliant with EU regulations in British cities, pollution levels did not become an election issue. Nor did President Trump’s decision to withdraw the USA from the Paris Agreement push climate change back up the public agenda. Polls consistently showed that only 5-7% of people identified the environment as one of the most important issues facing the country, placing it outside the top ten issues. Thus despite the Greens filling an important gap in the debate with regards to the environment and the EU, the Green voice struggled to be heard above the noise from other events.

**Strategic readjustments during the campaign**

The Prime Minister’s announcement in April that a general election would be held on 8 June took everyone by surprise. With polls indicating that May would win by a landslide to secure her ‘strong and stable’ government, the Greens were leading advocates of a ‘Progressive Alliance’ to prevent it. With a Progressive Alliance, Labour, Liberal Democrats, Greens and other minor parties would agree to stand a single candidate in marginal seats to avoid dividing the anti-Conservative vote. To this end, the Greens unilaterally announced that they would not run candidates in 24 mostly Labour-held marginal seats. Despite grassroots enthusiasm in some party circles, the Labour leadership rejected the idea outright. The Liberal Democrats agreed a handful of seat ‘swaps’, the most significant being the decision not to run a candidate against Lucas.

In the event, the Greens stood 467 candidates, compared to 573 in 2015, the reduction in the numbers being not just the result of the Greens push for a Progressive Alliance, but was also a strategic consideration in light of the party’s poor performance in opinion polls. Despite Lucas’ good media performances, the challenges facing a minor party in the British electoral system are such that when one poll [asked respondents their opinion of her](http://www.comresglobal.com/polls/independent-sunday-mirror-june-2017-voting-intention-and-political-poll/) one week before election day, 62% had no opinion at all, with 15% favourable and 23% unfavourable (ComRes 2017). It made sense to reduce the cost of the election by standing fewer candidates to reduce the numbers forfeiting their £500 deposit if they secured less than 5% of the individual constituency vote, especially as the Greens received no donations comparable with the £300,000 fashion designer Vivienne Westwood gave in 2015. The unexpected announcement of the election also made it difficult to recruit candidates to contest seats where the Greens could hope to attract no more than a few hundred votes.

**The Result**

The general election result surprised almost everyone. Rather than winning a large parliamentary majority to produce a ‘strong and stable’ government that would (supposedly) strengthen the prime minister’s position as she entered the Brexit negotiations, her decision to call a snap election rebounded on her. Corbyn confounded his critics by delivering an unexpectedly strong performance, even though Labour came second and remain a long way off winning an overall majority in Parliament. Crucially, Corbyn appears to have mobilised the youth vote, which is traditionally where the Greens have performed the strongest.

The national performance of the Greens was deeply disappointing for the party. The aggregate vote was halved to 525,435, and the share of the overall national vote fell to just 1.6%. A smaller aggregate vote might have been expected with fewer candidates, but the average vote for each Green candidate also fell. Moreover, only 11 deposits were saved – a disastrous collapse compared to 2015 – which left the party with a bill of around £228,000. However, Caroline Lucas was re-elected with an increased majority, securing 52.3% of the votes in Brighton Pavilion. Elsewhere, no Green candidate came anywhere near winning a seat, although there was some limited satisfaction with third-place performances in Bristol West (13%), Isle of Wight (17%) and Sheffield Central (8%). But with Corbyn ascendant and Brexit likely to dominate the political agenda for some time, the medium-term prospects of the Greens winning more seats in Westminster looks bleak.

**Conclusion**

The re-election of Caroline Lucas ensures the Greens will continue to have a visible presence in parliament and beyond. But with Labour resurgent and likely to remain firmly on the left for the foreseeable future, the Greens will struggle to improve their electoral prospects. Their best hope may be if the environment ascends the political agenda. There are certainly important issues that demand attention: worsening air pollution in many cities; the failure of the Government to publish its long-overdue 25-year plan for the environment; the need for more effective policies to ensure the UK meets the emissions reduction targets set out in the fifth carbon budget for the period 2028-2032; and the potential restructuring of British environmental governance post-Brexit. The appointment of Michael Gove as Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is sure to attract greater attention to environmental issues, but despite his ‘Green Brexit’ speech in July the impact is uncertain: a leading supporter of Brexit, he has demonstrated little previous interest in environmental protection. Nevertheless, in the short-term the wider challenges posed by Brexit are likely to dominate the political agenda.

One lesson for Labour is that the Green Party’s unilateral efforts to forge a progressive alliance clearly contributed to Labour’s unexpectedly strong performance. Of the 31 seats targeted by the Progressive Alliance, Labourwas successful in 22. Compass, the left-leaning think tank behind the Progressive Alliance, estimated that up to 62 additional seats could have been won had opponents of the Conservatives coalesced around a single candidate. The Greens have shown that, had Labour overcome its rejection of electoral pacts, Labour might have finished as the largest party – and it may need to do so if it is to win a majority at the next election. The good performance of Labour might in fact be the most significant outcome of the Greens’ election campaign in 2017, and demonstrates scope for future collaboration. Although Labour now seems very unlikely to offer one, some kind of pact is surely necessary if the Greens are to secure future electoral success, for, despite the strategic readjustments, the Green campaign was unable to counter either the Corbyn effect or the noise from Brexit.

**References**

Carter, N., 2015. The Greens in the UK general election of 7 May 2015. *Environmental Politics*, 24 (6), 1055-1060, doi: 10.1080/09644016.2015.1063750.

ComRes, 2017. *Independent/Sunday Mirror June 2017 Voting Intention and Political Poll.* <http://www.comresglobal.com/polls/independent-sunday-mirror-june-2017-voting-intention-and-political-poll/>

Opinium, 2017. *Final Poll*, conducted 4-6 June. <http://opinium.co.uk/political-polling-4th-june-2017/>