

CHANGE

Labour's new coalition: challenges and opportunities

Elizabeth Simon

The Labour Party won the 2024 UK General Election with a landslide. They did this by building a broad, though potentially fragile, electoral coalition of ideologically opposed voters; winning the support of loyal Labour voters and of former Liberal Democrat and Conservative voters, who were dissatisfied with the Conservative Party's record over fourteen years in government and chose to vote for change. This article sheds light on Labour's 'new coalition' and considers the challenges and opportunities it poses for the party in their first term in government. Can Labour hold their 'new coalition' together and chart a path to victory at the next general election? And if so, how?

In the 2024 UK General Election the Labour Party achieved the second largest seat gain ever and secured the second largest number of Labour seats won in any general election contest, though all this was realised off the back of the lowest vote share ever recorded for a single governing party in electoral history.

Labour won emphatically, despite a lack of widespread enthusiasm for the party, or their leader – Keir Starmer – for three key reasons. Firstly, because many voters felt that fourteen years under the Conservatives had ‘broken’ Britain and were motivated by a strong desire for change. Secondly, and relatedly, because there was a sense that Labour might do a better job of running the country than the Conservatives had. The Labour Party were, for example, more trusted than the Conservatives on the two issues that mattered most to voters in the lead up to the 2024 contest: the cost of living and the NHS.¹ And, thirdly, because Labour’s targeting strategy – which aimed to increase the efficiency of their vote – was successful. They increased their vote share in (and won) many key marginal seats while holding almost all their ‘heartlands’ seats, even though the voters residing in these kinds of seats tend to have very different values and priorities.²

Gains and holds: Labour’s ‘New Coalition’

All of this means that the Labour Party now represents a very broad, and potentially rather fragile, coalition of people and places who are bound together by a shared belief that Labour are a ‘better bet’ than the Conservatives when it comes to running the country, rather than by shared attitudes, values, and policy preferences.

Ten per cent of 2019 Conservative voters and thirty per cent of 2019 Liberal Democrat voters opted for Labour at the 2024 UK General Election.³ While both of these groups of ‘switchers’ have economic attitudes which are broadly similar to, though somewhat more right-leaning than, those of the ‘loyal’ Labour supporters who voted for the party in both 2019 and 2024, the former Conservatives tend to be much less socially liberal than either the loyal Labour voters or former Liberal Democrats.⁴

In an election where economic concerns relating to the cost of living and public service provision dominated, this coalition was relatively easy to unite – as all groups had similar attitudes toward economic issues. This apparent unity is likely to face a grave challenge if, or when, social issues, like immigration – on which these groups are much more divided – become increasingly salient. Here, policies that will please one section of this ‘new coalition’ are likely to seriously displease others.

Ideological mismatches: close calls and losses for Labour

It also means that the Labour Party now hold numerous marginal seats. This includes many they took narrowly from the Conservatives – like Forest of Dean, Redditch and South West Norfolk – but also includes seats in urban centres with

large numbers of young people, graduates and/or ethnic minorities, that had large Labour majorities in 2019, but which they only just retained at the 2024 contest – like Birmingham Yardley and Ilford North.

There were also a handful of losses for Labour on election night; to the Greens in Bristol Central, to the former Labour leader – Jeremy Corbyn, standing as an independent, in Islington North; and to pro-Gaza independents in places like Leicester South and Dewsbury and Batley.

The desire for change that motivated vote choices at the 2024 contest was observed not only in the widespread willingness to vote to ‘get the Conservatives out’ and bring about a change in government, but also in the fact that incumbent MPs, on average, lost votes compared to 2019, including in most Labour held seats.⁵ While the electoral consequences of this collective sense of political disillusionment were felt far less severely by Labour than by the Conservatives; the contest was undoubtedly a ‘change’ election for the Labour Party too. Voters used the ballot box to signal to Labour that they were dissatisfied with the party’s stance on the conflict in Gaza and its ideological drift toward the centre.

Challenges for the Labour Party

If Labour are to hold on to power with a significant majority come the next election, they must maintain their ‘new coalition’. But doing so will be no easy task. It will mean finding a way to satisfy the conflicting desires and demands of more socially conservative, former Conservative voters and those of more socially liberal voters, who have historically voted for the Labour Party, or recently switched from the Liberal Democrats. Failure to strike the correct balance here will see Labour votes lost: to Reform UK and the Conservatives on the right, to the Liberal Democrats and the Green Party on the left, and to independent candidates – campaigning on issues important to local populations, which have been left off the mainstream political agenda.

The issue of immigration provides just one example of how difficult this ‘balancing act’ will be. Forty-two per cent of 2024 Labour supporters say the Conservative government were wrong to create a negative and fearful environment for migrants living in Britain – showing clear support for immigration – while another 41 per cent say the former governing party did not do enough to stop channel crossings, and 37 per cent say immigration numbers are too high – displaying anti-immigration attitudes.⁶ How, then, does the Labour Party design policies around immigration that will not alienate its loyal supporters and core voter base, many of whom favour a more compassionate approach to immigration, but will also satisfy some of their

newer, more socially conservative voters, who want to see a stricter approach on immigration?

Labour will also face challenges around delivery. The public are impatient to see 'broken Britain' fixed, and if they don't see the government implementing changes that improve their day-to-day lives quickly, they will take their votes elsewhere. Sixty-four per cent of 2024 Labour voters expect to start seeing a difference from Labour's policies within a year, and if these expectations are not met, they will look to different political parties to deliver change – particularly as many of these 'new coalition' voters are not particularly 'attached' to the Labour Party, with 23 per cent of 2024 Labour supporters voting for the party for the first time.⁷

Opportunities for the Labour Party

But where there is challenge, there is opportunity. Sixty-three per cent of the public say 'how much they reduce NHS waiting lists' will be the benchmark against which the Labour government's success or failure will be measured.⁸ If the party can make headway in reducing waiting lists, and in making other improvements to the NHS that will be felt by the public, like boosting the availability of GP appointments, and can do so quickly, this will not only help to hold the 'new coalition' together – convincing voters that the party can indeed deliver the change they have been craving – but may also help to build support among those who did not vote Labour in 2024. Something which will be important if they are to win a second term in parliament, given their win was based on a relatively low vote share at the 2024 contest.

Aside from delivering on the NHS, which Labour proposed to do by creating 40,000 additional appointments per week in one of their six core election pledges, there are other opportunities. No less than 70 per cent of the British public agree that the party's other five key election pledges,⁹ which cover areas including crime, the environment, education, the economy, and immigration, will be good for the country.¹⁰ Given the broad appeal of Labour's core policy offer, delivering on these pledges could shore up support for the party.

There are also opportunities when it comes to mode of delivery. Between concerns over lobbying activities, MPs taking up second jobs and the 'Partygate' and election betting scandals, there is a growing sense that politicians don't care about ordinary people, don't understand their struggles and concerns, and are simply out for themselves.¹¹ If Labour are to win the next election, they must not only demonstrate that they can bring about positive change which improves the day-to-day lives of British people but do so in a way that re-instils trust in politics and shows people

that the political process can be conducted in an effective, professional and respectful manner.

Looking ahead to the next general election

Could it be damned if they do, damned if they don't for Labour? If they fail to make the improvements the electorate demand when it comes to the cost of living and the NHS, they will be punished at the ballot box at the next election, and a swing of just under 6 per cent to the Conservatives would be enough to entirely wipe out their existing majority.¹² But if they do deliver in these areas, and social rather than economic issues therefore come to dominate the agenda at the next contest, the Labour Party's new electoral coalition could fall apart, as it will be difficult to find policies that satisfy the 'balancing act' of uniting the disparate ideological elements of this 'new coalition'.

The challenge of holding on to power at the next general election will be an immense one for the Labour Party, but it is not one without opportunities.

Elizabeth Simon is a Postdoctoral Researcher in British Politics at the Mile End Institute, based in Queen Mary University of London's School of Politics and International Relations.

Notes

- 1 *Change Pending: The Path to the 2024 General Election and Beyond*, More in Common and UCL Policy Lab, 2024, https://www.ucl.ac.uk/policy-lab/sites/policy_lab/files/ucl_policy_lab_change_pending.pdf, p97.
- 2 Robert Ford, 'Labour put 'safe' seats at risk to target marginals. It paid off – but there's a cost', *The Guardian*, 7 July 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/observer>
- 3 *How Britain voted in the 2024 general election*, YouGov, 2024, <https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/49978-how-britain-voted-in-the-2024-general-election>
- 4 Paula Surridge, 'Fragments of the future: where might the fault lines in Labour's electoral coalition lie?', *UK in a Changing Europe Blogs*, 3 July 2024, <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/fragments-of-the-future-where-might-the-fault-lines-in-labours-electoral-coalition-lie/>
- 5 *Change Pending: The Path to the 2024 General Election and Beyond*, More in Common and UCL Policy Lab, 2024, https://www.ucl.ac.uk/policy-lab/sites/policy_lab/files/ucl_policy_lab_change_pending.pdf, p7.
- 6 *Attitudes towards immigration, survey conducted in collaboration with British Future*, Ipsos, 2024, <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2024-03/immigration-tracker-2024-charts.pdf>

- 7 *Change Pending: The Path to the 2024 General Election and Beyond*, More in Common and UCL Policy Lab, 2024, https://www.ucl.ac.uk/policy-lab/sites/policy_lab/files/ucl_policy_lab_change_pending.pdf, p41 and p8.
- 8 *Change Pending: The Path to the 2024 General Election and Beyond*, More in Common and UCL Policy Lab, 2024, https://www.ucl.ac.uk/policy-lab/sites/policy_lab/files/ucl_policy_lab_change_pending.pdf, p39.
- 9 Labour's other five key election pledges were to crack down on antisocial behaviour, to set up Great British Energy, to recruit 6,500 new teachers, to stick to tougher spending rules and to launch a new Border Security Command.
- 10 *Change Pending: The Path to the 2024 General Election and Beyond*, More in Common and UCL Policy Lab, 2024, https://www.ucl.ac.uk/policy-lab/sites/policy_lab/files/ucl_policy_lab_change_pending.pdf, p98.
- 11 *Revealed: Trust in politicians at lowest level on record*, The Institute for Public Policy Research, 2021, <https://www.ippr.org/media-office/revealed-trust-in-politicians-at-lowest-level-on-record>
- 12 Robert Ford, 'Labour put 'safe' seats at risk to target marginals. It paid off – but there's a cost', *The Guardian*, 7 July 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/observer>