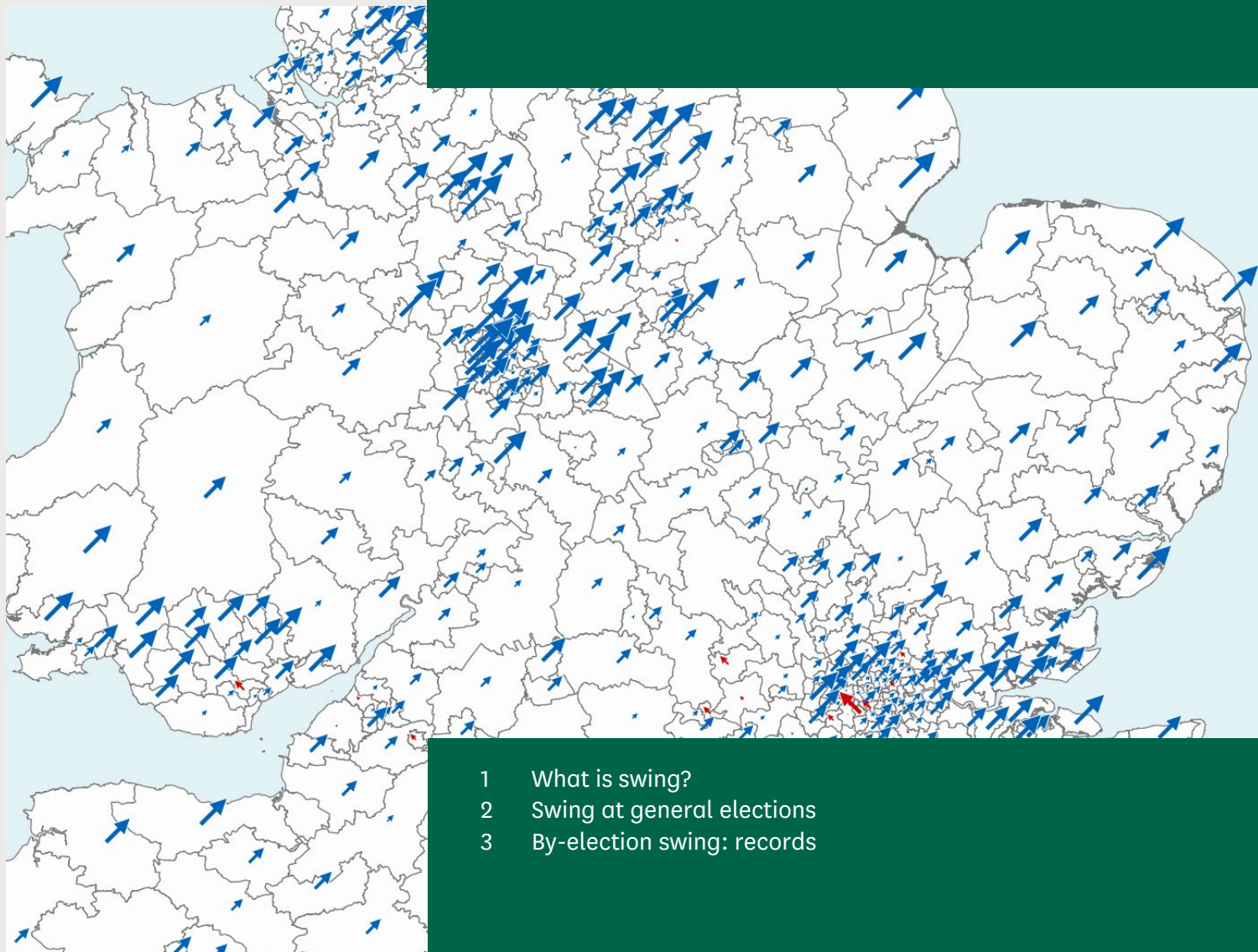


Research Briefing

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Electoral Swing



- 1 What is swing?
- 2 Swing at general elections
- 3 By-election swing: records

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The map on the cover shows two-party swing for constituencies in the 2019 General Election. A larger arrow indicates higher swing, and the colour of the arrow shows which party the swing was towards (blue for Conservative, red for Labour). The map contains National Statistics data under the Open Government Licence.

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1 What is swing?

Electoral swing is often used to analyse the performance of parties in different areas. Election swings show the extent of change in voter support for a political party, from one election to the next, and is typically expressed as a positive or negative percentage point change.

1.1 Calculating swing

The basis of calculating swing is the change in each party's percentage share of the vote. Traditionally, swing was calculated using the 'conventional' or 'Butler method' (after Sir David Butler, one of the first and most prominent psephologists in Britain).

The Butler method for calculating swing defines the swing from party A to B as the average of the percentage point fall in Party A's overall share of the vote and the percentage point rise in Party B's. A swing of five per cent from Party A to Party B can be visualised as five 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 five-percentage points would leave Party B with a ten-percentage point majority over Party A.

This calculation uses vote share changes defined as a loss for Party A and a gain for Party B. In cases where Party A gains rather than loses votes, this loss becomes a negative figure.

Limitations and alternatives

This way of calculating swing is limited because it is essentially two-dimensional; it was devised when Britain was characterised by the strength of its two-party electoral system. Nowadays, support for more than two parties is common in British general elections.¹

In elections with more than two competitive parties, it generally makes more sense to look at the change in the share of the vote of each party between two elections. This is also sometimes referred to as swing or one-party swing.

¹ Fieldhouse et al, *Electoral Shocks: The Volatile Voter in a Turbulent World*, first edition, 2021

When the same two parties occupy the first two places at successive elections, the Butler method is still a meaningful measure of electoral change and parties' relative performance.²

1.2 Example: when swing works well

The table below shows an example of a constituency where the Conservatives and Labour were the two main contenders in the 2017 and 2019 General Elections. The conventional method of calculating swing works well to capture the dynamics at play.

Newcastle-under-Lyme Election results					
	2017		2019		Change
	Votes	Vote share	Votes	Vote share	
Labour	21,124	48%	16,039	36%	- 12%pt
Conservative	21,094	48%	23,485	53%	4%pt
Liberal Democrat	1,624	4%	2,361	5%	2%pt
Others	0	0%	2,854	6%	6%pt

In this example, Labour's vote share loss was 12 percentage points while the Conservatives vote share gain was 4 percentage points. The swing from Labour to the Conservatives is therefore:

$$\frac{4 + 12}{2} = 8$$

There was an 8-percentage point swing from Labour to the Conservative Party for Newcastle-under-Lyme in the 2019 election.

1.3 Example: when swing falls short

The example below shows a constituency with important changes in the number of votes for third parties. Such changes can strongly influence the swing between the two main parties. In UK elections, third parties now often

² The conventional calculation of swing incorporates all the votes cast in an area, not just those for the two parties in question. 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 of methods calculating swing, and their limitations, 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.

receive significant shares of the vote which limits the use of swing as an analytical tool.

Esher and Walton					
Election results					
	2017		2019		Change
	Votes	Vote share	Votes	Vote share	
Conservative	35,071	59%	31,132	49%	-9%pt
Liberal Democrat	10,374	17%	28,389	45%	28%pt
Labour	11,773	20%	2,838	5%	-15%pt
Others	2,624	4%	725	1%	-3%pt

In this example, the two largest parties in 2019 were the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats. Between 2017 and 2019, the Liberal Democrats' share of the vote increased by 28 percentage points, whereas the Conservatives vote share fell by 9 percentage points. The calculation for swing is therefore:

$$\frac{28 + 9}{2} = 18.5$$

The swing from the Conservatives to the Liberal Democrats in Esher and Walton for the 2019 general election was 18.5 percentage points.

A look at the Labour Party's performance in this constituency shows that this does not fully capture what happened at this election: a substantial part of the Liberal Democrat's increase in votes is likely to have come from Labour.

In this scenario, looking at the percentage point changes in support for each party is more informative than looking at the swing between two parties.

2 Swing at general elections

2.1 Swing at the 2019 General Election

The table below shows the five largest Labour to Conservative swings at the 2019 General Election.³

Labour to Conservative swing: 2019 General Election				
% point change, compared with 2017 General Election				
	Constituency	Con change	Lab change	Lab-Con swing
1	Bassetlaw	+11.9%	-24.9%	18.4%
2	Dudley North	+16.6%	-14.9%	15.7%
3	Mansfield	+17.3%	-13.7%	15.5%
4	Redcar	+12.8%	-18.1%	15.5%
5	Leicester East	+14.4%	-16.2%	15.3%

Bassetlaw illustrates the limitations of the conventional method of calculating swing; the table here shows a large swing from Labour to the Conservatives. In reality, the Conservative's percentage increase is relatively low when compared to Labour's decreased share in votes. The Brexit Party received 10.6% of the vote here, probably accounting for some of Labour's loss. In Dudley North, the Conservatives gain was larger than Labour's loss, meaning some of this gain comes from other parties.

The table below shows the largest Conservative to Labour swings in 2019.

Conservative to Labour swing: 2019 General Election				
% point change, compared to 2017 General Election				
	Constituency	Con change	Lab change	Con-Lab swing
1	Bradford West	-1.4%	11.5%	6.5%
2	Putney	-8.4%	4.4%	6.4%
3	Portsmouth South	-0.2%	7.6%	3.9%
4	Cardiff North	-5.9%	-0.6%	2.6%
5	North East Fife	-11.1%	-5.9%	2.6%

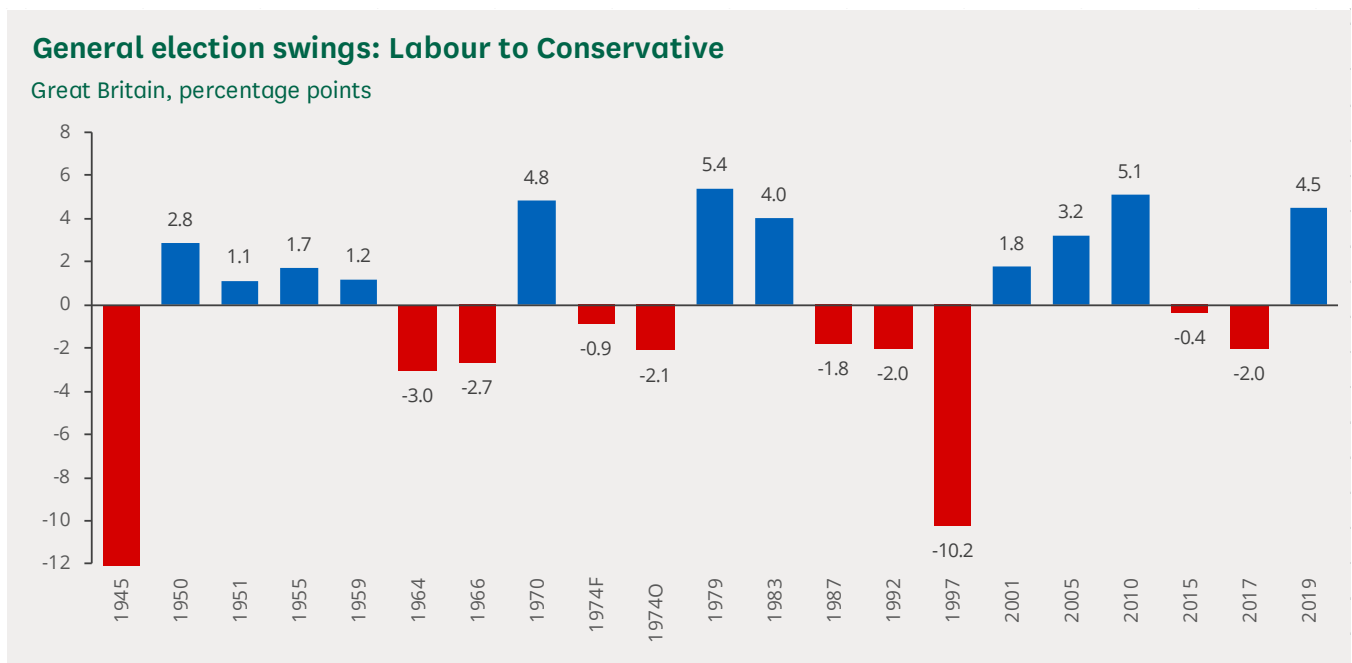
The largest Conservative to Labour swing was in Bradford West, although most of Labour's vote share increase did not come from the Conservatives.

³ Not including Buckingham, which was held by the Speaker until the 2019 General Election

Putney was the only seat Labour gained in the 2019 election, on a 6.4% swing from the Conservatives (though part of the Conservatives' vote share loss is likely to have gone to the Liberal Democrats). In Cardiff North and North East Fife, both the Conservatives and Labour lost vote share to other parties.

2.2 National swing at general elections

The chart below shows swings between the two major parties (Conservative and Labour) at general elections since 1950. A negative swing indicates a swing from the Conservatives to Labour.



Swings in general elections are generally less than 5-percentage points, except for 1997, 1979 and 2017. The Conservative to Labour swing of 10.2 percentage points in 1997 relative to 1992 was the largest since 1950. The February election in 1974 saw the lowest swing (0.9% from the Conservatives to Labour) since 1945.

The swing in 1997 was bigger than the Conservative to Labour swing of seven percentage points in 1945, but smaller than the 12.0 percentage points from the National Government to Labour. However, 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.⁴

Since 1979, a change in the Party of Government has been the result of a Labour/Conservative swing of more than 5 percentage points (1979, 1997, and

⁴ Rallings and Thrasher, *British Electoral Facts 1832-2006*, Ashgate, 2007, Table 1.27

2010). In 1979, there was a 5.4 percentage point swing from Labour to Conservative and in 2010 this was 5.1 percentage points.

The case of the 2017 General Election illustrates the limitation of swing: both the Conservatives (+6%) and Labour (+10%) increased their vote share compared with 2015. It is likely that these votes came from ‘other’ parties, most significantly UKIP. The two-percentage point swing to Labour noted in the chart above is therefore not a useful indicator of vote share changes at this election.

2.3 If an election were held tomorrow

The next general election is likely to be held using new constituency boundaries, which are expected in Summer 2023. This means it is not possible to predict the impact of different levels of swing on the number of seats each party is likely to win.

The table below illustrates the possible impact of different levels of swing by using the existing constituency boundaries to calculate the effect of different levels of swing on the number of seats the Conservative and Labour Parties would win. These calculations assume the level of swing is the same across all constituencies (uniform national swing) and vote shares for all other parties remain the same. A 2.5 percentage point swing hence means that the Conservative Party loses 2.5 percentage point of vote share, and the Labour Party gains 2.5 percentage point of vote share.

Swing at the next general election		
Estimated impact of different levels of uniform national swing, using current boundaries, Great Britain		
Level of swing	Seats won	
	Con	Lab
2.5%	335	226
5.0%	304	253
7.5%	273	284
10.0%	244	311
12.5%	226	329

The highlighted rows show the level of swing that would see the Conservatives lose their majority (5.0%) and the level of swing that would see Labour gain a majority (12.5%). Any level of swing between these two figures would produce a hung parliament.

3

By-election swing: records

Swing tends to be higher in by-elections, which also typically record lower turnout than general elections. The table below shows the largest swings in by-elections since 1950.

Record highest swing at by-elections 1945-2022			
By party, Butler two party swing			
Parties	Swing	Constituency	Date
Conservative and Labour			
Con to Lab	29%	Dudley West	15/12/1994
Lab to Con	23%	Walsall North	04/11/1976
Conservative and Lib Dem			
Con to Lib	36%	Paisley	20/04/1961
Lib to Con	17%	Sowerby	16/03/1949
Labour and Lib Dem			
Lab to Lib	44%	Bermondsey	24/02/1983
Lib to Lab	18%	Mid Staffordshire	22/03/1990
To Nationalists			
Lab to SNP	38%	Hamilton	02/11/1967
Lab to PC	29%	Rhondda West	09/03/1967
From Nationalists			
SNP to Lib Dem	14%	Kinross and Perthshire West	07/11/1963
PC to Lib Dem	11%	Swansea East	28/03/1963
UKIP and Brexit Party			
Con to UKIP	41%	Clacton	09/10/2014

The largest swing at a by-election since 1945 was in Southwark, Bermondsey in February 1983. Liberal candidate Simon Hughes won the seat on a 44.2%-point swing from Labour. Hughes retained the seat until the 2015 General Election.⁵

By-elections in the 2019 Parliament have recorded some relatively large swings: the Conservatives gained Hartlepool from Labour on a 16-percentage point swing and the Liberal Democrats gained Chesham and Amersham, North Shropshire, and Tiverton and Honiton from the Conservatives on 25.2, 34.2 and 30.4 percentage-point swings respectively.

⁵ House of Commons Library Briefing CBP-7529, [UK election statistics 1918-2022: A century of elections](#)

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