What will be left? Labour’s parliamentary representation after the 8th of June

Charlie Cady would
May 2017
About the Author

Charlie is a researcher at Policy Network, leading its work on the future of the left. Prior to joining Policy Network, he authored numerous reports on social and economic policy, as well as various analyses of public opinion and voting behaviour. Charlie holds a BA in Social and Political Sciences from the University of Cambridge and an MSc in Public Policy from University College London. He has written leaders for The Times, and has also been published in The Spectator, New Statesman, City AM and Evening Standard.
Introduction

Even after the big political surprises of 2016, few political commentators are suggesting the June election is anything other than a foregone conclusion. The stories have already been written: Tory gains at the expense of Labour, helped in no small measure by the collapse of UKIP; a Lib Dem revival of sorts; continued SNP dominance in Scotland (with the Conservatives cementing their place as the main unionist force); and a drubbing for Her Majesty’s Opposition.

The question therefore turns to what such an outcome means for British politics, and for the left in particular, after June 8th. What state will the Labour party be in? Will it still be the best vehicle for progressive politics? In recent years, the Labour party has debated internally what it is that it stands for, effectively rehashing the ‘Clause Four’ debate.

After June, we could well need a ‘Clause One’ debate: can Labour still ‘organise and maintain in Parliament and in the country’ – the whole country – a political Labour party? Can it still, in any meaningful sense, give effect to the principles it stands for at a national level?

Part of the answer will be determined by who continues to represent the party in parliament, where it has representation in the country, and ultimately who controls it going forward. This paper examines what the composition of the Parliamentary Labour Party might be after the election, based on a number of hypothetical defeat scenarios. Of course, the exact composition will depend on local as well as national factors, turnout, and swings to and from minor parties as well as between Labour and the Conservatives, but it is worth examining these various hypothetical scenarios to consider what might happen for two reasons. First, as an added dimension to considerations of where progressives should prioritise resources in the run-up to the election; and second, to begin planning for the immense challenge of rebuilding a progressive majority that will present itself in the event of a landslide defeat.

Method

This paper shows how the Parliamentary Labour Party would change in four different scenarios. The first three, whose results are shown together, involve Labour losing 20, 50 and 100 of its most vulnerable seats, measured in terms of raw vote majority, calculated from the 2015 election results. In 2015, Labour won a total of 232 seats. However, its representation since then has been cut to 229 due to a by-election defeat (Copeland), a suspension (Rochdale) and a recent death (Manchester Gorton).\(^2\) The fourth scenario is based on two opinion polls released at the time of research: an ICM poll of British adults and a Panelbase poll of Scottish adults, both conducted between 18-21 April 2017.\(^3\) This is more sophisticated, incorporating national swings between various parties. Here Labour loses 66 seats compared to its 2015 total, but they are not necessarily among the 66 seats with the smallest raw majorities. For example, Angela Smith’s seat of Penistone and Stocksbridge falls to the Conservatives here, despite having only the 77th smallest Labour majority.

Seat losses in the four scenarios are mapped across six different variables:

- MP’s support for Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the Labour party (pro, anti, unknown)
- MP’s gender\(^4\)
- MP’s ethnicity\(^5\)
- Constituency’s region
- Constituency’s geographic profile (urban-rural category, England only)\(^6\)
- Constituency’s deprivation profile (Indices of multiple deprivation, England only)\(^7\)
Categorising MPs as either supportive of or opposed to Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership involves a degree of personal judgement. The method employed in this paper is as follows:

- All MPs who nominated Owen Smith in the 2016 leadership challenge are categorised as anti-Corbyn. This is the majority (162) of the PLP. 8
- Of the remaining MPs, the 19 MPs listed as ‘core group’ in the list of Labour MPs allegedly prepared by Corbyn’s allies, and leaked to the press in March 2016 are categorised as pro-Corbyn. 9
- Of the remaining MPs, all listed as ‘hostile group’ or ‘core group negative’ in the 2016 leaked list are categorised as anti-Corbyn.
- Of the remaining MPs, any who had nominated Liz Kendall in the 2015 leadership election are categorised as anti-Corbyn.
- Of the remaining MPs, any who have made public anti-Corbyn comments since the EU referendum (including as part of shadow ministerial resignations) are categorised as anti-Corbyn.
- Of the remaining MPs, any who have made public pro-Corbyn comments since the EU referendum are categorised as pro-Corbyn.
- Of the remaining MPs, any who have served as a Shadow Minister or PPS in 2017 are categorised as pro-Corbyn.
- All remaining MPs (9) are categorised as ‘unknown’.
- All MPs who had announced they were standing down at the time of research (14) are categorised as such.
- Where a by-election has taken place, any information on the previous holder of the seat is discounted in this process.

What will the Parliamentary Labour Party look like?

The Worse Labour does, the stronger the Corbynites become

Of the 229 sitting Labour MPs, 31 are categorised as pro-Corbyn, 175 as anti-Corbyn and 9 as unknown, with 14 standing down. As shown in the graph below, anti-Corbyn MPs are likely to suffer disproportionate losses in the event that Labour underperforms its 2015 performance, and this is particularly acute in the event of a landslide.

If Labour loses 20 seats overall, 6 percent of all pro-Corbyn MPs lose their seats, while 9 percent of anti-Corbyn MPs lose theirs. If Labour loses 50 seats compared to 2015, the anti-Corbyn representation is reduced by 23 percent, while the pro-Corbyn representation is reduced by just 10 percent.

The difference is even starker if Labour loses 100 seats. Only half (53 percent) of anti-Corbyn MPs would hold onto their seats, compared to three quarters (77 percent) of pro-Corbyn MPs. In a scenario where Jeremy Corbyn stood down after the election and a ‘continuity’ candidate were to put themselves forward, if we assume that pro-Corbyn MPs would be willing to nominate them and anti-Corbyn MPs would not, the 15 percent threshold for pro-Corbyn MPs (and MEPs) is reached when Labour loses its 50th most vulnerable seat, or 52nd if it is assumed that Labour regains its representation in Manchester Gorton and Rochdale. 10
In the final scenario, based on the state of all parties in the latest opinion polls, and where Labour loses 66 seats compared to 2015, pro-Corbyn MPs lose just 5 of their 31 seats (16 percent), while anti-Corbyn MPs lose 53 out of 175 (30 percent).

**Graph 1: Number of MPs by support for Corbyn, various scenarios**

![Graph 1: Number of MPs by support for Corbyn, various scenarios](image)

**Graph 2: Number of MPs by support for Corbyn, based on ICM + Panelbase polls**

![Graph 2: Number of MPs by support for Corbyn, based on ICM + Panelbase polls](image)

Labour’s support is already heavily concentrated in certain parts of the country, which has historically helped it to gain parliamentary representation under the first past the post electoral system. This regional concentration is set to become even more acute in the event of a significant electoral defeat. Today, one in five (45) Labour MPs represent a London seat, with a further one in five (48) representing the North West of England. It holds just four seats in the South of England outside of London, just four in the East of England, and one in Scotland following the 2015 collapse of Scottish Labour.
In the event of a landslide defeat where Labour loses its 100 most vulnerable seats compared to its 2015 total, Labour holds on to 33 of its 45 London representation, which would then account for a quarter of the entire PLP. It would have just one MP elsewhere in the South of England, one in the East of England and none in Scotland. The biggest collapse, though would be in the West Midlands, where Labour would lose 17 of its 25 seats.

Graph 3: Labour representation in each region as a percentage of the total PLP, various scenarios

Graph 4: Labour seats in each region, current representation and projections based on ICM + Panelbase polls

Pushed back to an urban core

Labour’s representation has already become more concentrated in urban areas since the peak of its support in 1997. The party holds just 8 seats in majority rural English constituencies. By contrast, 60 percent of its current representation is in major conurbations. In the event of a landslide defeat, this could rise to 68 percent, as Labour holds on to its urban representation and loses its more marginal seats in towns and more rural areas. The biggest likely losses are seen in seats which combine towns and rural areas, as shown in the ICM and Panelbase poll projections.
Pushed out of ‘Middle England’

It is often said that British elections are won and lost in ‘middle England’ – with middle income voters in suburbs and towns. Ed Miliband’s ‘squeezed middle’ narrative was an appeal to this group, but it largely failed to cut through at the 2015 General Election. In the event of a significant electoral defeat, Labour’s representation will increasingly be confined to constituencies with the highest levels of deprivation.
If Labour were to lose its 100 most vulnerable seats, it would retain 72 percent of its representation in the most deprived fifth of English constituencies, which would then make up more than half of all Labour representation in the House of Commons. However, it would lose more than 80 percent of its representation in constituencies with lower than average levels of deprivation (from 21 down to 4). On current poll projections, Labour will lose 15 out of 21 seats it currently holds in less deprived (than average) constituencies, while holding all but six of the 51 seats it holds in the most deprived 10 percent of constituencies.

Graph 7: English Labour seats by deprivation level, percent retained in various scenarios

Graph 8: English Labour seats by deprivation decile, current representation and projections based on ICM + Panelbase polls

Less impact on gender and ethnicity balance

In contrast to the other variables considered in this paper, female and ethnic minority representation does not change significantly in the scenarios analysed. Labour women do not hold seats in disproportionately safe or marginal seats, so whether Labour loses 20, 50 or 100 seats,
Female representation remains steady at around 45 percent of the PLP. In fact, due to all women shortlists it is possible that female representation could rise in relative terms, as under the expedited NEC controlled process that has been adopted for the snap election, female MPs standing down are in the main to be replaced by female candidates, while the rules have allowed for male MPs to be replaced by candidates of any gender. On current poll projections, Labour could lose 29 (29 percent) of its 101 female MPs, and 36 (28 percent) of its 128 male MPs.

**Graph 9: Number of Labour MPs by gender, various scenarios**

![Graph showing number of Labour MPs by gender with different scenarios](image)

Ethnic minority representation is actually projected to rise in relative terms in the event of a significant Labour defeat. For example, if Labour loses its 100 most vulnerable seats, while 16 out of the 23 seats (80 percent) currently held by Labour MPs from ethnic minority backgrounds would be retained, just 114 of the 206 (71 percent) white MPs would retain their seats. BME representation would rise from 10 to 12 percent of the PLP as a whole. According to current polls, Labour is projected to lose 3 (13 percent) of its 23 ethnic minority MPs, but 62 (30 percent) of its 206 white MPs.

**Graph 10: Number of Labour MPs by ethnicity, various scenarios**

![Graph showing number of Labour MPs by ethnicity with different scenarios](image)
Conclusion - what sort of PLP will be left?

Any analysis of this kind in a fast-moving political context immediately before a general election must rely on a number of assumptions, not all of which will prove to be the case in hindsight. If the polls are right, however, Labour faces an immense challenge just to tread water in electoral terms. If, as every single opinion poll of the 2017 thus far has predicted, the party under Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership does suffer a landslide defeat on the 8th June, it is likely to be his more moderate parliamentary colleagues that will suffer most at the ballot box.

In a double whammy for Labour moderates, this would make it easier for Corbyn supporters to get their candidate onto the ballot paper in any future leadership election. The worse Labour does, the stronger the Corbymites are likely to become. In the event that Jeremy Corbyn stood down following an election defeat, leadership candidates would require nominations of at least 15 percent of the PLP and EPLP to get onto the ballot. As pro-Corbyn MPs tend to be in safer seats than more moderate Labour MPs, the worse Labour does nationally, the higher the likelihood that the Corbymites would be able to get their candidate on the ballot. They hold are likely to retain a greater proportion of their seats than moderates as the number of MPs required to reach 15 percent diminishes as the PLP shrinks.

Equally importantly, Labour’s claim to be a party for the whole United Kingdom is at risk. After this election, Labour could end up with representation largely limited to London and major city conurbations in the North of England. It faces a near wipe out in middle England and risks ending up an endangered species in towns across Britain.

These findings may serve as a wakeup call for progressives who, angry at Labour’s stance on Brexit and sceptical of Corbyn’s viability as a potential prime minister, are considering sitting this election out or registering a protest vote in the face of a seemingly inevitable Conservative majority.

Progressive politics will be best equipped to rebuild and hold the Conservatives to account if Labour holds onto seats outside its core areas of support, and retains strong MPs reflective of a range of different types of voters.
Of these, only Copeland is a vulnerable seat. Thus, the results show Labour losing 20, 50 and 100 seats from its 2015 position, but 20, 49 and 99 from its pre-election position. Seat predictions are made using Martin Baxter’s Electoral Calculus website. GB vote shares are: Con 48% Lab 26% LD 10% UKIP 8% Green 3% SNP 4.3% Plaid 0.6%, giving a Conservative majority of 170.

Seat predictions are made using Martin Baxter’s Electoral Calculus website. GB vote shares are: Con 48% Lab 26% LD 10% UKIP 8% Green 3% SNP 4.3% Plaid 0.6%, giving a Conservative majority of 170.

Of these, only Copeland is a vulnerable seat. Thus, the results show Labour losing 20, 50 and 100 seats from its 2015 position, but 20, 49 and 99 from its pre-election position. Seat predictions are made using Martin Baxter’s Electoral Calculus website. GB vote shares are: Con 48% Lab 26% LD 10% UKIP 8% Green 3% SNP 4.3% Plaid 0.6%, giving a Conservative majority of 170.

Seat predictions are made using Martin Baxter’s Electoral Calculus website. GB vote shares are: Con 48% Lab 26% LD 10% UKIP 8% Green 3% SNP 4.3% Plaid 0.6%, giving a Conservative majority of 170.

Seat predictions are made using Martin Baxter’s Electoral Calculus website. GB vote shares are: Con 48% Lab 26% LD 10% UKIP 8% Green 3% SNP 4.3% Plaid 0.6%, giving a Conservative majority of 170.

Seat predictions are made using Martin Baxter’s Electoral Calculus website. GB vote shares are: Con 48% Lab 26% LD 10% UKIP 8% Green 3% SNP 4.3% Plaid 0.6%, giving a Conservative majority of 170.

Seat predictions are made using Martin Baxter’s Electoral Calculus website. GB vote shares are: Con 48% Lab 26% LD 10% UKIP 8% Green 3% SNP 4.3% Plaid 0.6%, giving a Conservative majority of 170.

Seat predictions are made using Martin Baxter’s Electoral Calculus website. GB vote shares are: Con 48% Lab 26% LD 10% UKIP 8% Green 3% SNP 4.3% Plaid 0.6%, giving a Conservative majority of 170.

Seat predictions are made using Martin Baxter’s Electoral Calculus website. GB vote shares are: Con 48% Lab 26% LD 10% UKIP 8% Green 3% SNP 4.3% Plaid 0.6%, giving a Conservative majority of 170.

Seat predictions are made using Martin Baxter’s Electoral Calculus website. GB vote shares are: Con 48% Lab 26% LD 10% UKIP 8% Green 3% SNP 4.3% Plaid 0.6%, giving a Conservative majority of 170.

Seat predictions are made using Martin Baxter’s Electoral Calculus website. GB vote shares are: Con 48% Lab 26% LD 10% UKIP 8% Green 3% SNP 4.3% Plaid 0.6%, giving a Conservative majority of 170.

Seat predictions are made using Martin Baxter’s Electoral Calculus website. GB vote shares are: Con 48% Lab 26% LD 10% UKIP 8% Green 3% SNP 4.3% Plaid 0.6%, giving a Conservative majority of 170.