



Political Studies
Association

Expert Predictions of the 2017 General Election

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On behalf of the Political Studies Association

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A selection of comments from our experts

We didn't exactly cover ourselves in glory with the previous editions of this report, are you completely sure this is a good idea.....?

Probably a realignment election, with the Tory's victory kicking the can down the road a bit, from the Blair and Cameron legacies of elite center, while we all wait to see if Labour can move beyond Michael Foot redux.

Recent events have shown predicting political outcomes to be a fool's errand. But there are enough fools around to keep it popular.

I'm sure to be wrong. If I'm not it won't because I have good forecasting skills.

My predictions are invariably wrong - I'm a kind of 'opposite barometer'.

The reality on the ground is not being reflected by the polls or the media and I suspect that we may be surprised on June 8th...

Introduction

In February 2015, ahead of the general election, the Political Studies Association (PSA) published its first ever survey of experts regarding their predictions of party vote shares and seats for the general election.¹ At the time, the PSA experts predicted a narrow Conservative win (by 33% to 32%) along with a hung parliament – expectations that proved wide of the mark. In early June 2016, we also published a survey of experts ahead of the EU referendum,² with our experts predicting a Remain win (by 55% to 45%) – though notably the predicted probability of Britain’s leaving the EU was put at 38%, meaning the result did not come as a complete surprise. In both events, conventional wisdom about the likely outcome was proved wrong. Obviously polling misses in both events influenced the expectations of many experts, but this was not the only factor in over-confidence of pundits in their predictions.

It might be wondered, then, why we are repeating this exercise, given the poor accuracy of previous predictions. The answer is that it is important to properly record and benchmark the predictions of those who analyse politics for a living – and understand those predictions more precisely. Indeed, it generates a clear and verifiable prediction that can be evaluated after the event, rather than speculative commentary about political trends and events that might be presented as a ‘prediction’ but in fact is simply a diagnosis of conditions.

On behalf of the PSA, we carried out an expert survey of journalists, academics and pollsters concerning their predictions of the outcome of the June 2017 general election. The fieldwork was carried out online between 16th and 26th May 2017, and was by invitation only, distributed to a large mailing list of members of the PSA, journalists from the print and broadcast media, and pollsters from the major polling companies in the UK. Responses were anonymous, and our intention was not to provide a documentary record of the individual who got closest to the final result, but rather to discover what the election prediction of these experts were and whether they differed in meaningful or surprising ways.

In the report that follows, we describe some of the technical details of the survey and then review the headline results. We are very grateful to all those who took the time to respond and made the not inconsiderable effort of predicting 27 different aspects of the outcome of the elections.

¹ Chris Hanretty and Will Jennings. 2015. *Expert Predictions of the 2015 General Election*. <http://www.psa.ac.uk/sites/default/files/PSA%20GE%20Election%20Predictions%20Report.pdf>.

² Will Jennings and Stephen Fisher. 2016. *Expert Predictions of the 2016 EU referendum*. <https://www.psa.ac.uk/sites/default/files/PSA%20EU2016%20Report.pdf>

Response rate

Even though the 2015 expert survey achieved 537 responses, and that for the EU referendum elicited 596, this year only 335 people filled in our questionnaire (though the fieldwork period was shorter this time). In total, invitations to complete the survey were distributed to 2,182 people. This indicates a response rate of just over 15%.

Table 1 below reports the numbers responding to any part of the survey and the number of people who predicted either or both of the Conservative vote share and seats. Academics constitute 83% of respondents and the numbers of journalists and pollsters were so small it makes little sense to try to discuss how their forecasts differ, either from each other or from academics, as we have done in previous reports. What differences there were between these types of respondent were very slight.

Table 1. Number of respondents by type

<i>Role</i>	<i>Respondents</i>	<i>Forecast Conservative vote share or seats</i>
Academic	280	160
Journalist	23	13
Pollster	7	6
Other	25	12
Total	335	192

Those who provided forecasts of Conservative votes or seats nearly all gave forecasts for the other main parties for Great Britain. Non-response rates were higher for Scottish and Welsh nationalists and especially for the Northern Irish parties. Despite this we refer to the percentage forecasting the Conservative votes or seats as the forecasting or completion rate.

Our first question, almost universally answered by anyone clicking through, asked people to self-assess their forecasting ability relative to their peers. The willingness to go on to forecast votes and seats was higher for those who self-assessed as better forecasters. The choice to ask this question appears to have affected the completion rate. Whether this reduced the overall completion rate or not is not clear, but the pattern does suggest that we should have a more highly self-selected set of forecasters. (That was not our intention.) Whether they will do better than in the past couple of years remains to be seen.

Table 2. Self-assessed forecasting ability relative to peers for those who forecasted

	Survey completion rate (%)	N of forecasters	Percent of forecasters
Bottom 25 percent	50	16	8
Bottom half	56	55	29
Top half	59	90	47
Top 25 percent	67	30	16
Total		191	100

We also wonder whether the disappointingly low response rate might have something to do with the failures of the 2015 and 2016 surveys to accurately anticipate the main outcomes of those electoral events.

A further possibility is that the low response rate may have been something to do with insufficient efforts on our part to encourage participation and remind people of the deadline to participate. Some 80% of the eventual respondents, clicked through on the day the invitations were sent, 16th May. A further 7% of responses were on day 2. Thereafter there were very few responses each day with only a handful replied on the final day.

Context

To some extent this pattern of responses is helpful for interpreting the forecasts. There has been considerable movement in the opinion polls during the campaign so responses concentrated on just one day allow us to comment on what the state of play was at the time that most forecasts were being made.

The 16th May, when 80% of forecasts were made, was the day that the Labour manifesto was being launched, but most of the content was familiar to those who saw reports of the leaked version the week before. The vast majority, 87%, of responses were before the Conservative manifesto launch on 18th May, and so also before the Manchester bombing on 22nd May.

The polls conducted in the week before 16th May on average had the following vote intention figures for Great Britain: Conservatives 47%, Labour 30%, Liberal Democrats 9%, UKIP 5%, and Greens 3%. Polls for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are much less frequent. These polling figures for Great Britain are presented in conjunction with the expert forecasts where appropriate.

It is also helpful to view the responses to our survey in the context of what other forecasters were saying at around the same time. The day before the start of fieldwork for the survey, Chris Hanretty's electionforecast.co.uk prediction was as follows:

Conservatives	412	(365 - 467)
Labour	155	(108-198)
Liberal Democrats	7	(1-11)
SNP	54	(41-58)
Plaid Cymru	2	(1-4)
Greens	1	(0-1)
UKIP	0	(0-0)

Lastly, the broad consensus in the betting markets also pointed to a thumping Conservative win, with the odds of a Conservative majority on Betfair standing [at 90%](#) at the start of May. Obviously, the polls, betting markets and forecasting models have moved in Labour's direction since – but it is in this context that we present the forecasts of our experts.

Predictions of vote share

Respondents were asked to predict the percentage share of the vote for each of the main parties that field candidates across Britain. In Table 3 below, we report the average (mean), median (middle of the pack), 10th and 90th percentiles, and the number of respondents.

Table 3. Predicted vote shares: Great Britain

	Mean	Median	10 th percentile	90 th percentile	N	2015 %	Week prior poll average
Conservative	43	44	36	48	190	37.8	47
Labour	29	29	25	33	190	31.2	30
Liberal Democrat	12	10	8	15	190	8.1	9
UKIP	5	5	3	8	184	12.9	5
Green	4	3	2	5	179	3.8	3
Con-Lab Lead	15	15	6	20	190	6.6	17

On average our respondents thought that the Conservatives will win by a big margin in terms of votes, more than double the lead in 2015. Just one respondent thought that Labour would win a larger share of the vote than the Tories. A further participant had the two parties tied.

The Conservatives are expected by a large majority to improve on their 2015 vote share, while Labour are mainly expected to fall back but not by much. Some 27% of respondents expected Labour under Jeremy Corbyn to do as well or better than they did in 2015 with Ed Miliband.

Very broadly the levels of support estimated for the parties is rather similar to that in the opinion polls prior to survey, as show in the final column of the table. Even though the polls in 2015 substantially overestimated Labour and underestimated the Conservatives, on average our expert respondents were expecting the eventual result to be better for Labour and worse for the Conservatives than the polls in the week prior to the survey were suggesting.

Also striking are expectations for the Liberal Democrats relative to 2015 and the polls in the week prior to our survey. 88% of the experts predicted that the Lib Dems would exceed their 2015 result, and on average by 4 points; more than the 3 point average rise predicted for the Conservatives, despite the opinion polls showing little or no advance.

UKIP were expected to lose more than half of their 2015 vote share. Nobody expected them to win less than 2 per cent of the vote, however. Despite large drops in support being predicted by most, there were five respondents who expected UKIP to increase their vote share; more than the number expecting Labour to win more votes than the Conservatives.

The Greens were predicted to turn in a similar performance as last time.

Scotland

Table 4 gives summary statistics for the predicted shares of the vote in Scotland for the SNP. There were only three polls of Scottish vote intention between the election being called and the start of our survey. The final column gives the average SNP share across those three. Our experts average prediction was essentially in line with the polls showing a substantial drop in support from the nearly 50% they achieved in 2015. However, some 16% of respondents predicted that the SNP would take more than 51%, despite the party winning just 32% of the first preference votes in the local elections less than two weeks prior to the survey.

Table 4. Predicted vote shares: SNP as a share of the Scottish vote

	Mean	Median	10 th percentile	90 th percentile	N	2015 %	Poll average
SNP	44	44	38	56	132	50.0	43

Wales

Table 5 presents summary statistics on the forecasts of the Plaid Cymru share of the vote in Wales. There was just one poll of vote intention in Wales between the election announcement and our survey. It put Plaid Cymru on 13%. All but two of the seven Welsh polls of Westminster vote intention since the start of 2016 have put Plaid Cymru on 13%, one put the party on 14% and remaining one had 16%. It is hard to say why then that most of our respondents predicted that Plaid Cymru would get 16% or more, with an average of 21%.

Table 5. Predicted vote shares: Plaid Cymru as a share of the Welsh vote

	Mean	Median	10 th percentile	90 th percentile	N	2015 %	Poll
PC	21	16	10	40	110	12.1	13

Northern Ireland

Our final set of predictions of vote shares is for Northern Ireland, as presented in Table 6. Again there was only one relevant poll which is shown in the final column. On average our expert predictions are broadly in line with both the polls that have been conducted this year and the results of the 2017 Assembly elections. Another close contest between the DUP and Sinn Fein is expected with both gaining ground. The main surprise in the expert forecast is the high mean prediction of 15% for the SDLP when they received 12% of first preference votes in the Assembly elections this year. We put this down to some wildly high predictions and not enough lower ones to compensate. The median predictions are probably a better guide.

Table 6. Predicted vote shares: Northern Ireland

	Mean	Median	10 th percentile	90 th percentile	N	2015 %	Poll average
DUP	28	27	20	39	80	25.7	29
Sinn	27	27	20	35	79	24.5	28
UUP	14	15	8	20	79	16	15
SDLP	15	13	10	20	81	13.9	12
Alliance	8	8	5	12	78	8.6	10

Predictions of seats in Parliament

Our second set of questions related to how many seats respondents thought each party would win in parliament. In Table 7 we report the mean, median, 10th and 90th percentiles and the number of respondents (N) for each party.

Table 7. Predicted number of seats in UK parliament

	Mean	Median	10 th percentile	90 th percentile	N	2015 election	Day prior Hanretty forecast
Conservative	371	380	330	415	190	331	412
Labour	186	184	150	229	189	232	155
Liberal Democrat	16	12	8	25	189	8	7
UKIP	0	0	0	0	185	1	0
SNP	47	50	40	55	186	56	54
Plaid Cymru	4	3	2	5	178	3	2
Green	1	1	1	2	185	1	1
DUP	7	8	4	9	164	8	-
SLDP	3	3	1	3	162	3	-
Sinn Fein	5	5	3	7	164	4	-
UUP	2	2	1	4	163	2	-
Con majority	92	110	10	180	190		174

Just as with vote shares, the headline figures for our expert predictions concerning seats in parliament also suggest a big win for the Conservatives, although some 12% of respondents expected a net loss of seats for the Tories. On average they expected a majority of 92 but most, 59% of respondents, expected a Tory majority of 100 or more. Labour were expected to sink to their lowest number of seats since 1935, with an average prediction of 186 seats. Just 6% of our respondents expected Labour to match or increase their 2015 seat tally.

The average expert predictions were broadly in line with a uniform change projection based on their average forecasts of the share of the vote. So just as the expert vote share forecasts suggested a more modest lead for the Conservatives than the polls, so too did the expert seat forecasts suggest a smaller majority than either a uniform change projection from the average opinion polls at the time or the Hanretty forecast in the final column of the table.

Those who self-assessed as being in the top 25% of forecasters tended to give slightly higher forecasts for the Conservatives, but the difference was not statistically significant. Nor was there a systematic tendency for those with better self-assessments to give higher forecasts.

The average expected increase in seats for the Liberal Democrats, from 8 to 16, accords with fact that the average predicted shares of the vote imply swings from both the Conservatives and Labour to the Liberal Democrats. However, as with the expert vote share predictions, it is surprising that seat expectations for the Lib Dems were so positive when the polls were

showing big Liberal Democrat to Conservative swings. Just 6% of respondents predicted the Liberal Democrats would suffer a net loss of seats.

UKIP were nearly uniformly expected to not to win any seats this time. The SNP were expected to suffer a net loss of seats, broadly consistent with Scottish polls at the time. For the remainder of the parties listed, little change from 2015 was expected.

Predicted probabilities

We also asked respondents to indicate what probability they would put on the events of a Conservative majority of 100+ and 150+ seats. The summary statistics for the responses to these questions are reported in Table 8 below. In light of more recent polls and forecasts pointing towards a hung parliament we should also have asked about this event. Given that 8% of respondents predicted the Conservatives would lose their majority there would have been a noticeable but small average probability put on such an event.

Table 8. Predicted probabilities for big Conservative majorities

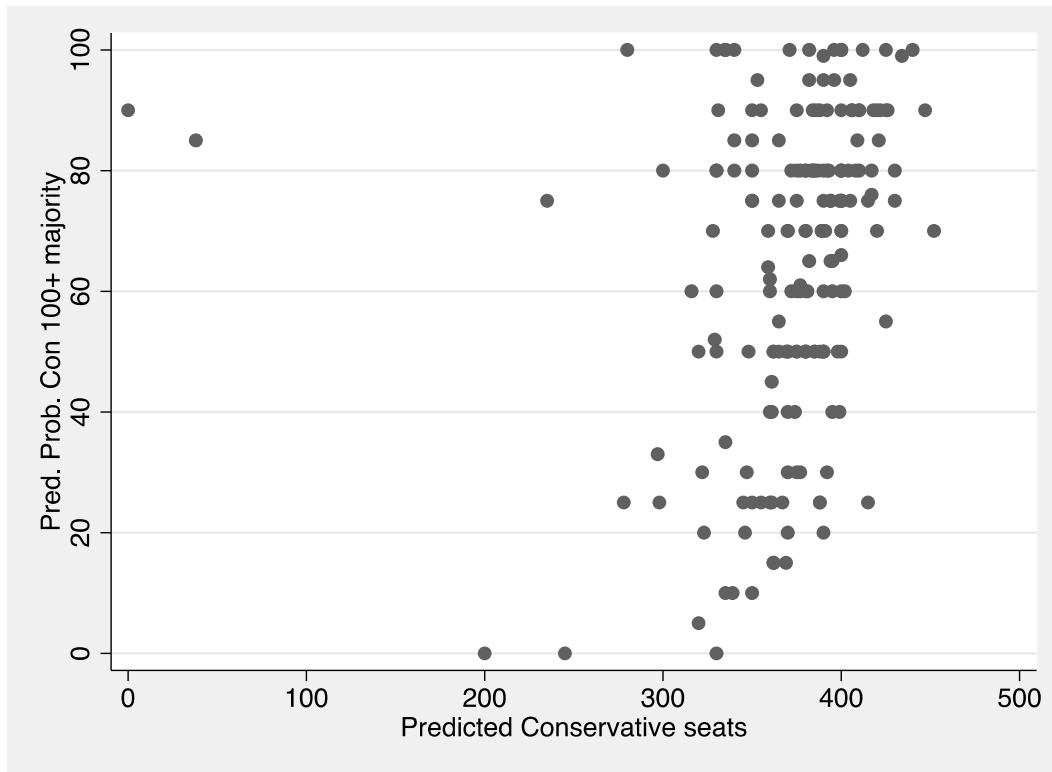
	Mean	Median	10 th percentile	90 th percentile	N
Probability Con majority 100+	65	70	25	95	190
Probability Con majority 150+	32	25	5	70	190

On average the experts gave a 65% probability of a 100+ Tory majority, which is not strictly inconsistent but surprising given that the average seats prediction was for a majority of 92. There were some respondents who gave inconsistent responses if they had symmetrical uncertainty distributions around their central predictions. Some 5% had a Conservative seats prediction that implied a majority of over 100 but gave the event of a 100+ majority less than a 50% chance. More common was the other way round. Some 20% of respondents said that there was better than a 50% chance of a Conservative majority of over 100 but they forecast the Conservatives would get fewer than the 375 seats necessary for a majority of 100.

Thankfully only two respondents made the logical error of giving a bigger probability for a majority of 150+ than for 100+ majority. We suspect that they mis-interpreted the question about 100+ to mean 100-150.

Figure 1 shows the relationship between predicted seats and predicted probabilities. Naturally there is a strong positive correlation, with respondents being more confident of a big majority the larger their estimated number of seats for the Tories. But there are signs of over-confidence. Those forecasting the Conservatives to win between the 375 and 380 Tory seats (little more than necessary) gave on average a 60% chance of a 100+ majority. Those with a central forecast between 380 and 385 gave a 70% chance of a 100+ majority on average. The extent to which respondents expressed uncertainty did not vary significantly according to their self-assessed forecasting ability given their central seats prediction.

Figure 1. Predicted probabilities of a 100+ Conservative majority by predicted Conservative seats



Predictions of turnout

Finally, we also asked respondents “What do you think the turnout will be?” The level of turnout has taken on particular significance for the 2017 election, given the apparent surge in support for Labour among younger respondents in the polls. Whether those people turn out to vote on June 8th will matter for the final result. Our experts’ predictions of turnout, summarised in Table 9 below, suggest that turnout – at 63% - will be lower than for the last election in 2015 (61%), and for the EU referendum in 2017 (71%). This remains substantially lower than the implied turnout from self-reported likelihood of voting questions in many opinion polls.

Table 9. Predicted turnout

	Mean	Median	10 th percentile	90 th percentile	N
Turnout	63	63	57	70	191

Conclusion

The findings of our expert survey are therefore that our respondents seem sure of a sizeable Conservative victory – both in terms of vote share and seats. Such an eventuality would give Theresa May the mandate she sought in calling the election – and would be in line with the conventional wisdom at the start of the campaign. As we discovered in 2016 – with the events of both the Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump – consensus in predictions across expert groups may be a sign of groupthink or over-confidence of forecasters. The recent surge of Labour in the polls will have caused many to reconsider their expectations. We, and our forecasters, would be the first to advise caution in placing too much weight on the Delphic power of expert predictions. We should also be cautious about the degree to which there is potential for self-fulfilling feedback between modes of prediction, such as the polls and election forecasts influencing pundit forecasts – or pundits convincing one another of the direction of political travel. At the same time, it is important to apply clear and transparent standards for what constitutes a ‘prediction’ of a political event or outcome. Simply saying something is a possibility is not the same as giving a verifiable and clearly defined prediction of a particular outcome. Our experts have provided specific predictions that can be tested against the election result. We look forward to finding out how they, and we, performed.

Acknowledgements: we are immensely grateful to all participants for giving up their time to complete the survey. We hope the results are of interest to them all. Thanks also to Stef Mair at the PSA for help in setting up and distributing the online survey.