

More than just 'dreamers' and 'students': where did Labour's support come from in 2017?



To explain the result of the 2017 general election for Labour, [Peter Dorey](#) examines the scale of the party's support not only among younger voters, but also among professions in different socioeconomic categories. The analysis yields some surprising findings.

It is very rare that a general election which did not result in a change of government can still be described as astonishing, extraordinary, even a political earthquake. Yet these seem wholly apt adjectives to characterise the 2017 election, when the Conservative Government lost its narrow parliamentary majority, and the Labour Party won 36 seats (albeit losing 6, so a net gain of 30), it gained an additional 3.5 million votes, it increased its share of the national vote to 40%, and won previously rock-solid, true-blue, Conservative seats such as Canterbury, and Kensington and Chelsea.

The result was a shock because for the previous 21 months, Jeremy Corbyn's leadership had been mired in relentless criticism and controversy, concerning his Left-wing policies – if Ed Miliband had been deemed too Left-wing in 2015, how on earth was Labour supposed to do better on a far more radical programme in 2017? – as well as his apparent lack of leadership skills. Certainly, the management of the Parliamentary Labour Party often seemed chaotic and shambolic under Corbyn's leadership.

As such, Labour was widely expected – not least by many distraught and despairing Labour MPs, some of whom decided to stand-down altogether – to face a meltdown in the 2017 election. Such expectations or fears were underpinned by a plethora of opinion polls which predicted that the Conservatives were on course for a landslide comparable to those achieved under Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s.

Thus it was when the BBC announced the result of the customary Exit Poll that there was widespread incredulity at the scale of Labour's electoral recovery. Of course, the Conservatives had suffered their own calamity, following a disastrous election campaign, but this is not our focus. Instead, I want to identify who and where Labour's support emanated; who voted for a Corbyn-led Party which was absolutely vilified by most newspapers and widely-expected to suffer a haemorrhage of support from erstwhile Labour voters who felt unable to vote for the Party under its current leadership.

Party support by age

The most common explanation of Labour's remarkable recovery is that Corbyn successfully attracted the support of young voters, particularly students, and largely did so by promoting policies such as the abolition of university tuition fees. Indeed, many Conservatives and pro-Conservative newspapers were outraged at this allegedly blatant and irresponsible bribe to young voters – as if Conservatives themselves had never appealed to a particular demographic, such as the 'grey vote' by promising to protect old age pensions while cutting the rest of the welfare state.

Labour certainly did enjoy a surge in support among younger voters, as can be seen in Table 1. Indeed, the Party almost doubled its support among the youngest cohort of voters compared to 2015, such that two-thirds of them voted Labour.

Table 1: Voting by age in 2017

	18-24		25-34		35-44	
	2017	2015	2017	2015	2017	2015
Labour	66	34	57	35	49	34
Conservative	18	16	22	25	29	28
	45-54		55-64		65+	
	2017	2015	2017	2015	2017	2015
Labour	38	32	32	26	23	20
Conservative	39	31	46	36	58	47

Source: Ashcroft, 2017: 4, Table 2 (for 2017 data); 13, Table 5 (for 2015 data).

However, the often dismissive or patronising claim that Labour's appeal was primarily to idealistic or impressionable youngsters and students – who had previously been berated for their apparent political apathy – is far too simplistic, for the Party also secured significant increases in support among various other age-groups. For example, among the 25-34 cohort, Labour's support rose by 22%, while the Party's support increased by 15% among the 35-44 age group. As such, Labour's support was strong among all voters under the age of 44, while for voters in the 45-54 age cohort, its support was almost equal to that of the Conservatives. Only among the over-55s did Labour trail the Conservatives by a wide margin.

Party support by social class

The Labour Party also attracted significant support among voters in both the AB socio-economic category, namely professional and senior managerial staff, and C1s, which comprises routine white-collar and administrative staff.

Table 2: Voting by socio-economic position or class

	AB		C1		C2		DE	
	2017	2015	2017	2015	2017	2015	2017	2015
Labour	38	28	43	30	40	31	44	37
Conservative	46	44	41	38	47	36	41	29
Lib Dem	10	10	8	9	6	6	5	6
UKIP	1	9	1	11	2	17	4	18
Green	2	4	2	5	1	3	2	3

Source: YouGov, 2017b: 1; YouGov, 2015: 2

As Table 2 illustrates, Labour's support among the ABs increased by 10 points from 2015, although it still trailed the Conservatives by 8 points. Even more notable, though, was the 13-point increase in Labour support among C1s, from 30% in 2015 to 43% in 2017, which gave the Party a narrow lead over the Conservatives. This was particularly significant, because the C1s have traditionally been a bedrock of lower middle-class Conservative support, especially during the Thatcher era.

Conversely, the lowest increases in Labour's 2017 support emanated from the working class, with a 9-point increase among the C2s (skilled workers) outweighed by the 11-point increase enjoyed by the Conservatives. Similarly, Labour's 7-point increase among the DEs (semi-skilled and unskilled workers, and the workless) was countered by a 12-point increase in Conservative support. That the Conservatives fared so well among the working-class might owe much to the collapse in support for UKIP, for as Table 3 shows, 57% of people who voted for UKIP in 2015 switched to the Conservatives in 2017. Moreover, many of these were likely to have been 'working-class Conservatives' anyway prior to their dalliance with UKIP, perhaps disillusioned with David Cameron's social liberalism and pro-EU stance.

Table 3: Vote switching between 2015 and 2017 (%).

2017 vote	Conservative in 2015	Labour in 2015	Lib Dem in 2015	UKIP in 2015	SNP in 2015	Green in 2015
Labour	10	83	30	18	12	58
Conservative	82	9	16	57	6	4

Source: Lord Ashcroft polls, 'How did this result happen?', 9 June 2017

Nonetheless, 18% of erstwhile UKIP voters switched to Labour this year, a not inconsiderable number given that UKIP polled 4 million votes 2 years ago. Meanwhile, 58% of those who voted for the Green Party in 2015 transferred their support to Labour in 2017, as did 12% of former SNP voters.

Highly notable was also the fact that 10% of those who voted Conservative in 2015 backed Labour in 2017, compared to 9% travelling in the opposite direction. Given that the Conservatives won 11.3 million votes in 2015, it means that about a million of these were switched to Labour in 2017. While one could previously have understood ex-Conservatives voting for 'safe' New Labour back in 1997, it is remarkable to think that about one million recent Conservative voters switched to a Labour Party led by Jeremy Corbyn.

It remains to be seen whether Labour can increase its support further whenever the next election is held, because so much will depend on the state of the economy, the Brexit situation, whether the Conservatives can elect a more competent or charismatic leader, whether the Tories will implode further regardless of leader, and whether we are in the midst of a sea-change in public attitudes after three decades of neo-liberal triumphalism.

Also, it has variously been suggested that some voters endorsed Labour on the assumption that the Party could not win, and so voting for it was a cost-free or symbolic option, but they would refrain from doing again so next time, lest they help to install Jeremy Corbyn in 10 Downing Street. This, though, seems a rather bizarre perspective. More likely, perhaps, is that some putative Labour voters who assumed that the Party had no chance under Corbyn, and so abstained or voted for another party rather than wasting their vote, might be galvanised to vote Labour next time, on the basis that victory is within grasp, particularly with the Conservatives in such disarray.

Note: The above draws on the author's article '[Jeremy Corbyn Confounds his Critics: Explaining the Labour Party's Remarkable Resurgence in the 2017 Election](#)', published in [British Politics](#).

About the Author



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