



Perspectives by Ruth Lea

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The statistical background to the forthcoming General Election

Introduction

In something of a departure from the usual economic subject matter of our Perspectives, this Perspective discusses the statistical background to the forthcoming General Election on 6 May 2010.

The constituencies: boundary changes and unequal sizes

There have been a considerable number of constituency boundary changes since the 2005 election which will be implemented for the 2010 election for England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Equivalent boundary changes were implemented in Scotland in time for the 2005 election and there will be no further alterations this time. Within the UK, the effects of the changes have gone some way to addressing the issue of unequal constituency sizes. But as the tables below show the situation is still far from uniform, firstly, between constituencies held by the major parties and, secondly, across the 4 countries of the UK.¹

Starting with the party bias, table 1 shows that the new constituencies would have resulted in 12 more seats for the Conservatives, 7 fewer for Labour and one less for “other” (Plaid Cymru) in the last Parliament, assuming unchanged voting patterns. But the average electorate of Conservative held seats, even with the new boundaries, is still significantly higher than for LibDem and for Labour and, especially, for seats held by other parties. If uniform constituencies could be imposed across the UK, and there would be considerable practical difficulties in achieving this precisely, the Conservatives would “gain” 9 seats from Labour (5), the LibDems (1) and “other” (3).

Table 1 Constituencies held by party, as at 1 Dec 2009

	Current boundaries (2005)	New boundaries (2010)		Number of seats if have average UK electorate (69,878)
		Number of seats (notional)	Average electorate	
Labour	356	349 (-7)	68,878	344 (-5)
Conservatives	198	210 (+12)	72,798	219 (+9)
LibDems	62	62 (0)	68,977	61 (-1)
Other	30	29 (-1)	62,699	26 (-3)
Total	646	650 (+4)	69,878	650

Source: House of Commons Library, "Electoral Statistics 2009", SN/SG/5423, April 2010. The "other" parties include Plaid Cymru, the SNP and the parties of the 18 Northern Ireland MPs.

Part of the explanation for the unequal constituency sizes reflects the fact that population data used for updating the constituencies were taken from the now very out-of-date 2001 Census of Population. Since 2001 there have been net population movements from inner cities, which tend to Labour strongholds, to the suburbs and beyond, which are more likely to be Conservative areas. This weakness should be addressed as soon as the 2011 Census data are available.

Turning to the average constituency sizes across the 4 countries of the UK, England is under-represented and Scotland (despite the changes in 2005), Northern Ireland and, especially, Wales are over-represented. These patterns of under/over-representation are correlated with constituencies held by the parties. Wales and Scotland, for example, have few Tory seats. If the constituencies across the 4 countries of the UK were made uniform then England would gain 13 seats from Scotland (4), Wales (8) and Northern Ireland (1). The position of Wales is particularly anomalous.

Table 2 Constituencies by country, as at 1 Dec 2009

	Current constituencies		New boundaries (notional)		Number of seats if have average UK electorate (69,878)
	Number of seats	Average electorate	Number of seats	Average electorate	
England	529	72,078	533	71,537	546 (13)
Scotland	59	65,588	59	65,588	55 (-4)
Wales	40	56,532	40	56,532	32 (-8)
Northern Ireland	18	64,487	18	64,487	17 (-1)
Total	646	70,311	650	69,878	650

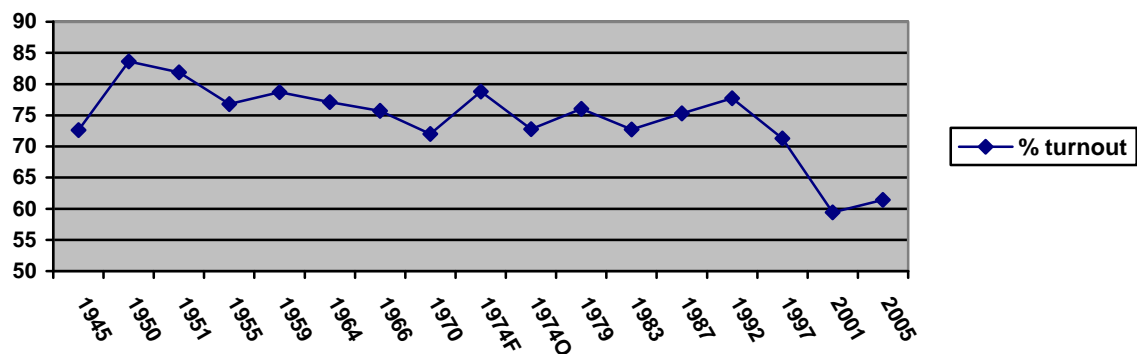
Source: House of Commons Library, "Electoral Statistics 2009", SN/SG/5423, April 2010.

Political bias: further observations

The unequal constituency sizes clearly go some way to explaining the pro-Labour party bias in the electoral system.²

There is also the issue of turnout. Conservative votes are converted less “efficiently” into seats. They pile up big majorities in safe seats, whereas Labour wins seats on lower turnouts. A low turnout is, however, a double-edged sword for the Labour party. This is especially the case in the Labour-held marginals where the electoral “battleground” will be fought and where the Labour party will need maximum support if they are to hold the seats. The following chart shows how turnout dropped significantly in 2001 and remained low in 2005.

Chart 1 Turnout (%), 1945 to 2005 General Elections



Source: Politics Resources, www.politicsresources.net. There were 2 elections in 1974 – in February and October.

Another factor operating against the Conservatives has, arguably, been “tactical” voting by Labour and LibDem supporters in order to keep out the Conservative candidate. Polling evidence shows that LibDems have a preference for Labour over the Conservatives.³

There is, of course, a bias in the electoral system against the LibDems because the First Past the Post electoral system operates against them. In 2005 Labour emerged with one MP for each 27,000 votes cast, whilst the equivalent figures were 44,000 and 97,000 for the Conservatives and LibDems respectively.⁴

The pre-election House of Commons and swings required for certain outcomes

Table 3 shows that the Labour party had an actual overall majority of 66 in the Commons on current constituency boundaries. But on the changed boundaries the overall majority would have fallen to 48.

Table 3 Notional composition of pre-election House of Commons, allowing for boundary changes

Party	Actual seats	Notional seats	Difference
Labour	356	349	-7
Conservative (including the Speaker)	198	210	+12
Liberal Democrat	62	62	0
Plaid Cymru	3	2	-1
SNP	6	6	0
Northern Ireland	18	18	0
Other	3	3	0
Total seats	646	650	+4
Seats for overall majority	324	326	+2
Labour overall majority	66	48	-18
Labour majority over Conservative	158	139	-19

Source: Colin Rallings & Michael Thrasher, *British electoral facts, 1832-2006*, Ashgate, 2007.

The table also shows the Conservatives would have had a notional 210 seats. Given 650 seats in the new Commons, they will need to gain an extra 116 seats in order to reach the crucial figure of 326 seats in order to gain an overall majority. This would give them an overall majority of just 2 - 324 seats being gained by the other parties. Assuming the outgoing (Conservative) Speaker is returned, the overall majority would drop to 1.⁵

As shown in table 4, the Conservatives will need a “swing” of 6.9% from Labour in order to gain these crucial 116 seats, assuming a uniform swing. This means that, out of every 100 people who voted last time, an “average” of 6.9 must change from Labour to the Conservative party.^{6,7} This is challenging. Indeed the Conservatives need a swing from Labour of 4.3% just to be the largest party.

Table 4 Turnover of seats and swing required for various outcomes, compared with 2005 election

To produce:	Seats	Swing, from Lab to Con (%)	Con lead over Lab (%)	Key seat
Labour majority of 20	Lab lose 14	1.0	-1	Chester
Labour loss of overall majority	Lab lose 24	1.6	0	Milton Keynes
Conservatives as largest party	Con gain 72	4.3	5½	Hammersmith
Conservatives overall majority (326 seats out of 650)	Con gain 116	6.9	11	Kingswood
Conservative majority of 50	Con gain 140	8.3	13	Chorley

Sources: (i) House of Commons Research Paper, "2010 General Election: new constituencies, seats and swing", SN/SG/5280; (ii) Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher, "Nobody has achieved what Cameron must do" *Sunday Times*, 11 April 2010.

Required leads in the polls

In 2005 Labour polled 36.1% of the vote, the Tories 33.2% and the LibDems 22.6%. The Labour share of the vote was therefore just 2.9% ahead of the Tory share.

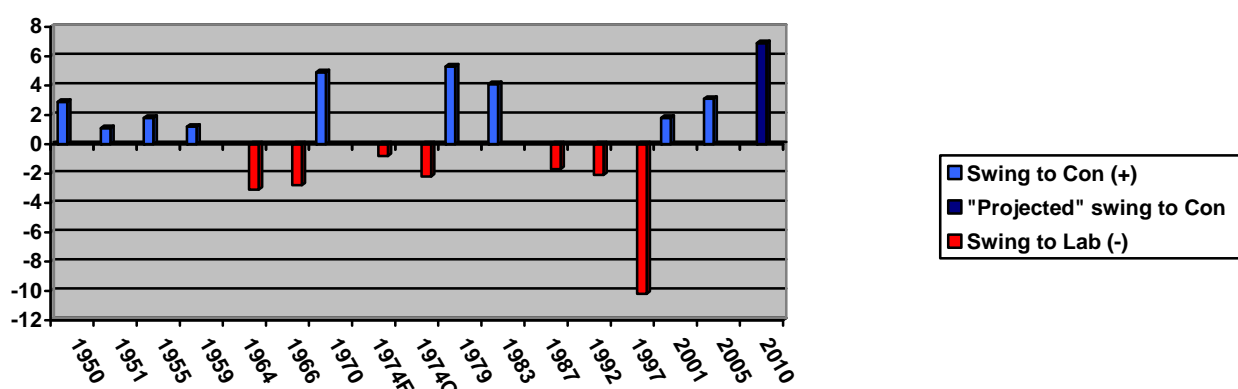
If the Labour share is reduced by 6.9%, they would poll 29.2% of the vote and if the Tory share is increased by 6.9%, they would poll 40.1% of the vote. This equates to a required lead of nearly 11%, assuming uniform swings, in order to achieve an overall majority. It is somewhat higher than the 7% (or so) currently shown by opinion polls.

In order to be the largest party, the Tories have to be over 5½% ahead of Labour. In this set of circumstances Labour would poll about 31.8% of the vote and the Tories would poll about 37.5%. Table1 and chart 1 in the annex provide historical data on voting shares.

"A mountain to climb"

The Conservatives are faced with a very considerable challenge if they are to gain an overall majority. It is, statistically, "a mountain to climb". When Margaret Thatcher won a very comfortable victory over the Labour party in 1979, she achieved a swing of 5.3%. This was impressive by historical standards but still less than the 6.9% needed by David Cameron. Tony Blair's 10.2% swing in 1997 was unprecedented and unlikely to be replicated.

Chart 2 Swing to Conservative from Labour (%), 1950 to 2005 General Elections, GB only



Source: Colin Rallings & Michael Thrasher, *British electoral facts, 1832-2006*, Ashgate, 2007.

NB: Negative swings from Conservative to Labour are shown in red as swings to Labour. The “projected” swing is the swing required for the Conservatives to form an overall majority.

But there are qualifications. We have assumed so far that the “swings” are assumed to be uniform. This may not be the case, especially in the Conservatives’ “target” seats” - the “marginals”. According to Peter Kellner, YouGov, Populus and Ipsos Mori have all found swings to the Tories of up to 2 percentage points higher than the national average in Labour-held marginals in recent weeks. Kellner argues that if this pattern were to be repeated on polling day, then this would offset some of the pro-Labour bias. And his “guesstimate” is that the Tories will need a lead of just 3-4 percentage points in the popular vote to become the largest party and a lead of just 7-8 percentage points to secure an overall majority.⁸ If current polls are accurate and replicated on polling day the Conservatives would achieve an overall majority.

There is also the matter of the “fringe parties”, including UKIP, BNP, and the Green Party, which may make progress at this election. Their impact on the overall result is especially difficult to judge.

Finally, some commentators are suggesting that the Tories’ lead will be whittled away before the election-day because there will be a “traditional” swing back to the government as election-day approaches. This is unlikely to happen. Indeed the “tradition” is something of a myth. The best “remembered” example, 1992, is deceptive. Retrospective analysis concluded the polls were wrong throughout the campaign.

A hung parliament?

There has to be the possibility of a hung parliament after the May election, where no party achieves an overall majority. There are few precedents in British parliamentary history. The most recent was in February 1974 when the Labour party gained the most seats, without achieving an overall majority, and formed a minority government. They went to the country again in October 1974, when they achieved an overall majority of just three.⁹ It struggled through crises, partly supported by the Liberals under the Lib-Lab Pact. It is not a happy precedent. We will discuss the implications of a hung Parliament further in the next Perspective.

References

1. House of Commons Library, "Electoral Statistics 2009", SN/SG/5423, April 2010.
2. Tim Bale, "Swings, seats and the science of psephology", *FT*, 9 April 2010, reported that the Conservatives needed a lead of at least 5 percentage points to offset the electoral system's pro-Labour bias.
3. Economist, "They're off!", 10 April 2010
4. Economist, "Room at the top", 10 April 2010.
5. Conventionally, the Speaker remains non-partisan, and renounces all affiliation with his former political party when taking office. The Speaker does not take part in debate nor vote (except to break ties, and even then, subject to conventions that maintain his or her non-partisan status), although the Speaker is still able to speak.
6. House of Commons library, "Electoral swing", SN/SG/2608, 2003. The "swing" from Party A (say Labour) to Party B (Conservative) is the average of the percentage point fall in Party A's share of the vote and the percentage point rise in Party B's. This is the conventional definition of 2-party swing. Alternatively put, a 1% swing from one party to another involves adding 1% point of votes to one party and subtracting 1% point of votes from the other.
7. DIY "swingometers" are available: (i) from the Polling Report, www.ukpollingreport.co.uk/blog/swing-calculator and (ii) from the BBC, www.bbc.co.uk
8. Peter Kellner, "Watching every punch, gaffe and mood swing", *Sunday Times*, 11 April 2010.
9. See table 3 and chart 2 in the annex for back-up historical data on Britain's General Election results.

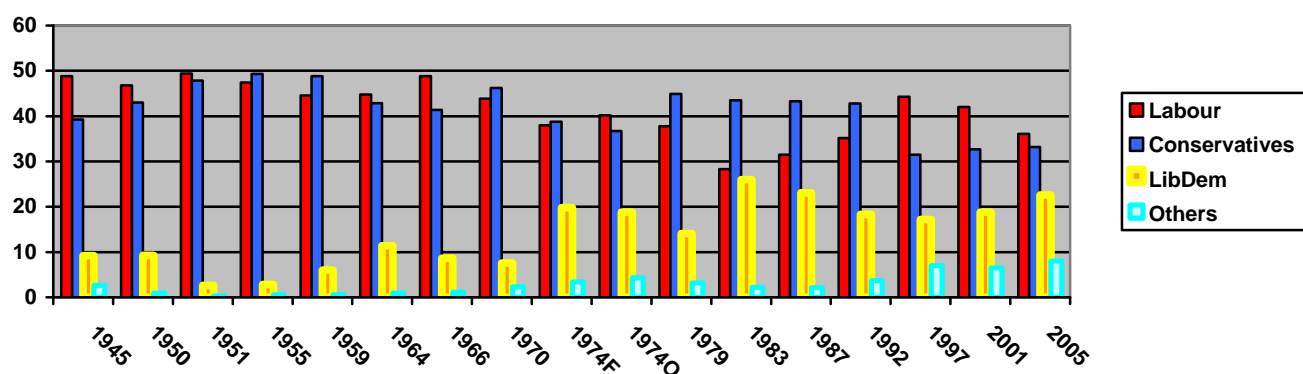
Annex

Table 1: Share of the vote (GB data)

	Conservative	Labour	Con lead over Lab
Jul 1945	39.3	48.8	-9.5
Feb 1950	43.0	46.8	-3.8
Oct 1951	47.8	49.4	-1.6
May 1955	49.3	47.4	1.9
Oct 1959	48.8	44.6	4.2
Oct 1964	42.9	44.8	-1.9
Mar 1966	41.4	48.8	-7.4
Jun 1970	46.2	43.9	2.3
Feb 1974	38.8	38.0	0.8
Oct 1974	36.7	40.2	-3.5
May 1979	44.9	37.8	7.1
Jun 1983	43.5	28.3	15.2
Jun 1987	43.3	31.5	11.8
Apr 1992	42.8	35.2	7.6
May 1997	31.5	44.3	-12.8
Jun 2001	32.7	42.0	-9.3
May 2005	33.2	36.1	-2.9
May 2010: illustrative data:			
For Lab to lose overall majority (swing 1.6%)	[33.2 + 1.6 = 34.8]	[36.1 - 1.6 = 34.5]	[0.3]
For Con as largest party (swing 4.3%)	[33.2 + 4.3 = 37.5]	[36.1 - 4.3 = 31.8]	[5.7]
For Con overall majority (swing 6.9%)	[33.2 + 6.9 = 40.1]	[36.1 - 6.9 = 29.2]	[10.9]

Source: Colin Rallings & Michael Thrasher, *British electoral facts, 1832-2006*, Ashgate, 2007.
 NB: The swings for May 2010 are shown as symmetrical for illustration only. They are most unlikely to be symmetrical.

Chart 1: Share of votes (%), 1945 to 2005 General Elections, GB only



Source: Colin Rallings & Michael Thrasher, *British electoral facts, 1832-2006*, Ashgate, 2007.
 NB Data are for the LibDems from 1992; the Liberal party for 1945-1979; and the Liberal-SDP Alliance for 1983 and 1987.

Table 2 Polling data: changes in share and swings, GB data

Changes between elections	A: Con change in share (%)	B. Lab change in share (%)	C=A-B	D=C/2: swing to Con from Lab (%)
1945-50	3.7	-2.0	5.7	2.9
1950-51	4.8	2.6	2.2	1.1
1951-55	1.5	-2.0	3.5	1.8
1955-59	-0.5	-2.8	2.5	1.2
1959-64	-5.9	0.2	-6.1	-3.1
1964-66	-1.5	4.0	-5.5	-2.8
1966-70	4.8	-4.9	9.7	4.9
1970-74Feb	-7.4	-5.9	-1.5	-0.8
1974F-74Oct	-2.1	2.2	-4.3	-2.2
1974O-79	8.2	-2.4	10.6	5.3
1979-83	-1.4	-9.5	8.1	4.1
1983-87	-0.2	3.2	-3.4	-1.7
1987-92	-0.5	3.7	-4.2	-2.1
1992-97	-11.3	9.1	-20.4	-10.2
1997-2001	1.2	-2.4	3.6	1.8
2001-05	0.5	-5.8	6.3	3.1
2005-10: illustrative data:				
For Lab to lose overall majority	[1.6]	[- 1.6]	[3.2]	[1.6]
For Con as largest party	[4.3]	[- 4.3]	[8.6]	[4.3]
For Con overall majority	[6.9]	[- 6.9]	[13.8]	[6.9]

Source: Colin Rallings & Michael Thrasher, *British electoral facts, 1832-2006*, Ashgate, 2007.

NB: The changes in share for May 2010 are shown as symmetrical for illustration only. They are most unlikely to be symmetrical.

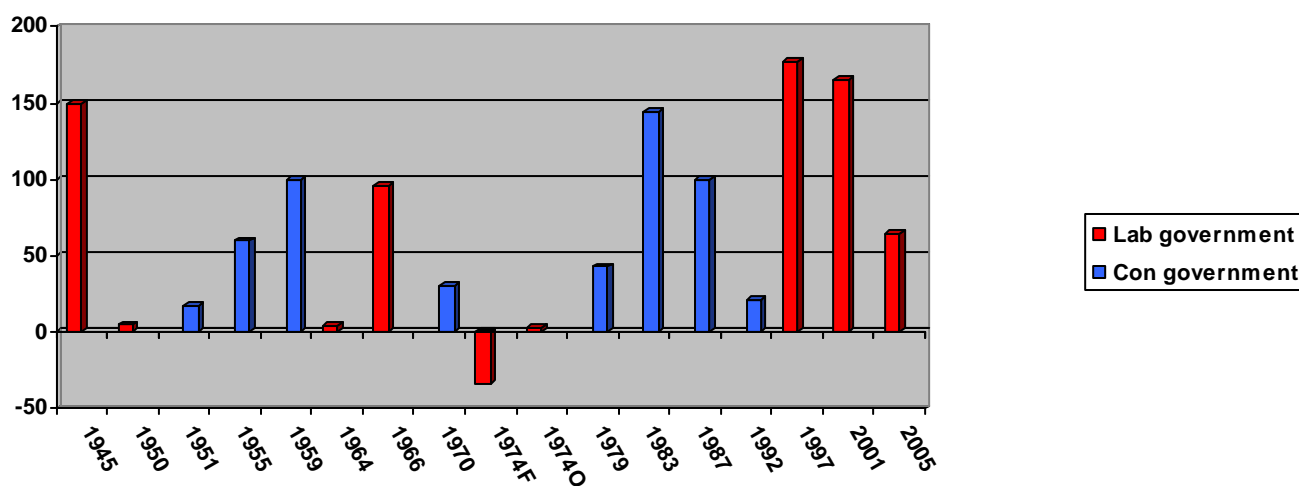
Table 3 General Election results since 1945

	Government	Number of seats	Winning party	Other parties	Overall majority	Turnout (%)	PM
Jul 1945	Lab	640	395	245	150	72.6%	Atlee
Feb 1950	Lab	625	315	310	5	83.6%	Atlee
Oct 1951	Con	625	321	304	17	81.9%	Churchill
May 1955	Con	630	345	285	60	76.8%	
Oct 1959	Con	630	365	265	100	78.7%	Eden; Macmillan
Oct 1964	Lab	630	317	313	4	77.1%	Wilson
Mar 1966	Lab	630	363	267	96	75.7%	Wilson
Jun 1970	Con	630	330	300	30	72.0%	Heath
Feb 1974	Lab	635	301	334	-33	78.8%	Wilson
Oct	Lab	635	319	316	3	72.8%	Wilson;

1974							Callaghan
May 1979	Con	635	339	296	43	76.0%	Thatcher
Jun 1983	Con	650	397	253	144	72.7%	Thatcher
Jun 1987	Con	650	375	275	100	75.3%	Thatcher; Major
Apr 1992	Con	651	336	315	21	77.7%	Major
May 1997	Lab	659	418	241	177	71.3%	Blair
Jun 2001	Lab	659	412	247	165	59.4%	Blair
May 2005	Lab	646	355	291	64	61.4%	Blair; Brown
May 2010	Na	650	Na	Na	Na	Na	Na

Source: Politics Resources, www.politicsresources.net.

Chart 2 Overall majorities, 1945 to 2005 General Elections



Source: Politics Resources, www.politicsresources.net.

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