

**FABIAN
SOCIETY**

THE FINAL FURLONG

**WHAT DO THE PUBLIC WANT FROM THE
NEXT ELECTION?**

**Ben Cooper and Eloise Sacares
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About the authors

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About the briefing

This report provides new evidence on what voters want to happen at the next election. It sets out voters' views on election outcomes, based on polling and focus groups.

About the polling

The Fabian Society commissioned YouGov Plc to survey 4,068 adults across Great Britain. Fieldwork was undertaken between 31 July and 2 August 2023. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+). All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc.

About the focus groups

The Fabian Society held six online focus groups with voters who were open to voting Labour at the next election, but who were not certain to do so. All participants lived in target seats (based on the old boundaries, not those that will be fought at the next election) across England and Wales. All participants reported voting Labour in either the 2010, 2015, or 2017 general elections but did not vote Labour in 2019. Openness to voting Labour was judged on a 0 to 10 scale – with our participants saying the chance of them voting Labour at the next election was between 5 and 8 out of 10.

We divided the groups based on sex (three all-male groups and three all-female groups), and had two age-specific groups for those aged 55 and over.

The seats selected for our focus groups have diverse political histories and require different swings for Labour to win. They are broadly grouped into seats Labour lost in 2019 or 2017, seats Labour lost in 2015, and seats Labour have never won. The focus groups we held were in:

- Heywood and Middleton, Stoke-on-Trent Central, North and South, and Don Valley – men, all ages
- Heywood and Middleton, Stoke-on-Trent Central, North and South, and Don Valley – women, all ages
- York Outer, Wimbledon, and Basingstoke – men, all ages
- York Outer, Wimbledon, and Basingstoke – women aged 55 and over
- Southampton Itchen and Morley and Outwood – men aged 55 and over
- Bridgend – women, all ages

SUMMARY

Opinion polls conducted over the last 12 months have suggested Labour is on track to secure an overall majority at the next election. In spite of this evidence, there has been media speculation about a hung parliament and deals between political parties.

In response, the Fabian Society undertook research during summer 2023 to understand voters' preferred election outcomes and their reactions to the prospect of a hung parliament. We particularly focused on 'target voters', or those who did not vote Labour in 2019 but who are considering the party at the next election. Since this research was undertaken, the Rutherglen and Hamilton West, Mid Bedfordshire and Tamworth by-elections have dampened speculation about a hung parliament by providing further evidence that Labour is on track for a majority.

We undertook focus groups with target voters in target seats and conducted an opinion poll with YouGov. We found:

- **Strong support for a majority government:** 64 per cent of respondents preferred one party winning 'an outright majority and forming a single party government' – compared to 19 per cent preferring no party winning 'an overall majority and two or more political parties work together to govern' – and 17 per cent saying don't know. **Two-thirds (66 per cent) of Labour's target voters prefer one party winning an outright majority at elections** – compared to 25 per cent preferring no party winning an outright majority and 10 per cent saying don't know.¹
- **Hostility to both the Conservatives and political instability:** When asked to select their biggest concern about a hung parliament, a quarter of respondents (25 per cent) said it would 'let the Conservatives back into power'. This was followed by it would 'produce an unstable government' (20 per cent) and 'make it hard to pass laws/introduce new policies' (19 per cent). **More than a third**

¹ For the purpose the survey, we defined Labour's target voters as those who did not vote Labour at the last election and said their likelihood of voting Labour was between six and 10, out of 10.

(36 per cent) of Labour's target voters fear a hung parliament would let the Conservatives back, 24 per cent said it would produce unstable government, and 22 per cent said it would make it hard to pass laws and introduce new policies.

- **A Labour majority is the most preferred election outcome:** Of the nine outcomes that were offered, 27 per cent of respondents selected a majority Labour government as their most preferred (with 42 per cent selecting it as a top three preference). This was followed by 21 per cent selecting a Conservative majority government as their most favoured outcome (27 per cent selecting it within their top three) and 8 per cent selecting a Labour-Liberal Democrat deal (34 per cent selecting it within their top three). **Nearly half (47 per cent) of Labour's target voters choose a majority Labour government as their most preferred outcome of the next election,** with 70 per cent selecting it as a top three outcome. Of those who voted Conservative in 2019, 11 per cent selected a Labour majority government as their most preferred outcome, corresponding to more than 1.5 million 'switch' voters. Nearly a fifth (19 per cent) selected it as one of their top three preferences.

THE NEXT ELECTION ACCORDING TO TARGET VOTERS

There is strong support for a majority government.

“[In a hung parliament], everyone is running round trying to get everybody’s vote ... it’s very desperate ... I would prefer to see a Labour majority.”

“I think a coalition [between political parties] doesn’t settle things at all ... I think a coalition definitely blurs the lines and delays true change.”

There is hostility to both the Conservatives and political instability.

“Honestly a deal with the devil would be better than the Conservatives.”

“I don’t believe in [the] Conservative [party] anymore, they’ve really let us down with everything ... whether that’s cost of living, whether that’s mortgage prices, whether that’s energy ... council tax, everything, petrol prices, everything. I mean what hasn’t been left to destroy?”

“We need ... a party that is going to sort this country out and pull it up from the ground, from the terrible mess that the Conservatives have put us into.”

“The Conservative party [is] a rudderless ship ... I don’t think they know where they’re going or what they’re doing and they just seem to be backwards and forwards ... not really achieving anything at the moment.”

A Labour majority is the most preferred election outcome.

“I would hope that it’s a Labour majority and we get a fresh start from another party that can maybe sort out our country that’s in dire straits.”

“I agree that it’s time to give Labour a chance because Conservatives have been in a long time now and the country is in a right mess ... They [Labour] can’t do any worse.”

“I just need to get rid of the Conservatives ... Labour would then be my steadfast choice.”

INTRODUCTION

Almost four years on from Labour's historic defeat in 2019, the party is now on the brink of power. There is an increasing expectation amongst the public that Labour will win the next election, and make the rare transition from opposition to majority government for the first time in 27 years.¹

Since 2019, the Fabian Society has conducted substantial research into how Labour can win the next election. In the immediate aftermath, we set out the party's formidable 'mountain to climb'.² In 2021, subsequent work analysed the 150 most marginal seats, identifying Labour's need to focus on towns in all their diversity to unify historic swing seats with former heartlands.³ In 2022, we set out how Labour should appeal to older voters, as there will be no future Labour prime minister without them.⁴ We showed how coastal towns and rural areas, traditionally Conservative strongholds, can be persuaded to back Labour.⁵ And we used Scottish 2022 local election data to show that 25 SNP seats were within Labour's grasp at the next election.⁶

The party has largely done what it needed to do. Labour has made a clean break with the previous leadership, set out policies that are perceived as credible, and rebuilt trust amongst the British public to govern. In doing so, Labour placed itself in a good position to persuade voters to back the party, as the Conservatives became mired in scandal and incompetence during 2022.

And things have not changed much since Rishi Sunak became prime minister. According to Politico's 'Poll of Polls', as of 1 December 2023, Labour has an 19-percentage-point lead over the Conservative party – a lead that has barely moved in over six months. Compared to 2015, when Labour last looked like it could win, the party today is in a very different position: a larger lead over the Conservatives, a more popular leader with the public, and a focus on economic credibility that has cut through. The Conservatives have not just lost the support of the British public; Labour have made significant steps to secure it.

Nonetheless, following the 2023 local elections, highly respected commentators floated the idea of a hung parliament and discussed possible coalition scenarios. Such speculation has been dampened by Labour's quadruple by-election victories in Selby and Ainsty, Rutherglen and Hamilton West, Mid Bedfordshire and Tamworth, while the polls

throughout the last 12 months have consistently indicated that the next election will result in a Labour majority.

But, in response to the speculation earlier in the year, the Fabian Society undertook research to understand public perceptions about the next general election. As we head into the 'final furlong' before the election campaign starts, we wanted to understand what outcome voters favoured and reactions to a hung parliament. We were particularly interested in the views of people in Labour's key target voter group: those who did not vote Labour in 2019 but who are open to doing so now.⁷

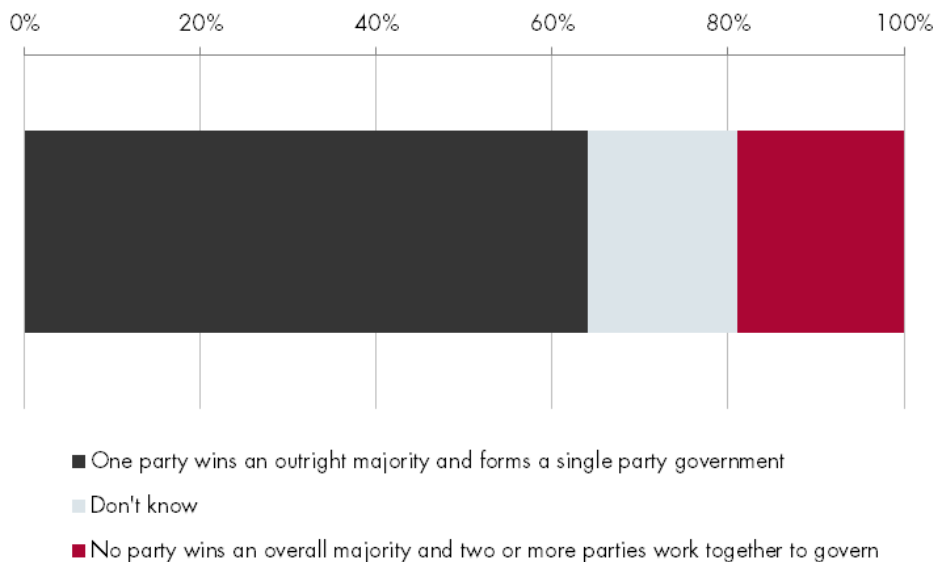
At its simplest, we wanted to answer the question: what does the public want to happen at the next general election? This remains a relevant question, even if the possibility of a hung parliament after the next election is ever more distant. We conducted six focus groups and an opinion poll with YouGov to find answers to these questions.

WHAT DO VOTERS WANT?

1. Most voters prefer a majority government to a hung parliament

The public has little desire to see another hung parliament, a coalition government, or some other arrangement where political parties work together. There is strong support for a majority government, with one political party in power – including from the target voters that Labour needs to win the next election.

FIGURE 1: NEARLY TWO-THIRDS OF RESPONDENTS OVERALL PREFERRED A SINGLE PARTY WINNING OUTRIGHT AND GOVERNING ALONE.



The percentage of respondents selecting each option when asked 'thinking about election outcomes in the UK, generally speaking, do you prefer it when...?'

When asked about election outcomes in the UK generally, 64 per cent of respondents overall preferred one party winning 'an outright majority and forming a single party government'. This compares to just 19 per cent preferring no party winning 'an overall majority and two or more political parties work together to govern' – and 17 per cent saying don't know.

No single demographic group analysed was more likely to say that they preferred two or more parties working together than one party winning an outright majority. This includes:

- 69 per cent of those currently intending to vote Labour favour one party winning an outright majority – compared to 21 per cent wanting no party to win an overall majority and 10 per cent saying don't know.
- 66 per cent of Labour 'target' voters (those who did not vote Labour in 2019 but who are considering doing so at the next election) prefer one party winning an outright majority at elections – compared to 25 per cent wanting no party to win an overall majority and 10 per cent saying don't know.
- 64 per cent of those who live in the 125 English and Welsh most winnable seats for Labour prefer one party winning an outright majority – compared to 17 per cent wanting no party to win an overall majority and 18 per cent saying don't know.¹

When we asked our focus groups participants how they felt about a hung parliament or a coalition, they said:

"It's a negative emotion ... can't we just get someone in with a plan and let's just get on with it and get what we need to be doing?"

"It would be a fearful surprise, because all they'd do is just argue against each other ... so, we'd be the ones worst off."

"I think a coalition doesn't settle things at all. I don't think it will bring any consistency around policy. I think a coalition definitely blurs the lines and delays true change."

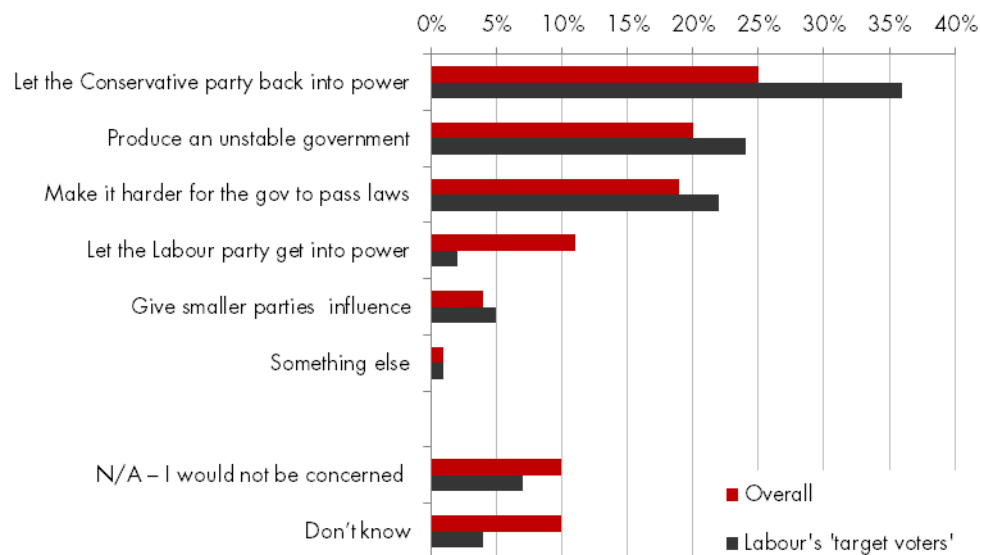
This evidence indicates that activists who champion party political pluralism are part of a rare breed. The view that parties should work together in 'alliances' (progressive or otherwise) which results in no party securing an overall majority is not widely shared among the public, including among people who plan to vote against the Conservatives. This is true even among current Liberal Democrat supporters: 47 per cent say they prefer it when one party wins a majority, 42 per cent prefer it when no party wins a majority, and 10 per cent don't know.

¹ These are based on the old electoral boundaries, not those that the next election will be fought on. However, the new 2023 boundaries will have little effect on this result.

2. Hostility both to the Conservatives and to political instability shape voters' views towards a majority government and a hung parliament

While specific issues will crop up during the next election, for many voters, the dominant consideration will be the chance to kick the Conservatives out of power, end political instability, and secure a government that gets things done. A hung parliament is seen as a barrier to achieving these aims for many – and explains the preference for a majority, single party government.

FIGURE 2: LETTING THE CONSERVATIVES BACK IN, PRODUCING AN UNSTABLE GOVERNMENT, AND MAKING IT HARD TO PASS LAWS WERE VOTERS' TOP THREE CONCERNS WITH A HUNG PARLIAMENT



Percentage of respondents – both overall and Labour 'targets' (those who said they did not vote Labour in 2019 but are considering doing so now). Question: "imagine that no party has an overall majority at the next election, which of the following, if any, would be your biggest concern?"

Respondents were asked to imagine that no party had an overall majority at the next election and to select their biggest concern. The most selected worry was that it would 'let the Conservatives back into power' (25 per cent). This was followed by it would 'produce an unstable government' (20 per cent) and it would 'make it hard to pass laws/introduce new policies' (19 per cent). A much lower proportion (11 per cent) said their fear would be that it would let the Labour party into power.

Among Labour's 'target' voters, the pattern was the same, but more pronounced: 36 per cent feared a hung parliament would let the Conservatives back in, 24 per cent said it would produce an unstable

government, and 22 per cent said it would make it hard to pass laws and introduce new policies. Only 2 per cent mentioned fear that it would let Labour into power.

Kicking the Conservatives out of power

The next election will be perceived as a chance for voters to ‘throw the rascals out’, as Professor Rob Ford argues.⁸ Our research found widespread hostility to the Conservatives. In our poll we asked a sub-sample with over 700 respondents how likely they were to vote Conservative at the next election: 44 per cent said their likelihood of voting Conservative was 0 out of 10. This is twice the proportion that said the same about Labour (22 per cent).

Just 30 per cent of adults said their likelihood of voting Conservative was between 6 and 10 (out of 10). The equivalent figure for Labour was 45 per cent. This indicates a low ceiling of potential Conservative support.

Our focus groups of Labour’s target voters (those who did not back Labour in 2019 and are considering doing so now) reflected antipathy toward the Conservatives and a strong desire for change:

“Honestly a deal with the devil would be better than the Conservatives.”

“I don’t believe in [the] Conservative [party] anymore, they’ve really let us down with everything ... whether that’s cost of living, whether that’s mortgage prices, whether that’s energy ... council tax, everything, petrol prices, everything. I mean what hasn’t been left to destroy?”

“We need ... a party that is going to sort this country out and pull it up from the ground, from the terrible mess that the Conservatives have put us into.”

“They’ve made promises upon promises and nothing’s really seems like it’s happened from it. So it’s just time to move on really.”

“I just need to get rid of the Conservatives ... Labour would then be my steadfast choice.”

As figure 2 above shows, when asked about a hung parliament, Labour target voters selected ‘letting the Conservatives back into power’ as their biggest concern. Our focus groups reflected the same worry. When we discussed hung parliaments with participants, many said they would be afraid that the Conservative party would do a ‘backroom deal’ with other political parties to stay in power – rather than Labour.

Ending instability in politics and getting things done

Figure 2 also shows that a significant number of voters would be concerned that a hung parliament could lead to instability and inertia. As we have seen this view is even more commonly held by Labour's target voters than the public at large.

Our focus groups found that target voters do not want more uncertainty, instability and 'drama' in politics. They felt the country has had enough – and saw a hung parliament as likely to generate more. Indeed, this often combined with their fear of letting the Conservatives back into power.

As one focus group participant argued: "The Conservative party [is] a rudderless ship ... I don't think they know where they're going or what they're doing and they just seem to be backwards and forwards and side to side and not really achieving anything at the moment."

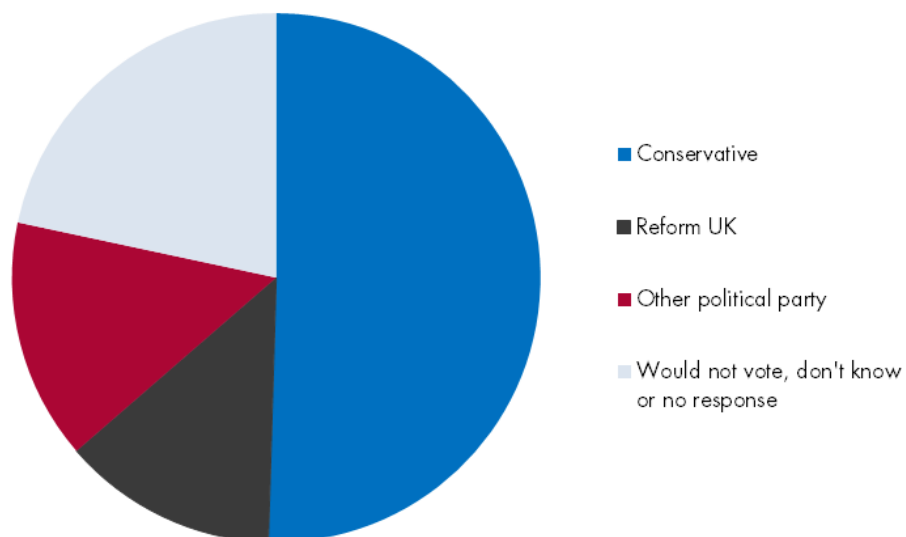
Few worry about enabling a Labour government

Only a small proportion of our survey respondents said their main concern about a hung parliament would be that it would let Labour get into power (see figure 2). As we have seen, only 11 per cent of all adults and 2 per cent of Labour's target voters think this.

Most people who hold this concern currently support parties hostile to Labour. Considering Labour's substantial poll lead at present, these are not voters who are likely to be persuadable or 'in play' for Labour at the next election. Nearly two-thirds (63 per cent) of those who said their main concern with a hung parliament was 'Labour getting into power' already intend to vote Conservative or Reform UK – see figure 3.

This is not like 2015: a Labour-led government is not a feared outcome from the next election. There does not appear to be much of an opportunity for the Conservatives to use the prospect of a Labour government to persuade target voters to back them at the next election. Raising the prospects of a hung parliament could actually damage the Conservatives by motivating a large section of the population to turn out – and vote Labour.

FIGURE 3: NEARLY TWO-THIRDS OF THOSE SAYING 'LETTING LABOUR BACK INTO POWER' IS THEIR BIGGEST FEAR OF A HUNG PARLIAMENT, CURRENTLY INTEND TO VOTE CONSERVATIVE OR REFORM UK



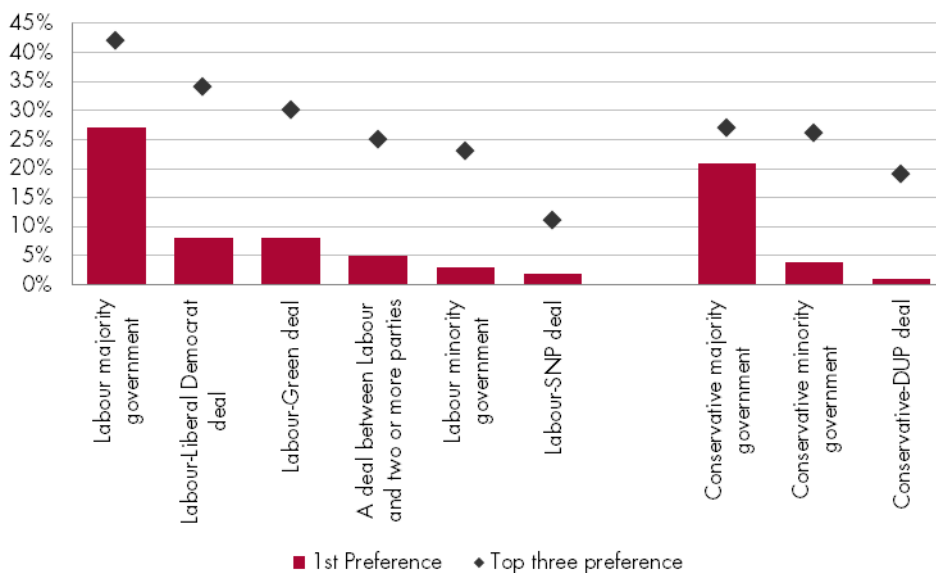
The voting intention of those respondents who selected their biggest fear of a hung parliament was that it would 'let the Labour party get into power'. Question: "imagine that no party has an overall majority at the next election, which of the following, if any, would be your biggest concern?"

3. A Labour majority is the most preferred outcome after the next election, with a Labour-led government acceptable for many voters

A larger proportion of the public wants a Labour majority government after the next election than any other outcome. As we have seen, many are motivated by a desire to kick out the Conservatives and end instability in politics.

This instinct means that many voters would accept a Labour-led government without a majority if necessary. But this is usually viewed as second or third best.

FIGURE 4: A LABOUR MAJORITY GOVERNMENT IS MORE POPULAR THAN ANY OTHER RESULT AS EITHER A FIRST PREFERENCE OR A TOP THREE OUTCOME



The proportion of respondents overall selecting each election outcome presented as their first preference and their top three preferences. Around a fifth (21 per cent) did not pick any outcome. Question: "Thinking ahead to the next general election, which of the following outcomes, if any, would you most like to see? Please rank your top three."

In our survey we asked: "Thinking ahead to the next general election, which of the following outcomes, if any, would you most like to see?" We then showed respondents a long list of possible outcomes, most of which would only arise in the event of a hung parliament (see figure 4). This is not a reflection on the likelihood of any outcome, and many are unlikely even if a hung parliament was to occur. We knew that by presenting many options that people rarely consider, we would be likely to prompt greater support for outcomes that are neither likely nor at the forefront of people's minds.

Nevertheless, there was a clear preference for a Labour majority government.

Our survey found that 27 per cent of all respondents chose a majority Labour government as their first preference. This was followed by 21 per cent selecting a majority Conservative government. None of the minority government, coalition or deal outcomes that might arise from a hung parliament secured first preference support from more than 10 per cent of voters (see figure 4). Just 2 per cent of respondents across Great Britain wanted a Labour-SNP deal as their first preference.

More than a fifth (21 per cent) said ‘don’t know’ and did not express a preference. This means that if you exclude those who did not indicate any preference, 34 per cent of respondents expressing a view wanted a majority Labour government as their most preferred election outcome – compared to 27 per cent selecting a majority Conservative government.

At first glance, the results might seem to suggest that support for a Conservative majority is not much less than for a Labour majority. But this is because the question presented six election outcomes that included Labour in government and only three including the Conservatives: Labour supporters had more options to choose from.

Many key voter groups still had a strong preference for a majority Labour government. The groups selecting this option as their preferred outcome included:

- 47 per cent of Labour’s target voters (those who did not vote Labour in 2019 and who are considering doing so now), which equates to around 3.4 million people.
- 11 per cent of respondents who voted Conservative in 2019, which corresponds to over 1.5 million ‘switch’ voters (by comparison, just 1 per cent of Labour 2019 voters selected a Conservative majority as their preferred election outcome).
- 29 per cent of those living in the 125 English and Welsh target seats.
- 24 per cent of respondents living in Scotland, making it the most popular outcome amongst Scottish respondents (more popular than a Labour-SNP deal which received support from 19 per cent of respondents in Scotland).

Our focus groups with Labour target voters in England and Wales found strong support for a majority Labour government:

“I would hope that it’s a Labour majority and we get a fresh start from another party that can maybe sort out our country that’s in dire straits.”

“I agree that it’s time to give Labour a chance because Conservatives have been in a long time now and the country is in a right mess ... They [Labour] can’t do any worse.”

“I think there needs to be a change ... the way things are going at the moment, it’s not getting any better, it’s just getting worse day-by-day so there needs to be a change and see if Labour can make that change and we need to give them a chance to have a go at things.”

They saw Labour as ‘for the people’, ‘honest’ and ‘genuine ... they would do a lot more for the UK’ – compared to the Conservatives who are seen as ‘corrupt’, ‘not as reliable’ and ‘fighting amongst themselves’.

The public’s backing for a Labour majority becomes clear when we look at people’s top three preferences for the election outcome: 42 per cent of respondents selected a majority Labour government as one of their top three outcomes. After that, 34 per cent chose a Labour-Liberal Democrat deal and 30 per cent a Labour-Green deal. Only 27 per cent of respondents selected a Conservative majority government as one of their top three preferences.

Crucially, 70 per cent of Labour’s target voters (those who did not vote Labour in 2019 and who are considering doing so now) selected a Labour majority government as one of their top three outcomes of the next election. This indicates that, even if some might say their first preference is a multi-party deal led by Labour, they will willingly vote Labour knowing that the likely outcome is a majority Labour government.

As figure 4 above shows, there is a big gap between the percentage of people who opted for one of the Labour-led hung parliament options as a top three outcome, as opposed to their first preference. This indicates that a significant share of voters is willing to support a coalition or deal as the price to pay to get the Tories out and avoid instability. But for many, it would be a second or third best option. These people want a majority Labour government after the next election.

CONCLUSION

On the eve of the long general election campaign, electoral and polling evidence shows that Labour is on course for a majority. A hung parliament is currently an unlikely outcome. But in spite of this, it will probably continue to be discussed. After all, Labour has a 'mountain to climb' just to achieve a majority of one.⁹

Therefore journalists and observers should take note: the British public want a single party majority government and many will vote for Labour to deliver it.

The next general election will not have dynamics similar to those in 2015. Our evidence shows that the next election will be dominated by the public's desire for change after will have been at least 14 years of Conservative government. This has been clearly shown in by-elections in Selby and Ainsty, Rutherglen and Hamilton West, Mid Bedfordshire and Tamworth.

Labour's 'target' voters are motivated by kicking the Conservatives out of power, and delivering a stable government that can get things done. Many see a majority Labour government as the principal way to guarantee change and to end political instability. But, if necessary, there are people who would tolerate a Labour-led deal in order to get rid of the Conservatives.

As we head into the final furlong, Labour can be cautiously optimistic about the next election and is in a strong position to make it through the turbulent final weeks and months before polling day. The voters the party needs to win outright are on the party's side, ready for change and eager for a Labour majority.

Endnotes

¹ What do you think is the most likely result of the next general election?, monthly tracker, 1627 - 1820 GB Adults per wave. YouGov, 2023..

² Another mountain to climb, Andrew Harrop. Fabian Society, 2019.

³ Winning 150, Luke Raikes. Fabian Society, 2021.

⁴ A mature approach, Ben Cooper. Fabian Society, 2022.

⁵ The sea wall, Ben Cooper. Fabian Society, 2022; Green and pleasant, Ben Cooper and Iggy Wood (eds). Fabian Society, 2022.

⁶ Winning back 'the first red wall', Katherine Sangster, Lewis Wotherspoon, Jake Ballantyne, and Zack Langmead-Jones, 2022.

⁷ These voters are defined as backing any political party other than Labour, or not voting, in 2019 and stating their likelihood of voting Labour at the next election is between 6 and 10, out of 10.

⁸ Throw the rascals out!, Rob Ford. The Swingometer, 18th May 2023.

⁹ Another mountain to climb, Andrew Harrop. Fabian Society, 2019.