

# Stay-at-home voters are the key to Labour victory

Andrew Harrop

## FABIAN REVIEW

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It's now well known that the single greatest explanation for Labour's steady lead in the opinion polls is the defection of former Liberal Democrat voters to the party's ranks. If Labour can sustain a decent proportion of this new Lib Dem support it is on track to be the largest party in the next parliament.

But new Fabian Society research shows that an outright majority in 2015 also depends on Labour winning over stay-at-home voters from 2010. Huge numbers of people who declined to vote at the last election now say they will vote Labour. But the party will only secure a majority if it can persuade these new supporters to cast their ballots in two years' time.

We used a specially commissioned You Gov poll to assess the voting intentions of people who didn't vote in the 2010 election. You Gov's polling methodology is particularly suitable for this analysis because the pollster uses a panel of respondents and so is able to re-question people who originally told them they didn't vote immediately after the May 2010 election (other companies take people's word for their previous voting behaviour).

Figure 1: Voting intention of 2010 non-voters in Autumn 2012					
	Labour	Conservative	Liberal Democrat	Other	None
%	23	15	4	5	53

Source: YouGov; 31st August – 3rd September 2012; sample 2018 GB adults

You Gov found that 23 per cent of their sample of 2010 non-voters now say they'll vote Labour (figure 1).<sup>[i]</sup> According to Fabian Society calculations using the data, this means an estimated 1.4 million people in the non-voter group now plan to vote Labour (see figure 2).

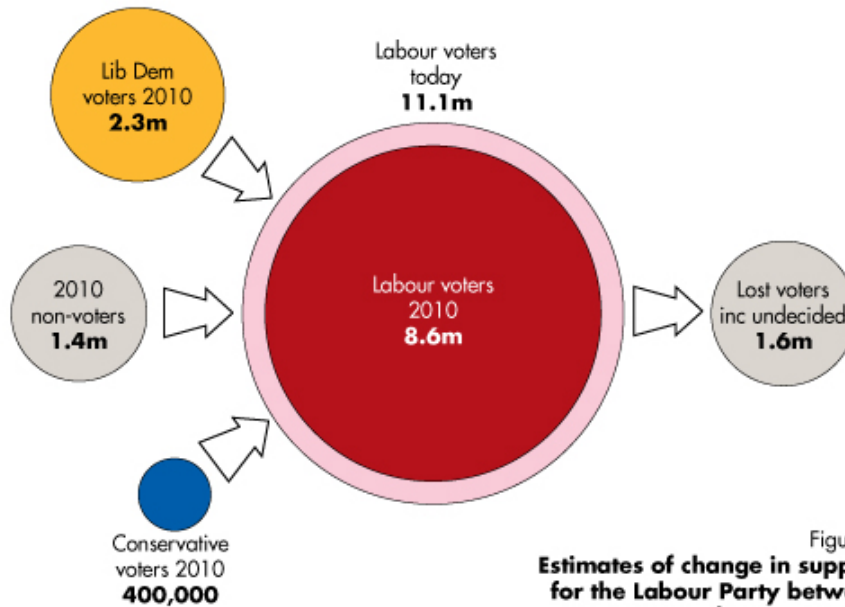


Figure 2  
**Estimates of change in support  
 for the Labour Party between  
 May 2010 and Autumn 2012**

This shift in support is factored into Labour's headline polling numbers and has boosted Labour's lead by around 5 percentage points, which could translate into an extra 40 seats in the House of Commons. With the polls expected to narrow as the election nears, this non-voter bloc is likely to make the difference between a hung parliament and a Labour majority.

These non-voters are particularly important for Labour because the party has won very few supporters directly from the Conservatives. Only one to two per cent of voters have switched directly from the Tories to Labour, despite the troubles the government has faced over the last 12 months.

Indeed, with so few former Tories switching sides it may come as a surprise to see Labour doing so well in the polls. However the party is succeeding by building a centre left coalition of support. Many of the 2010 non-voters are likely to be former Labour supporters who gave up on the party in the latter half of its term of office, and so are similar to the defectors from the Lib Dems. As these broadly left-leaning voters have seen the effects of the coalition and as Labour's time in office has grown more distant they have been prepared to consider the party again. Labour's strength is based on the return of former supporters who turned away from the party and new voters who share the same values.

Meanwhile Labour's failure to attract 2010 Conservatives has a silver lining: it means the party has fairly few current supporters who might switch back to the Tories as their mid-term blues recede. Labour's polling lead is much more vulnerable to apathy and disenchantment among its loose centre-left coalition than it is to deserters from Conservative-inclined 'swing voters'.

In other words, 2015 is set to be an 'Obama-style' election, with very few people likely to switch between the two main parties and a Labour victory dependent on motivating and mobilising sympathetic voters. This analysis indicates that Labour stands a strong chance of winning as long as it learns from the grass-roots campaign techniques of the US Democrats.

## **And what about the other parties?**

The research also provides insights for the other two main parties. Turning to the Tories first, our analysis reveals something curious: the Conservatives have lost little support to people who now

back no party (ie saying they are undecided or won't vote). All parties lose some former voters in this direction but the survey suggests the Tories have lost no more support than Labour since 2010 (figure 3). Meanwhile a reasonably high number of 2010 non-voters say they plan to support the Conservatives (figure 1).

This suggest the Conservatives are bucking recent trends for Governments in power with regard to former voters sitting on their hands (by contrast Labour lost 1.6 million votes to people not voting between 1997 and 2010 and John Major lost 2 million in just one parliament).

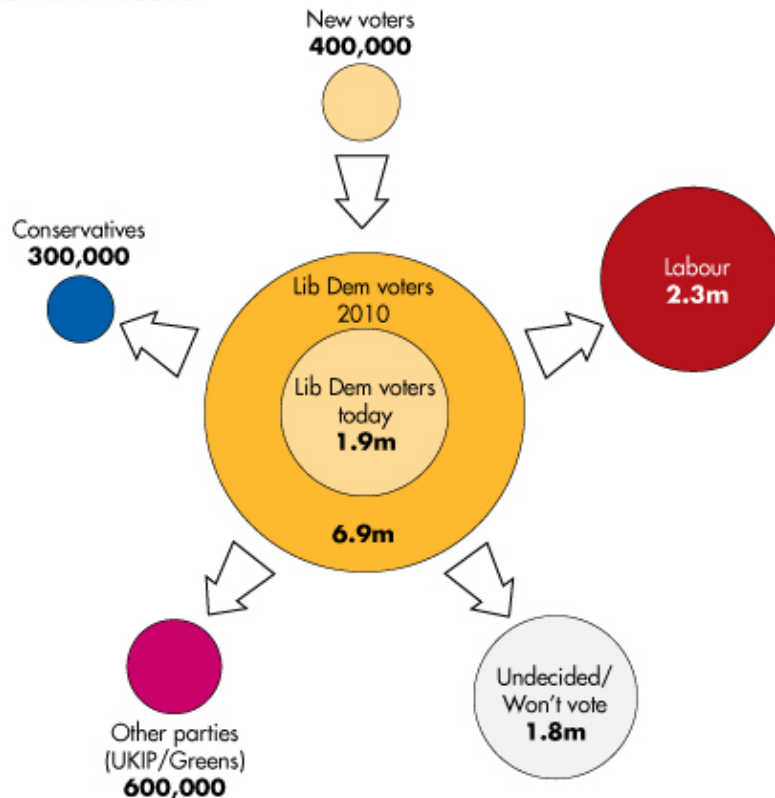
Figure 3: 2010 voters who did not support a party in Autumn 2012				
	<b>2010 Conservative</b>	<b>2010 Labour</b>	<b>2010 Liberal Democrat</b>	<b>2010 Non-voter</b>
Would not vote	2	2	5	31
Undecided	12	10	21	22

*Source: YouGov; 31st August – 3rd September 2012; sample 2018 GB adults*

On the other hand, it's been widely reported that the Tories have lost significant support to UKIP and the Fabian Society analysis suggests this amounts to an estimated one million people. Putting these numbers together, it's plausible to suggest that UKIP is a vehicle for disenchanting 2010 Conservative who in another era might have refused to support any party. In other words, David Cameron's 'UKIP problem' may have replaced the normal pattern, where governing parties lose votes to abstentions. This would mean that if or when UKIP's fortunes wain, the Conservatives cannot automatically expect supporters to return to the Tory fold.

There is also important news for the Liberal Democrats. It's frequently reported that the Liberal Democrats have lost vast swathes of their support to Labour, but according to our analysis this tells less than half the story. Figure 4 suggests an estimated 2.3 million 2010 Lib Dem voters now plan to vote Labour and a further 900,000 for another party. However 26 per cent of 2010 Lib Dems do not support anyone (figure 3) which we estimate is equivalent to 1.8 million voters (figure 4).

Figure 4  
**Estimates of change in support  
 for the Lib Dems between May  
 2010 and Autumn 2012**



It's plausible to assume that this 'undecided/won't vote' group may be less 'detached' from the Lib Dems than voters who are actively supporting a different party and many in this group may end up voting Lib Dem. If this turns out to be true it would suggest there is now an army of 'shy Lib Dems' (as there were supposed to be 'shy Tories' before the 1992 election).

This could be good news for Labour as well as the Lib Dems. It's widely assumed that the Lib Dems will recover some ground before 2015 and this will dent Labour's lead. But if the smaller party achieved a modest revival by securing support from the 'undecided/won't vote' group ahead of those who have switched to other parties, the immediate harm to the Labour Party's vote would be reduced. So these former Lib Dems could create a cushion that stops every Lib Dem vote gained becoming a Labour vote lost. After all, our analysis shows there is a pool of five million disaffected 2010 Lib Dems and Labour only needs a decent share of this group to do well in 2015.

## Conclusion

To recap, since 2010 the Labour Party has won very few new supporters directly from the Conservatives, but it is still well ahead in the polls because it has gained the backing of people who didn't vote in 2010 as well as former Liberal Democrats. The stay-at-home voters are the critical group, for Labour will find it almost impossible to win a majority in 2015 without the support of at least one million people who decided not to cast a vote in 2010.

The challenge for Labour is to turn its mid-term support into votes in the ballot box. The top priority for the party in the next election campaign must therefore be to ensure its potential supporters actually vote. This will take a huge organisational effort, with strong parallels to the US Obama Campaign. Labour's polling lead is much more vulnerable to apathy and disenchantment

among left-leaning voters than it is to deserters among Conservative-inclined 'swing voters'. Labour must design its 2015 campaign with this in mind.

Meanwhile, most people assume that the Conservatives will take votes off UKIP as the 2015 election approaches. But it's equally possible that people who say they support UKIP today will actually not vote at all. David Cameron knows that John Major lost two million votes to abstentions and he will want to avoid the same fate.

For the Liberal Democrats, it's obviously terrible news that five million people who voted Lib Dem in 2010 no longer support the party. But there is a glimmer of hope: almost two million say they support no one and many could be 'shy Lib Dems' who eventually back the party in 2015.

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[i] The sample of non-voters does not reflect the full population of people who did not vote in 2010, as some in this group are socially disengaged and difficult to reach through standard consumer research techniques. For a discussion see Peter Kellner, 'Becoming Real', Fabian Review, Autumn 2012.

[ii] The analysis for figure 2 and figure 4 is the output of Fabian research and not YouGov's original data. The results are estimates only and the calculations include various simplifications. For example no account is taken of deaths since 2010. The results are also subject to the standard margin of error for an opinion poll.