

Here is the article in a print-friendly format. [Click the button above to print this page.](#)

## The British General Election of 2005

by Donley T. Studlar  
West Virginia University  
Morgantown, West Virginia

### A Historic Result

At the end of a one-month-long campaign, the Labour party achieved its third consecutive electoral victory on May 5, 2005, winning 356 seats out of 646 in the House of Commons, 55 percent of the total. The runner-up Conservatives won 197 seats, 31 percent; the Liberal Democrats 62 seats (their largest amount since the 1920s), 10 percent; and other parties, primarily in Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, 30 seats, or 5 percent. Three independents, including anti-Iraq War candidate and former Labour member of Parliament George Galloway, won seats, the most since World War II.

Nevertheless, this was hardly a resounding victory. As Table 1 indicates, the shares of the vote did not correspond to the seat shares. Labour won only 35 percent of the votes cast, or only 22 percent of the total eligible electorate of the United Kingdom. This was a record low for a victorious party in a British election. Turnout was 61 percent, a slight increase on the modern record low at the last general election in 2001. "No excuse" postal voting was allowed for the first time. The Conservatives won 33 percent of the vote and actually outpolled Labour in England, where approximately 80 percent of the British population lives, by 36 percent to 35 percent, although they lost in seats there, 54 percent to 37 percent, with the Liberal Democrats gaining 23 percent of the vote in England but only 9 percent of the seats. Throughout the United Kingdom, the Liberal Democrats won 22 percent, and other parties received 10 percent.

For the ninth consecutive general election since 1974, the United Kingdom showed itself to have a multiparty electorate, even though it continues to have a largely two-party House of Commons. This is due not to gerrymandering but rather to the territorial distribution of party votes, the loss of population in many inner-city constituencies where Labour does well, and the fact that only one member is elected through plurality voting for each district. Constituency boundary revisions are not due until 2007. This result has reignited demands for a change in the single-member-district, simple-plurality electoral system to one reflecting more proportional results. But with the usual single-party majority in the legislature and government, any immediate change is unlikely.

### Campaign Styles and Issues

The election campaign was a relatively dull affair until the closing days. The three major parties were not widely separated in ideology or positions on most issues. The major issues were the economy, social policy, and trust in leaders. Labour touted its record of good economic growth along with better health and educational services. The Conservatives complained about Prime Minister Tony Blair's untrustworthiness, especially over Iraq (although they supported the war on principle), and promised to improve health, education, and policing while exercising tighter control on immigration. The Liberal Democrats claimed to be the only alternative to two parties who were both to the right of center. They stood out for their positions against the Iraq War and student tuition fees.

Unlike the United States, there was not extensive debate on issues of moral values. Conservative leader Michael Howard suggested tightening the law on abortion early in the campaign, but then the parties agreed not to discuss it further. Such issues are subject to "free votes," not under party discipline, in the House of Commons.

Despite the presence of some small anti-European Union parties, one important issue that surprisingly did not feature much in the campaign was Britain's relationship to the European Union. Tony Blair's pledge to hold a referendum in 2006 on approval of the proposed EU constitution apparently took the immediate controversy out of this issue. Britain took over the rotating presidency of the European Union for six months in July 2005, gaining the opportunity to set the agenda of discussion.

### Trust in the Government

During the latter part of the campaign, the issue of trust in the government focused on the shifting prewar advice that the attorney general had given the prime minister on the legality of the Iraq War. This raised an issue on which Tony Blair has been beleaguered, both within and outside his party, for three years, since a majority of the British public did not favor going to war.

Nevertheless, Labour survived this controversy electorally, although its vote and seats dropped from 2001 (see Table 1). Conservative leader Michael Howard, although able to unite his party better than recent leaders, was unable to overcome the image that the Conservatives would govern little differently from Labour other than that they were less caring about social welfare. After the election, Howard announced that he would step down as Conservative leader as soon as a replacement was chosen. This will be the fifth Conservative party leader since 1997, while Labour has had only one.

But Tony Blair already had pledged that this campaign would be his last as leader of the party. No sooner had the campaign ended than speculation began about how long he would remain. The heir apparent is his longtime chancellor of the exchequer (treasury secretary) Gordon Brown, whom many Labour activists consider to be more left wing than Blair.

With only marginal differences on issues, the campaign focused more on personalities, especially those of the party leaders, than ever before. Furthermore, campaign appeals were influenced by foreign political consultants, from the Australian Liberals (a right-wing party) in the case of the Conservatives and from the U.S. Democrats in the case of Labour. Thanks to Labour support for the Iraq policy of the U.S. administration of George W. Bush, U.S. Republican consultants stayed away from their previous natural allies, the Conservatives.

### Regional Variations in Party Results

In Scotland, the number of seats was reduced by 13 to correct for previous central-level overrepresentation, since most domestic issues now are under the authority of the devolved Scottish parliament. Although Labour won 41 of the 59 seats in Scotland on 40 percent of the vote, there is four-party politics in that part of the United Kingdom. Each major party won seats; the Liberal Democrats finished second, with 23 percent of the vote and 11 seats. The party championing Scottish independence, the Scottish National Party (SNP), won six seats. The situation was similar in Wales. Labour won 29 of the 40 seats on 43 percent of the votes. The nationalist party, Plaid Cymru, won three.

In Northern Ireland, the party system is very different from the rest of the country. The two parties representing the less-compromising elements in each community, the Democratic Unionists (DUP) for the Protestants and Sinn Féin for the Catholics, won seats at the expense of the more moderate Protestant party, the Ulster Unionists (UUP). UUP leader and Nobel Peace Prize winner David Trimble lost his seat and resigned as party leader.

Despite Labour losing 47 seats, the number of women members of Parliament (MPs) rose slightly, mainly through internal Labour party efforts. Women now constitute 19.8 percent of MPs, up from 17.9 percent. Of the 128 women, 98 are Labour, an increase of three from 2001. Fifteen ethnic minority MPs of black or Asian descent were elected, 13 for Labour, despite Labour's loss of support among Muslims in several seats because of the Iraq War.

As noted, the results were very regional. Labour lost seats to the Liberal Democrats in the north of England and Scotland, while the Conservatives were their major competitors in the southeast around London. Among socioeconomic groups, Labour support held up better among women, the middle-aged, the middle class, and homeowners. Older voters were disproportionately Conservative, while the Liberal Democrats did especially well among women and younger voters. The major issues on people's minds were health care, education, crime, and pensions. While its support eroded in almost every social category, Labour's inroads into the middle class over the past three general elections, plus its remaining base in the working class, make it difficult to beat.

The cabinet Tony Blair appointed from MPs and members of the House of Lords contained many familiar faces, often in the same positions as in the previous Labour government. In opening Parliament the week after the election, the Queen's Speech set forth the new Labour government's agenda for the next year, including 44 bills. This included measures to introduce identity cards, reform disability benefits, restrict immigration and asylum claims, boost school standards, improve hygiene in public hospitals, tighten policing against antisocial behavior in cities, introduce a law against religious hatred, extend maternity leave benefits, restrict smoking indoors, strengthen antiterrorism legislation, and complete reform of the House of Lords. Once a royal commission reports, there will be a draft bill on pension reform. In foreign affairs, the government pledged to take a lead in securing more aid for Africa and in moderating climate change.

In summary, Labour won its third consecutive election for the first time ever, but with a reduced majority in Parliament and an even greater loss of votes. It showed not so much widespread popular support for the government as lack of confidence in the major alternative, the Conservatives, and an increasingly fragmented and apathetic electorate. Once Tony Blair departs as prime minister, the major question will be whether British electoral politics stabilizes under continued dominance of the Labour party or becomes more volatile.

**Table 1: Party Votes and Seats in Last Two General Elections, United Kingdom**

	2001		2005	
	% of Votes	% of Seats	% of Vote	% of Seats
<b>Labour</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>55</b>
Conservative	32	25	32	31

Liberal Democrats	18	8	22	10
Other	9	5	10	5
	<b>2001</b>		<b>2005</b>	
Voter turnout	59%		61%	

## References

BBC: [www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk)

The British Politics Group at the University of Cincinnati: [www.uc.edu/bpg](http://www.uc.edu/bpg)

Market and Opinion Research International (MORI): [www.mori.com](http://www.mori.com)

*Donley T. Studlar is Eberly Family Distinguished Professor of Political Science at West Virginia University, where he teaches courses in comparative politics. For eleven years he served as Executive Secretary of the British Politics Group. A member of the Development Committee for AP Government and Politics for four years and also a Reader for the Comparative Politics exam, he is the author/editor of five books and over 100 articles, including the newly-revised co-authored text, Comparative Politics (4th ed., CQ Press 2006) and the widely-read article, "A Constitutional Revolution in Britain?" in Christopher Soe, ed., Annual Editions: Comparative Politics (Dushkin).*