Political fortunes and public spending plans: the UK in a European context

Estimated reading time: 10 minutes

Labour is trailing in the polls and its manifesto has been attacked for profligacy. But the polls are a poor guide to the election outcome, as Theresa May's ratings in 2017 show – and Labour's spending plans are roughly in line with those of Germany, writes Danny Dorling (University of Oxford).

The polls tell us remarkably little about how well the political parties are doing

In April 2015 the Conservatives polled, on average, at 33.6% and their lead over Labour was only 0.7%. David Cameron went on to win a comfortable majority a month later. The Conservatives' vote had risen by only 2.4 percentage points in May 2015; but Labour's fell by 2.2. The Labour leader Ed Miliband resigned. Here, all polls taken in the UK over each month are used to produce and average for that month and the rate of change is calculated from the month before to the month after the month in question – except for the case of November 2019, as we do not know yet what the polls in December 2019 will be.

Table – Average support in the polls - % of those intending to vote and change in that %

	Con		Lab		Lib		UKIP		Green		Lead		
Jan 2015	32.1	0.2	33.0	0.0	7.5	0.0	15.2	-0.5	6.6	0.3	-1.0	0.3	Jan 2015
Feb 2015	32.3	0.7	33.5	0.2	7.6	0.1	14.5	-0.6	6.5	-0.5	-1.2	0.4	Feb 2015
Mar 2015	33.5	0.7	33.5	0.1	7.6	0.3	14.1	-0.4	5.7	-0.8	-0.1	0.6	Mar 2015
Apr 2015	33.6	0.5	33.7	-0.3	8.3	0.6	13.6	-0.5	5.0	-0.5	-0.1	0.7	Apr 2015
May 2015	34.4	2.4	33.0	-2.2	8.8	0.2	13.0	-1.5	4.7	0.4	1.4	4.6	May 2015
Feb 2017	40.7	1.2	26.3	-0.3	10.2	0.0	12.7	-0.9	4.0	0.1	14.4	1.4	Feb 2017
Mar 2017	42.8	2.4	26.7	0.2	9.9	0.2	10.4	-2.2	3.9	-0.4	16.1	2.2	Mar 2017
Apr 2017	45.4	1.6	26.6	2.7	10.6	-0.6	8.2	-2.7	3.2	-0.7	18.8	-1.1	Apr 2017
May 2017	45.9	-1.2	32.1	5.7	8.7	-1.6	5.1	-2.1	2.5	-0.7	13.8	-6.9	May 2017
Jun 2017	43.0	-2.8	38.1	5.6	7.5	-0.9	4.0	-0.7	1.9	-0.4	5.0	-8.4	Jun 2017
Aug 2019	32.3	2.9	24.3	0.1	18.2	0.6	9.9	-2.3	5.3	-1.1	7.9	2.9	Aug 2019
Sep 2019	32.7	1.8	24.7	0.4	19.4	-0.2	9.3	-1.4	4.1	-0.7	8.0	1.3	Sep 2019
Oct 2019	35.8	3.7	25.2	2.0	17.9	-2.0	7.1	-3.3	4.0	-0.5	10.5	1.7	Oct 2019
Nov 2019	40.1	4.3	28.7	3.5	15.3	-2.6	2.7	-4.4	3.2	-0.8	11.4	0.9	Nov 2019
Dec 2019	?	?	?	?	?	?	?	?	?	?	?	?	Dec 2019

Note: Support for the Brexit party is included in the UKIP column – change is shown after each share and is change from the month before to the month after – per month (Thus 0.7 in Feb 2015 for the Conservatives is (33.5-31.1)/2).

In May 2017, Theresa May had a huge lead in the polls: 13.8% and some 45.9% of all those who said they would vote said they would vote for her. However, support for Labour was rising, at 5.7 percentage points in May 2017 and 5.6 in June 2017. She was denied her majority, but staggered on for two years and resigned in June 2019 as her party's lead in the polls fell towards -5%.

In November 2019, given all polls reported up until November 23, Boris Johnson's Conservatives stand at 40.1% in the polls, a lead of 11.4% over Labour – in both cases worse than May's position a month before her disastrous general election. However, unlike May, support for Johnson's Tories is still rising in November 2019. But so is support for Labour. More importantly, the Liberal Democrats' support is

dropping faster than it did in the run-up to the previous two general elections, suggesting people are planning to vote tactically. The percentage of those backing UKIP, the Brexit Party and the Greens also fell each month from September 2019 onwards.

Halle Dölau hospital in Germany from the air. Photo: baerchen57 via a CC-BY-NC-SA 2.0 licence
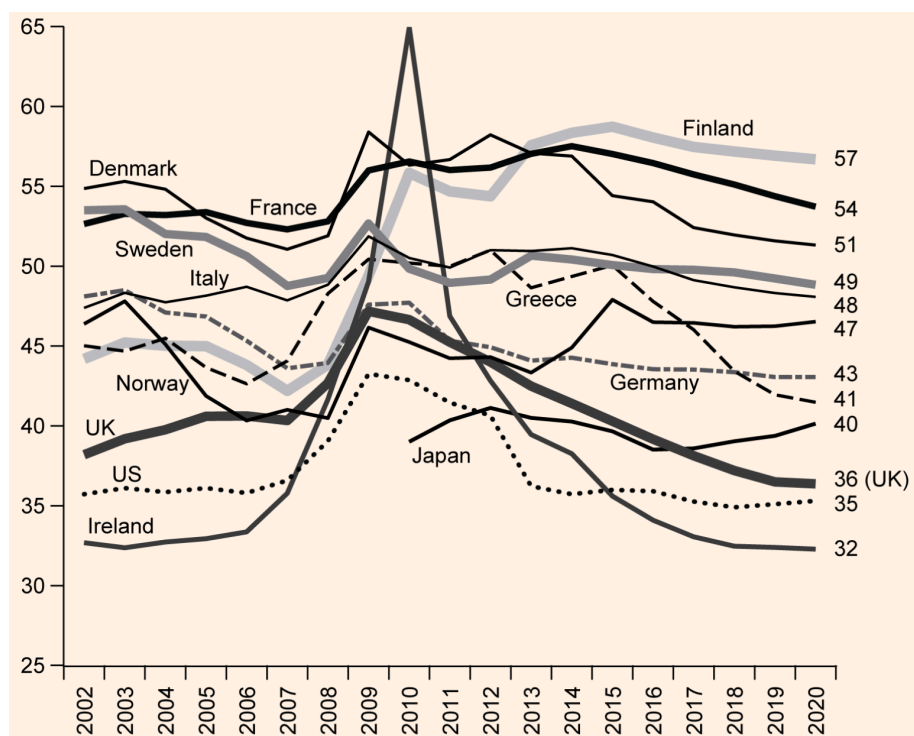
The nationalist parties are not included in the table above – other than that the sum total of all five party voting intentions falls far short of 100% because of them, especially the SNP. The Welsh and Northern Irish parties are also not included in the above table, and people who say they will not vote are ignored.

Theresa May was in a much stronger position a month before her disastrous general election than Boris Johnson is in the month before his. However, the tide had already turned against her in April 2017 and she lost her majority – despite being 14 points ahead in the poll average in May 2017. Boris Johnson is averaging just under 12 points ahead in November 2019.

How do Labour's spending plans compare to the countries in the rest of the EU?

Will Hutton, <u>writing in the Guardian</u>, has described Labour's spending commitments in its 2019 election manifesto as meaning that: "Social democracy is to be expunged from Labour's ruling bodies – and an amalgam of green statist, top-down socialism and social democratic remnants is to take its place." But is this true? The graph below show current public spending in selected European countries and the USA. Labour's spending plans would move it to just below the position of Germany by 2024. For Hutton's comment to hold water, Labour would have to aim to be Finland, which is currently governed (very well) by the kind of coalition he describes. Here are public spending trends in European countries, Japan and the United States, as a proportion of GDP. In all the countries public spending rose to bail out the banks in 2008, but before and after that the levels were very different.

Figure 1: State spending as a proportion of GDP, twelve rich countries 2002-2020 (%)

Source: The 2010, 2012 and 2015 IMF database, projections after 2014. The figure comes from <u>A Better Politics: How Government Can Make Us Happier</u>, by Danny Dorling

In the UK, GDP in 2018 was estimated to be £2.11 trillion. The Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) predict 1.2% growth during 2019 which, if it were to occur, would result in UK GDP for 2019 being £2.135 trillion. In its December 2019 manifesto Labour promised to raise annual public spending to reach, at the end of five years, £55bn per year public investment and £83bn per year on "day to day" spending. This totals £128bn a year by 2024, or 5.995% of £2.135 trillion. If such a rise were to occur the UK's public spending as a share of GDP would increase from 38.3% to 44.3% – placing the UK above where Portugal could be shown and just below where Germany is shown on the graph above.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the Brexit blog, nor LSE.

Danny Dorling is the Halford Mackinder Professor of Geography at the University of Oxford. A Better Politics: How Government Can Make Us Happier is available as a free ebook; from this website:

http://www.dannydorling.org/books/betterpolitics/