

Why was labour  
excluded from  
governmental power  
between 1979-1997  
essay sample



Many theories have been put forward in an attempt to answer the question why the Labour party lost four elections between 1979 and 1997 and could be put into three categories. The first being socio-economic which is put forward by Ivor Crewe, arguing that it is due to a shrinkage in the working classes and partisan de-alignment. The MORI Opinion Polling Organisation shows that between 1979-1987 households defined as middle class rose from 35-42% (Jones et al, 1994: 955).

Arguments have also been put forward on how the shift of the Labour parties' emphasis on policies and leadership being unpopular were a significant cause in their loss of power. Moreover, other concerning factors such as the rise of the Social Democratic Party, the Falklands conflict, the Sheffield Conference, and damaging media hype will be discussed here in answer to this question. Ivor Crewe, a prominent psephologist, argued that it was clearly down to social trends and cited both short and long-term factors.

Crewe focused his attention on how changes within society affected voting behaviour. He suggests that the shrinkage of the working class, which has declined due to embourgeoisement, largely affects why Labour, who were created by the working classes to represent the working class, have lost so many of their votes. In conjunction with this, he also suggests that the repercussion of embourgeoisement is due to 'Partisan de-alignment'. This occurrence is another major factor that disrupts the voting pattern and has favoured the Conservative Party.

The geographical mobility which is required by society's workers, push families away from areas of concentrated working class industry in the north.

The north is viewed as full of working class families holding allegiance to the Labour Party, and pulling them to the rural suburbs of the south, or white collar areas, thus changing their personal or political interests to those of Conservative policies. It could also be suggested that the initial change of the working environment did not swing it for the electorate once employed in the southern white-collar industry - associating with those of middle class status.

The manual workers were more likely to purchase their own homes for which they would receive a reward of tax relief, further coaxing home owners to vote Conservative. The Conservative Party introduced 'the right to buy' policy which perpetuated Labour's loss of votes and exclusion from governmental power in that it cut across the classes. Those who were affluent enough to buy their own council house then saw themselves as being a class apart from those still renting from the council.

In their minds they had moved up from being working class and belonged somewhere in the private sector with the middle classes and thus voted accordingly. Crewe believes that people no longer see themselves as holding allegiance to one particular party, but are partisan to their neighbourhood and vote according to the community in which they live. He also suggested that the new generations of working class who reach the required age to vote hold no allegiance to the Labour Party policies and have no idea that it was this particular party that created the Welfare State and alleviated the poor conditions of the working classes.

It could also be said that they do not remember how badly the Tory Party treated the working class in the inter war years, or how the Trade Unions set up by the Labour Government improved working conditions such as introducing safety regulations, rest breaks and workers rights. Neither are they old enough to remember that it was Labour who nationalised industries such as British Gas and British Telecom to help fund the Welfare State which provides unemployment benefit for the thousands of young people who are presently unemployed.

Conservatives promote the only thing the younger generation know such as Capitalism and privatisation. The idea being privatise the companies and sell the shares which encourages those in a position to purchase the shares to vote Conservative, hence further excluding Labour from governmental power. Crewe examined the possibility of a succession of short-term factors being responsible for Labour's decline in governmental power. For example, party image was a problem in promoting policies and issues of the day, concluding that the Labour Party themselves were responsible for the own decline in these mistakes.

He studied the trend of party identification - starting in 1944 - and discovered that the parties' loyalty had gradually decreased from 43% to 31% by 1987 (Contemporary Record, 1988: 3). In contrast, the Conservative Party identification had stayed reasonably level, between 35% to 40% (ibid, 1988: 3). By 1987, one third had opted out of the two party system and the Liberals and SDP slowly grew. Crewe believes that these voters going out the two party system remained Conservative or Labour at heart but were merely protesting against the battle.

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The electorate may have only voted for a third party because Labour was not moving forward and the SDP covered the middle ground. Thus, it could be argued that if Labour had moved to middle of the road policies, their votes might have increased. Towards the end of Labour's leadership, Callaghan was caught up in the public sector strike, which brought about the ' Winter of Discontent'. The government were in a financial crisis and in 1976 called in the IMF who had set monetary targets on departmental programmes, cuts on spending and sold government shares in British Petroleum to the private sector.

They were gradually abandoning Keynesian economics in an attempt to prise the country out of the recession. They received a hostile reaction to their dilemma and the public was generally disheartened. By the time Callaghan called the election, it was too late as a vote of no confidence had been passed and therefore Labour lost. As well as lacking confidence in Labour, the electorates were also put off by Labours extreme left policies set out in their pre-election manifesto.

For example in 1983 Labour was offering unilateral disarmament of Trident and cruise missiles, withdrawal from the EC, an end to council house sales, re-nationalisation and increased taxation. It was described by Peter Shore from the right wing of the Labour party as being ' the longest suicide note in history' (Kingdom, 1992: 216), as after four years under Conservative government the public were being given opportunities they never had before, that of private enterprise.

Although optimists claim that rows over Militant changes and weaknesses of Michael Foot as leader were to blame. To explain Labours losses in 1987 is more difficult. Michael Foot had resigned and Neil Kinnock had been Prime Minister for four years. Some argue that ' a rise in living standards, falling unemployment and low inflation would have made any government unbeatable. ' (Kingdom, 1991: 191). Others say it would have threatened people's assumptions about Britain's place in NATO where as Labour today accepts Tory policies more (ibid 1991: 59).

In the 1992 pre-election polls, Labour was ahead. At the last minute, the Conservatives took the lead and the consensus was that people had had to seriously reconsider whether they truly wanted Labour to return to power thus changed their minds. Kinnock also came in for criticism, after the press had tarnished his reputation over the years. Hill went as far as to announce ' One major problem appears to be that we still carry too much baggage from the 1970's and early 80's to persuade people that they can really trust us' (Jones et al, 1994: 195).

This was because of their belief that the Conservatives were still recognised as the party of disaster and produced negative thoughts of Trade Union conflict, declining industry and intra party strife. Moreover, Labours taxation policies were high on the agenda and Conservatives bragged about how they thought tax and interest rates would soar under Labour. In addition, there is the argument by commentators and politicians that it was Labours turn to middle of the road policies, which were non-inspiring for the electorate (ibid, 1994: 195).

Adding on to this, Labours premature celebration at the Sheffield Conference was perceived as cheeky. The reports by the media could not have helped Labour to secure votes from the floating voters that they needed so badly. It seemed the Conservatives were difficult to match. Margaret Thatcher had become a popular figure and very charismatic, unlike most of the Labour leaders. She was the first woman Prime Minister and one who had opened doors for the working class and given confidence to women who had been shadowed by the men of this nation.

The media were great followers of Thatcher and ' put her name in lights' at every opportunity possible. Ralph Miliband (1988: 85) believes newspapers do not support Labour but favour Conservatives and that this is so because newspapers are an intrinsic part of the business world. Hence, it is a major concern of editors and senior journalists to maintain good relations with governments and rely on them for news updates and information. He points out that all newspapers were for the mixed economy, against any radical alternative and some are more virulently opposed to militant trade unionism than others, but all are against it.

He quotes ' None of them have ever supported left wing Labour, not to speak of anything further to the left and been fierce in their attacks on anyone who has assumed a position of leadership of the left' (Ibid, 1988: 86). This would explain why in contrast to Margaret Thatcher, Labour leaders such as Michael Foot have been ridiculed by the press, creating a negative image and labelling them ' The Looney Left', resulting in lack of confidence from the electorate.

It could be argued that the emergence of the SDP in 1981 with members such as Shirley Williams and Roy Jenkins, who had previously served in the Labour government, also created lack of confidence in the Labour party. Their aim being to claim the central ground, reintroduce consensus government, favouring privatisation as opposed to nationalisation, showing there had been lack of unity and distaste for extremist policies within the party itself.

Their emergence had a damaging effect on Labour in that the results of the 1983 election showed the new SDP only two votes behind Labour. Other factors, over which the Labour party themselves had no influence further contributed towards their exclusion from governmental power. The Falklands conflict can be cited as swaying the opinions of the electorate in the 1983 election as Margaret Thatcher was hailed a hero after she sank the Belgrano. She then brought the election date forward to a politically convenient time obviously within her interests.

In conclusion, numerous reasons have been outlined here and social changes are certainly a factor to be considered, as the statistical data provided and analysed by psephologists show that embourgeoisement has occurred, hence, many council tenants now own their own homes, a result of the 'right to buy'. On the other hand, the Labour party stuck their heads out and included unpopular policies in their pre-election manifesto. This combined with the negative media image published in most daily tabloids could also be a factor for consideration.



Each of the four general elections also has specific points that may have served the Conservative Party well. Unpopular leaders of the opposition counting chickens before they hatched at the Sheffield conference and the Falklands conflict highlighted Margaret Thatcher as a strong leader. In addition to these factors, a left-wing argument could be that Labours exclusion from government power was a punishment for not approaching a radical alternative to the Conservatives.

It could be argued that the Labour parties success in 1997 was due to their emphasis on becoming organised and a shift in policies from the traditional left to right, for example, zero tolerance and education. Moreover, the electorate knew they could not afford to let the Tory party continue the damage it had caused especially in terms the disastrous events of ' Black Wednesday' on September 16th 1992. The sterling became devalued due to leaving the Exchange Rate Mechanism and voters needed to think about the commitments to continue making their mortgage payments without affecting their monthly expenditure.

The successes of the 1997 and 2001 elections could be due to Tony Blair's ' New Labour' promises and the product of his devotion in creating a reformed party built on trust with the electorate. This reformed party together with its policies ' were necessary for setting the foundations of a successful Labour government' (Mandelson and Liddle, 1996: 211). One can only consider the information written and conclude therefore that social change; Labour party mistakes and left wing policies were contributory factors to Labours loss of governmental power between 1979 and 1997.