

# As the Conservatives fight among themselves, Labour is increasingly optimistic about its electoral chances. But is this optimism justified?

Blog post by Associate Director Matt Bevington, 21 July 2022

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There is an unusual and unfamiliar mood in the Labour Party these days: optimism. Labour have had an unbroken lead over the Conservatives in the [polls](#) for past seven months. Since autumn last year, Labour leader Keir Starmer has [led](#) Boris Johnson on perceptions of who would make the best prime minister. Labour have pulled more or less [level](#) with the Conservatives on who would be best trusted with the economy.

Meanwhile the Conservatives are tearing strips off each other in the leadership race to replace Boris Johnson. According to [YouGov](#), at the end of June, 78% of the public said the Conservatives were divided (just 5% said they were united) – which is comparable to Labour’s numbers just before the 2019 general election – and that was before Boris Johnson was forced out of office and the subsequent race to replace him began.

However, despite an increasingly bullish tone adopted by Starmer, Labour’s position remains precarious. While there has undoubtedly been progress in recovering from the party’s catastrophic 2019 general election result, support for Starmer and the party is shallow. Digging into the data on why people think Starmer would make a better prime minister than Johnson, the overwhelming majority (70%) attribute this more to Johnson’s weaknesses than Starmer’s strengths. Labour has benefitted mainly from negative perceptions of Johnson rather than positive ones of Starmer. A different Tory leader could quite easily upend this balance.

On overall polling, too, while the party under Jeremy Corbyn never had a consistent lead for anything like the period Starmer has achieved (Corbyn only ever managed a lead for a few weeks), this is a very low bar for comparison. Even under Ed Miliband, Labour had a sizeable 16-month unbroken poll lead in 2012-13 – also a couple of years out from a general election – and still went on to lose.

There is plenty that is different to that period, not least the Conservatives have had nearly a decade in office since, but Labour’s current polling performance is not a clear sign of an impending general election victory. Ahead of Labour’s 1997 landslide, the party led the Conservatives in the polls permanently from September 1992, and often with 20+ point leads. And Labour is in such a hole after 2019 that a swing in support from the Conservatives to Labour on a par with 1997 would [barely yield a majority](#), compared to a 179-seat majority in 1997.

On the economy, Labour have certainly made some progress. Ahead of the 2019 general election, according to [YouGov](#), just 18% thought Labour would be the best party to handle the economy. In June this year, this figure had notched up to 23%. Crucially, the gap to the Conservatives has fallen from 21% to just 1% over this period. ‘Don’t know’ now leads this question, with 28%. But the main explanation for the collapse in the Conservative lead on the economy – accounting for three-quarters of the shift – is damage to that party’s economic reputation, not a sudden faith in Labour.

The Labour Treasury team are clearly conscious of this persistent weakness – all spending announcements are tightly controlled. But Labour is still afflicted by the legacy of its last time in government to 2010, when government debt ballooned following the global financial crisis. Among those asked by [Opinium](#) who thought the Conservatives would still be better at handling the economy, by far the most common reason (52%) was a perception that Labour would drive up debt and the deficit by spending too much money.

For all the optimism in the party – and there is some justification for it – Labour remains vulnerable should a more competent and trusted Conservative prime minister take over. Over the past eight months of Johnson’s leadership, Labour have increasingly been seen by the public as an acceptable alternative, which is undoubted progress on 2019, but not an inspiring one. Johnson’s unpopularity has created a mirage of Labour popularity.

A key metric to follow in the coming months will be Ipsos MORI’s [best prime minister tracker](#), which has predicted the next prime minister at every election since 1983. In January 2021, the last time the question was run, Starmer had an 18-point lead over Johnson, similar to Tony Blair’s lead over John Major in 1997. This alone suggests the Conservatives have made an astute move in seeking to change their leader.

But democratic politics is always an ‘ugly contest’ to choose the least unpopular rather than most popular candidate. Labour will undoubtedly face a new Conservative prime minister that is less unpopular than Johnson. That may well reveal the party’s flirtation with optimism to be a brief one.