



Electoral swing

Standard Note: SN/SG/2608

Last updated: 3 December 2012

Author: Rob Clements

Section Social & General Statistics Section

This note briefly explains the concept and calculation of electoral swing, and some of its limitations. It also includes some frequently requested statistics of swing.

Contents

1	Calculating swing	2
2	Examples	2
3	National swing at General Elections	4
4	Swing at the 2010 General Election	4
5	By-election swing: records	6

This information is provided subject to [our general terms and conditions](#) which are available online or may be provided on request in hard copy. Authors are available to discuss the content of this briefing with Members and their staff, but not with the general public.

1 Calculating swing

Electoral swing is a way of comparing the results of two elections in the same area, whether nationally or locally. It is often used to analyse the performance of parties over time or in one election between different electoral areas. The basis of calculating swing is each party's percentage share of the vote.

The swing from Party A to Party B is conventionally defined as the average of the percentage point fall in Party A's share of the vote and the percentage point rise in Party B's.

A swing of 5 per cent from Party A to Party B can be visualised as 5 percentage points' worth of voters who previously voted for Party A voting instead for Party B. From a position of parity at the previous election, a swing of 5 percentage points would leave Party B with a 10 percentage point majority over Party A.

The conventional calculation of swing incorporates all the votes cast in an area, not just those for the two parties in question.¹

2 Examples

The tables below show 2005 and 2010 General Election results in three selected constituencies to illustrate how electoral swing is calculated.

Broxbourne	2005	2010	Change
Conservative	53.8%	58.8%	+4.9%
Labour	25.5%	17.6%	-7.9%
Lib Dem	12.2%	13.4%	+1.1%
Others	8.4%	10.2%	+1.8%
Total	100%	100%	0%

The Conservatives' share in 2010 was 4.9 percentage points higher than in 2005, while Labour's share fell by 7.9 percentage points. The swing from Labour to the Conservatives was therefore

$$\frac{4.9\% + 7.9\%}{2} = 6.4\%$$

¹ Throughout this note, the conventional, or 'Butler', swing is used. Another method, known as two-party or Steed swing, is calculated from only the votes cast for the two parties in question. For further discussion, see David Denver, *Elections and Voting Behaviour in Britain*, second edition, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994 pp20-21 and Dick Leonard and Roger Mortimore, *Elections in Britain, A Voter's Guide*, Palgrave, 2001, pp38-39.

Hartlepool	2005	2010	Change
Labour	51.5%	42.5%	-9.0%
Conservative	11.5%	28.1%	+16.7%
Lib Dem	30.4%	17.1%	-13.3%
Others	6.6%	12.2%	+5.6%
Total	100%	100%	0%

The Conservative share of the vote rose by 16.7 percentage points while Labour's fell by 9.0 percentage points. The swing from Labour to Conservative was therefore

$$\frac{16.7\% + 9.0\%}{2} = 12.8\%$$

Blyth Valley	2005	2010	Change
Labour	55.0%	44.5%	-10.5%
Lib Dem	31.1%	27.2%	-3.9%
Conservative	13.9%	16.6%	+2.7%
Others	-	11.7%	+11.7%
Total	100%	100%	0%

The swing from Labour to the Liberal Democrats is calculated as follows:

$$\frac{-3.9\% + 10.5\%}{2} = 3.3\%$$

There was a swing of 3.3% in Blyth Valley from Labour to the Liberal Democrats even though both parties' share of the vote fell between 2005 and 2010, mostly because four 'other' candidates stood in 2010 (including the BNP which took 4.4% of the vote and UKIP which polled 4.3%) whereas only the three major parties has contested the seat in 2005.

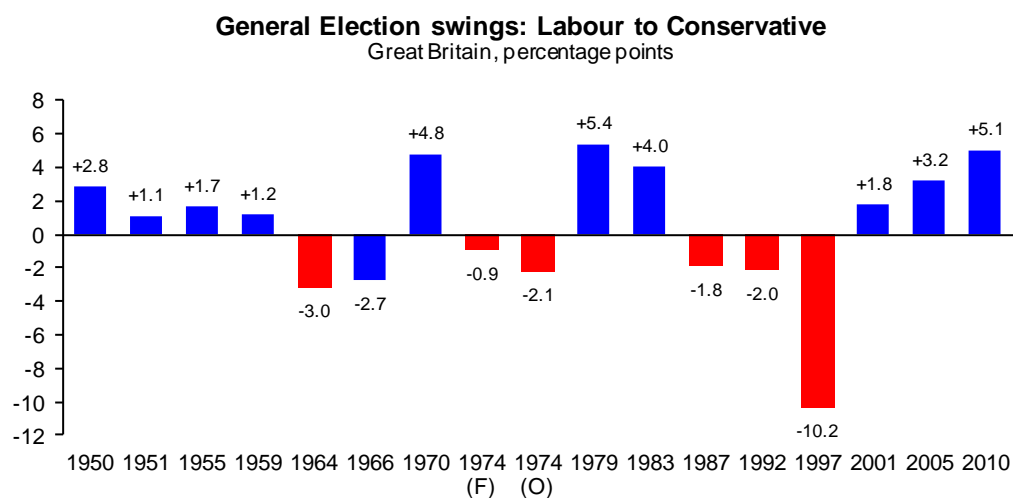
This example demonstrates the limitations of swing as an analytical tool. The concept of swing is essentially two-dimensional; it was devised when Britain was characterised by a strong two-party electoral system. When the same two parties occupy the first two places at successive elections, it is usually still a useful measure of their relative performance, but it is less useful when three or more parties take substantial shares of the vote, as is common today.

An extreme example is the Wyre Forest constituency in 2001. Conventional swing calculations show a swing from Labour to the Conservatives relative to the 1997 election. In reality, however, both parties' shares of the vote fell substantially (by 27% and 17% respectively), largely because Richard Taylor stood in 2001 as an independent candidate in 2001 and won the seat with 58.1% of the vote, while the Liberal Democrats did not stand in 2001. Swing has little to offer in this case.

It generally makes more sense in a multi-party system to look at the changes in each party's overall share of the vote between two elections. Taking the example of Blyth Valley (above), it is likely that both Labour and the Liberal Democrats lost votes to the Conservatives and more so to the BNP, UKIP and an Independent candidate. In reality, of course, the flows of votes between parties are complex but they cannot be measured directly at a constituency level.

3 National swing at General Elections

The chart below shows swings from Labour to the Conservatives at General Elections since 1950. A negative swing indicates a swing from the Conservatives to Labour.



The Conservative to Labour swing of 10.2 percent in 1997 relative to 1992 was by far the largest since 1950. The swing in 1997 was smaller than the 12.0 percent from the National Government to Labour in 1945, but the circumstances of the 1945 election were unusual, not least because there had not been an election since 1935 when National Labour candidates had contributed 1.6 percentage points to the National vote total.²

4 Swing at the 2010 General Election

The tables below show the five largest Labour to Conservative and the five largest Conservative to Labour swings at the 2010 General Election respectively.

Labour to Conservative swings: 2010 General Election

% points, using 2005 notional results

Constituency	Con change	Lab change	Lab-Con swing
Lab-Con			
1 Hemel Hempstead	+9.9%	-18.9%	14.4%
2 Cannock Chase	+10.1%	-17.9%	14.0%
3 Barnsley East	+3.8%	-23.9%	13.9%
4 Crewe & Nantwich	+12.9%	-14.4%	13.7%
5 Norwich North	+10.1%	-15.7%	12.9%

² Rallings and Thrasher, *British Electoral Facts 1832-2006*, Ashgate, 2007 Table 1.27

In Barnsley East the Conservatives were in third place (behind the Liberal Democrats) in both 2005 and 2010. The Conservatives gained both Crewe & Nantwich and Norwich North from Labour at by-elections in 2008 and 2009 respectively.

Conservative to Labour swings: 2010 General Election

% points, using 2005 notional results

	Constituency	Con change	Lab change	Lab-Con swing
Con-Lab				
1	Blaenau Gwent	+4.7%	+20.1%	7.7%
2	East Ham	+1.4%	+16.8%	7.7%
3	Glenrothes	+0.1%	+10.4%	5.2%
4	Dumfries & Galloway	-3.7%	+4.8%	4.3%
5	West Ham	+2.6%	+10.9%	4.2%

Conservative-Labour swing means little in Blaenau Gwent as the Conservatives were in fifth place in 2005 and fourth in 2010, when Labour regained the seat which they had lost to an Independent in 2005 (and again at a by-election in 2006). Respect stood in both East Ham and West Ham in 2005 and were runners-up in both to Labour, but did not stand in either constituency in 2010. The Conservatives finished fourth in Glenrothes in both 2005 and 2010. All these constituencies provide examples of why (two party) swing is often a relatively unhelpful measure in a multi-party system.

The table below shows the five constituencies with the largest swings involving any of the five major parties in Great Britain at the 2010 General Election.

Largest swings: 2010 General Election

% points, using 2005 notional results

Rank	Constituency	Parties	Swing
1	Redcar	Lab to LDem	21.8%
2	Ashfield	Lab to LDem	17.2%
3	Merthyr Tydfil & Rhymney	Lab to LDem	16.9%
4	Hemel Hempstead	Lab to Con	14.4%
5	Barnsley East	Lab to LDem	14.0%

Barnsley East provides another example of the limitations of swing as an analytical tool. Between 2005 and 2010, Labour's share of the vote fell by 23.9%, a considerable portion of which was due to votes going in 2010 to five minor parties which had not stood in 2005. Between them they took 18.3% of the vote in 2010. Although both the Liberal Democrat and Conservative shares rose between 2005 and 2010, by 4.1% and 3.8% respectively, the swings shown in the table are largely notional.

5 By-election swing: records

Record swings at by-elections 1945-2012

Percentage points

Con to Lab	29.1	Dudley West	15/12/1994
Lab to Con	22.6	Walsall North	04/11/1976
Con to Lib	35.5	Paisley	20/04/1961
Lib to Con	17.2	Sowerby	16/03/1949
Lab to Lib	44.2	Bermondsey	24/02/1983
Lib to Lab	18.2	Mid Staffordshire	22/03/1990
To SNP	37.9	Hamilton (Lab to SNP)	02/11/1967
To PC	29.2	Rhondda West (Lab to PC)	09/03/1967
From SNP	13.6	Kinross and Perthshire W (SNP to Lib)	07/11/1963
From PC	10.6	Swansea East (PC to Lib)	28/03/1963

Sources: Rallings and Thrasher, *British Electoral Facts 1832-1999*

House of Commons Library Research Paper 03/59

Note: "Lib" denotes Liberal Democrats and predecessors

The swing from Labour to Respect in Bradford West at the by-election on 29 March 2012 was 36.6 per cent.