

Counting words in the manifestos

Danny Dorling

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So, we had an election – what did the parties promise to do if they won?

The Greens

Let's start with the smallest nationwide political party, the Greens. How often do you think they mentioned inequality in their December 2019 manifesto? The answer was seven times and the first occurrence is here: *“None of this is happening by accident. It's the consequence of an out-of control economic system that plunders the Earth's natural resources to create wealth for the few, casting the climate into chaos and causing corrosive levels of inequality.”* It was laudable and true, but the specifics were lacking. For instance, the Green Party would “create” 100,000 new council homes a year – but there is no mention as to whether any of them would be built where people needed them. And they don't say if a single home, or whole block of echo-apartments, would be built on green fields.

The Greens would fund a universal basic income from carbon taxes, but gave no specifics. They would reduce tax evasion and avoidance – but no mention of taxing high earners more. The section of their manifesto on taxation ends: *“We accept that these savings will take place over a long period of time. When they are delivered we will seek to allocate these funds to other areas of public service provision that are currently being underfunded, such as education, healthcare and local services.”*

When they are delivered?!

If you work in the public services “such as education, healthcare and local services” you might not have been very impressed had you got that far through their manifesto and read those words – but few people bother to read that far through. One derogatory nickname for the Greens in the South of England is “Tories on bikes”. I had not heard it until I moved back down south to live in a city (Oxford) desperate for housing where the Greens oppose any building in the very environmentally unfriendly – car commuting creating – green belt.

The Liberals

Next, the second smallest UK wide party:

Jo Swinson, Leader of the Liberal Democrats, said this in the forward to her party’s manifesto.

“Voters are being told that the only choice is between the Conservatives and Labour. But when I look at Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn, I know that I could do a better job as Prime Minister than either of them.”

When some-one is that self-assured it is worth being wary of them. In more equitable countries in the world than the UK, which includes every other country in the European Union, it is not great leaders that make their countries great – but politicians working together and not suggesting that they are individually such better people. In contrast, many of the most unequal countries of the affluent world are led by men who appear to have a lot in common with each other; but there was no indication in the manifesto of The Liberal Democrats as to why Jo Swinson would have done any better than whoever will actually be prime minister – just that she can “look at” them and thinks she just knows that she is better – and she thinks it is a good idea to tell the rest of the world of her high opinion of herself. So just how different would she be to the men normally in high office in the most unequal of places?

Most economically unequal large and affluent states in the world

0.470	Brazil	Jair Bolsonaro	1st
0.460	Chile	Sebastián Piñera	2nd
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Source – OECD Gini coefficient of income inequality as reported in November 2019

All the Liberals had to say in their manifesto about inequality was that *“Staying in the European Union will secure a £50 billion Remain Bonus, with the economy two per cent larger by 2024-25. We can invest that bonus in our schools, and on tackling in-work poverty and inequality.”*

The word inequality appeared less than a dozen times in their 2019 manifesto, and in most cases was associated with how staying in the EU would somehow allow them then to *“tackle inequality”*. Of course, the most equitable countries in the world are mostly in the EU, and staying in it is a very good idea. But the UK has gone out of its way to show how it is very possible to be in the EU but also become the most economically unequal country in the EU. At least the Liberals managed to mention inequality more often than the Green Party did; but their manifesto did not suggest that either inequality, nor public services were a great priority for them. I guess they were trying to attract Conservative voters, but that party also appeared to be very in-line with the policies of past Conservative governments, and of course they had only recently enacted a series of Conservative policies when they jointly held power with the Conservatives between 2010 and 2015.

The Labour Party

In their manifesto Labour mentioned inequality over thirty times, admittedly that is also in one of the title headings of a chapter of their manifesto. A typical mention reads as follows: *“Labour will eradicate in-work poverty in our first term by tackling the structural causes of poverty and inequality, such as low pay and high living costs, while raising the floor provided by our social safety net.”* And yes, they said they would properly fund education, healthcare and local services a little more speedily and substantially than the Greens promised or the Liberal’s implied. In fact, Labour pledged to raise public spending each year so that by the end of the fifth year of any Labour government the UK would be taxing and spending at just under the levels that Germany taxes and spends. Unfortunately they did not explain that their tax and spending plans were that prudent!

Finally – what of the political party with the most MPs in the house of commons as I write these words, just before the general election?

The Conservatives

The word inequality appeared only twice in the Conservative manifesto, so I quote in full:

Firstly: *“We are committed to reducing health inequality. We will continue to repair the damage done by Labour’s disastrous PFI deals.”*

Secondly: *“The UK Shared Prosperity Fund will be used to bind together the whole of the United Kingdom, tackling inequality and deprivation in each of our four nations. It will replace the overly bureaucratic EU Structural Funds – and not only be better targeted at the UK’s specific needs, but at a minimum match the size of those funds in each nation.”*

You can make your own mind up as to whether these were promises they had any intention of keeping; or if the rise in health inequalities since 2010 was actually due to the PFI deals (which were disastrous but no one claims were the main cause) or if by tackling inequality they actually really mean reducing it – or merely defending it and pretending to be doing something to tackle it while quietly letting it rise and rise even further.

Oh – sorry I almost forgot – there is one other national party – although it only planned to stand in seats not held by the Conservatives.

The Brexit Party

How many times does the word inequality appear in the Brexit party manifesto ‘Contract with the People’?

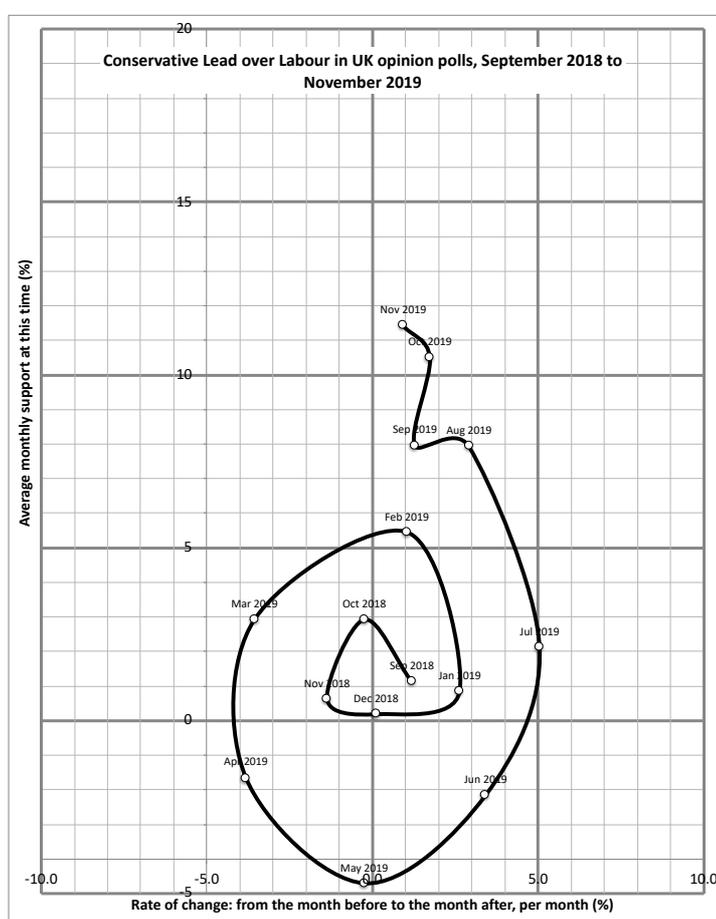
The answer – zero.

Whatever has happened in the election – countries at a peak of inequality never manage to stay at that peak for too long. They tend to be unstable; and their leaders try ever more desperately to hold onto power as the instability rises; until either quickly or slowly but eventually – inequality falls.

Conclusion

Finally, a graph for context. As I was writing these words the Conservatives were slowly but surely rising in the polls. By late November 2019 they were approaching a 12% lead (if you averaged all the polls out). But what no one pointed out was that this lead was lower than that held by Theresa May at the same point in the 2017 General Election campaign. Nor that the trend since July 2019 had been of rising but decelerating support for the Conservatives.

The polls tend to tell us how people might have voted in a general election if one were held six weeks ago; not if one were held tomorrow. Anything could happen between when I am writing these words and when you are reading them; but whatever does happen is unlikely to have been that greatly influenced by the manifestos – they are mainly political parties writing for themselves, their own members, and most ardent supporters. This is why the manifestos tell us so much about the parties. If you wanted to win people over, you would do so in a very different way. Most people don't read party manifestos, and certainly not all the manifestos.



A timeline of the change in voting-lead in the run up to the December 2019 election:

(% point advantage of the Conservatives over Labour). Theresa May was ditched as she approached her lowest popularity ratings as far as her party as a whole was concerned.

COUNTING WORDS IN THE MANIFESTOS

Danny Dorling is Halford Mackinder professor of human geography at Oxford University. He is the author of All That Is Solid, Injustice: Why Social Inequality Still Persists and A Better Politics. Here on the eve of the 2019 General Election, Danny reinforces how important it is to read the manifestos of the major political parties and what by doing so we can learn in advance of their real objectives in government.



Prof Danny Dorling

Let's start with the smallest nationwide political party, the Greens, how often do you think they mentioned inequality in their manifesto? The answer was seven times and the first occurrence is here: "None of this is happening by accident. It's the consequence of an out-of control economic system that plunders the Earth's natural resources to create wealth for the few, casting the climate into chaos and causing corrosive levels of inequality." It's laudable and true, but the specifics were lacking. For instance, the Green Party would "create" 100,000 new council homes a year - but there is no mention as to whether any of them would be built where people needed them, let alone if a single home or block of echo-apartments would be built on green fields.

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England is "Tories on bikes". I had not heard it until I moved back down south to live in a city desperate for housing where the greens oppose any building in the very environmentally unfriendly - car commuting creating - green belt.

Next the second smallest UK-wide party: the Liberals

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"Voters are being told that the only choice is between the Conservatives and Labour. But when I look at Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn, I know that I could do a better job as prime minister than either of them."

When someone is that self-assured it is worth being wary of them. In more equitable countries in the world, which includes every other country in the European Union, it is not great leaders that make their countries great - but politicians working together and not suggesting that they are individually

such better people. In contrast, many of the most unequal countries of the affluent world are led by men who appear to have a lot in common with each other; but there was no indication in the manifesto of The Liberal Democrats as to why Jo Swinson would have done any better than whoever will actually be prime minister - just that she can "look at" them and thinks she just knows that - and thinks it is a good idea to tell the rest of the world of her high opinion of herself.

All the Liberals had to say in their manifesto about inequality was that "Staying in the European Union will secure a £50 billion Remain Bonus, with the economy two per cent larger by 2024-25. We can invest that bonus in our schools, and on tackling in-work poverty and inequality." The word inequality appeared less than a dozen times in their 2019 manifesto, and in most cases was associated with how staying in the EU would somehow allow them to "tackle inequality". Of course, the most equitable countries in the world

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are in the EU and staying in it is a very good idea. But the UK has gone out of its way to show how it is very possible to be in the EU but also become the most economically unequal country in the EU. However, at least the Liberals managed to mention inequality more often than the Green Party did.

So what about Labour, the next largest national party?

In their manifesto Labour mentioned inequality over thirty times, admittedly that is also in one of the title headings of a chapter of their manifesto. A typical mention reads as follows: "Labour will eradicate in-work poverty in our first term by tackling the structural causes of poverty and inequality, such as low pay and high living costs, while raising the floor provided by our social safety net." And yes, they said they would fund education, healthcare and local services a little more speedily and substantially than the Greens promised or the Liberal's implied. In fact, Labour pledged to raise public spending each year so that by the end of the fifth year of any Labour government the UK would be taxing and spending at just under the levels that Germany taxes and spends. Unfortunately they did not explain that their tax and spending plans were that prudent!

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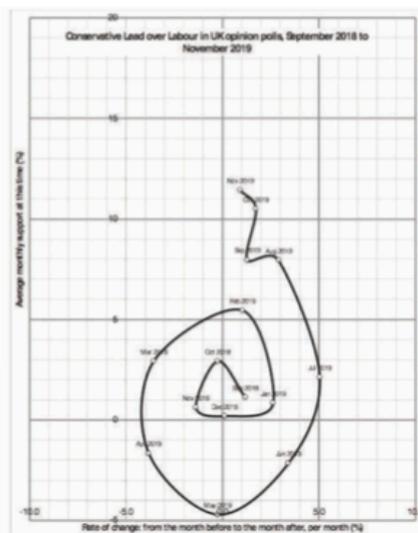
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