

Book Review: Britain At The Polls 2010

Natalie Dzerins reviews an extremely helpful guide to analysing the public mood during the election campaign.

Britain At The Polls 2010. Nicholas Allen and John Bartle. [Sage Publishing](#). November 2010.

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Britain At The Polls 2010 is the latest in the long running and well respected series of books which has covered general elections in Britain since February 1974. This edition carries a stellar cast of contributors from the world of political academia, including new editors [Nicholas Allen](#) (Lecturer in Politics at Royal Holloway) and [John Bartle](#) (Senior Lecturer in Government at the University of Essex), along with 14 others.

This edition opens with a recap of Labour's third term in office (2005-2010) and examines the role and legacy of both Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. This chapter examines what went wrong during Labour's third term and how things got worse, resulting in Brown losing the possibility of Labour's fourth term. It is easily accessible without ever feeling particularly 'dumbed down', setting the tone (and scene) very nicely for the rest of the book. The second chapter follows the Conservative party, analysing their failings at past elections and what David Cameron got right (and wrong) in the run up to the general election in 2010. The third chapter follows the Liberal Democrats' journey to the election. Almost fittingly, this is the least strong of the chapters on the three main parties, and sadly, the conclusion is already out of date – considering the adoption of the Alternative Vote electoral system was the Liberal Democrats' only saving grace after joining the Conservatives in a coalition.

The next five chapters follow other factors which helped to influence and explain the outcome of the election. The first essay of this section is devoted to the financial crisis and recession, going back to the times of Thatcher to discover how they came about, and concludes by arguing that policy-makers were left without a convincing solution to the problem of creating an economy capable of generating sustainable employment, especially in the private sector. This is a convincing chapter, but one which can at times seem very biased against financial institutions, and suffers from seeming to largely ignore the global causes of recession.

The fifth and sixth chapters of the book look at the changing relationship between parties and voters (using the expenses scandal as evidence), and the change in attitudes towards left/right politics and how the parties responded to those changes, respectively. These chapters offer interesting theories and insights into how parties must continually evolve to reflect the changing views and expectations of the electorate between elections.

Another chapter charts Britain's late coming to the era of televised debates between Prime Ministerial candidates and offers a detailed analysis of what occurred during them. I found this the easiest to follow and most enjoyable of the essays. It is an extremely helpful guide to analysing the public mood and a valuable aid with regards to giving the reader a feel of the prevailing moods during the election campaign.

Allen and Bartle also deal with how the local campaigns influenced the results at the election, the outline of the Conservative party's strategy being particularly enlightening. The book ends with an essay about the current coalition government, detailing the negotiations that led to its formation, analysing how it has performed so far, and how Labour have performed as an opposition party.

To conclude, this is a cohesive, accessible and overall enjoyable book. The problems I found with it are minor, and hugely overwhelmed by the delight to be found within. So many collections of essays can be either biased or disjointed, but this seems to strike the perfect balance, being both representative and managing to present a conjoined approach to the subject. As Speaker John Bercow says in the preface, "this book is ... an intellectual feast for anyone with the slightest enthusiasm for the operation of British Politics".

Natalie Dzerins is a law graduate who blogs about feminism and current affairs.



