

Anti-austerity Labour could have won the election

Stephen Parsons (June 2015)

Lord Ashcroft did a very useful survey on Election Day. Over 12,000 voters were questioned. They were asked not only about their voting behaviour but also about their attitudes to economic policy and their personal experience with respect to prevailing economic conditions. The results are worth reflecting on (tables appended below). They illustrate the difficult political problem that the Labour Party faced with regard to economic policy. They also prompt some reflections about the wisdom of the party's policy choices.

At the time of the election nearly half of voters questioned (46%) said they would endorse a continuation of austerity and cuts in government spending for the next five years. Almost a quarter (24%) chose to adopt a hardline anti-austerity stance, viewing cuts in government spending as unnecessary and ideologically driven. The remainder (30%) thought a period of austerity had been necessary but they did not accept the need for another five years of cuts in government spending. So overall a majority of voters (54%) was against the continuation of austerity as government policy.

Only a quarter of voters (26%) said they were already feeling some of the benefits of an economic recovery. The rest were evenly divided. There were those who weren't feeling the benefits of a recovery but expected to do so at some point (37%). And there were those who weren't feeling the benefits but didn't expect to either (37%). So a substantial majority of voters hadn't seen evidence of the much-trumpeted economic recovery in their own lives.

Those already feeling the benefit of recovery were overwhelmingly in favour of continued austerity (well after all it seemed to have worked for them! so why not for everybody else?). Most of those who expected to benefit from recovery accepted that austerity had been a necessary precursor, although only about half of them (48%) thought that there ought to be further cuts in government spending. Most of the support for the most hardline anti-austerity position was amongst those who didn't expect to benefit from recovery anyway.

To summarise: a majority of voters opposed further austerity and cuts to government spending; and only a minority had yet felt any benefit of an economic recovery. You might think this combination of circumstances ought to favour opposition to the existing government and its economic policy of continuing austerity.

The Conservatives had established themselves as the party most definitely committed to austerity. Labour had to choose whether to compete with the Conservatives in pro-austerity territory or to stand against any further austerity. The problem for Labour was that a policy incorporating a degree of austerity (which definitely includes further cuts in government spending) risked writing off the votes of anti-austerity voters (especially the hardliners who thought it had never been necessary in the first place). But without accepting austerity as being a platform for recovery Labour risked writing off the votes of those expecting to benefit from any recovery (the hopeful or aspirational?), and many of these people (48%) favoured further cuts in government spending.

In the event, Labour offered an undefined degree of austerity (definitely including some further cuts in government spending). But this did not attract substantial support: only about a tenth (11%) of those who favoured more austerity voted Labour (59% of them voted Conservative). Perhaps surprisingly Labour held on to half (51%) of the hardline anti-austerity voters; but significant shares went to the avowedly anti-austerity Celtic Nationalists (12.3%), the Greens (11.9%) and UKIP (11.4%). And Labour got a lower share of those expecting to benefit from recovery (31%) than the Conservatives did (35%). And less than half of those with no hopes of benefiting from the recovery voted Labour (42%); about a fifth of these 'no-hopers' (19%) voted for UKIP, perhaps because UKIP at least promised 'something different'.

With the wisdom of hindsight (and Lord Ashcroft's data) Labour made a fundamental miscalculation by backing austerity (even though a less austere austerity than the Conservatives: 'austerity lite'). If Labour had had the courage to define itself as anti-austerity, and if the party had got the same fraction of the anti-austerity majority of voters as the Conservatives got of the pro-austerity minority, then Labour might have won the election.

Lord Ashcroft's Election Day Survey Re-analysed

The tabulations presented below are derived from the results of a survey undertaken on Election Day 2015 and published by Lord Ashcroft. The numbers reported in Tables 1, 5 and 9 are taken directly from the survey results, the proportionate analyses reported in the rest of the tables were prepared by me based on that data. Some elucidatory sentences are supplied. These are intended to provide interpretational guidance and not to provide an exhaustive commentary.

Table 1: Numbers of respondents in each category

	More austerity	No more austerity	Austerity a con	Total
Recovery benefit felt	2461	563	169	3193
Recovery benefit expected	2149	1607	724	4480
Recovery no benefit	1047	1510	2023	4580
Total	5657	3680	2916	12253

There were 12253 respondents in total of whom 5657 believed that a further period of austerity was justified. There were 3193 respondents already feeling some benefits of economic recovery. There were 2461 respondents who were already feeling some benefits of economic recovery and also felt that a further period of austerity was justified. There were 2916 respondents who believed that austerity had never been necessary but was a cover for ideologically-driven cuts in government spending. Of these people 2023 had no expectation of benefiting from any economic recovery.

Table 2: Attitudes to austerity within each recovery benefit category (%)

	More austerity	No more austerity	Austerity a con	Total
Recovery benefit felt	77.1	17.6	5.3	100
Recovery benefit expected	48.0	35.9	16.2	100
Recovery no benefit	22.9	33.0	44.2	100
All voters	46.2	30.0	23.8	100

A substantial majority (77%) of those already feeling some benefit from economic recovery believed that a further period of austerity was justified. Even amongst those without any hope of benefit from economic recovery more than a fifth (22.9%) felt that a further period of austerity was justified.

Table 3: Recovery benefit category within each attitude to austerity (%)

	More austerity	No more austerity	Austerity a con	All voters
Recovery benefit felt	43.5	15.3	5.8	26.1
Recovery benefit expected	38.0	43.7	24.8	36.6
Recovery no benefit	18.5	41.0	69.4	37.4
Total	100	100	100	100

A majority of those without hope of benefit from recovery (69.4%) thought that arguments in favour of austerity had always been a con to justify ideologically-driven government spending cuts.

Table 4: Percentages of respondents within each sub-category of the overall analysis

	More austerity	No more austerity	Austerity a con	Total
Recovery benefit felt	20.1	4.6	1.4	26.1
Recovery benefit expected	17.5	13.1	5.9	36.6
Recovery no benefit	8.5	12.3	16.5	37.4
Total	46.2	30.0	23.8	100

The following tables relating to voting behaviour (tables 5-8) include a category which adds together both sorts of people with anti-austerity attitudes (i.e. 'All antiausterity' includes both 'No more austerity' and 'Never needed austerity' voters).

Table 5: Numbers voting for parties according to recovery benefit category and attitude to austerity

	CON	LAB	LIBDEM	UKIP	GREEN	SNP	Pcymru	TOTAL
More austerity	3339	628	503	773	120	66	21	5657
No more austerity	571	1571	431	558	165	220	21	3690
Never needed austerity	86	1495	174	331	347	322	38	2916
(All antiausterity)	657	3066	605	889	512	542	59	6606
Alreadyfelt recovery	1972	368	294	297	91	53	12	3193
Expectfeel recovery	1576	1396	460	523	167	183	23	4480
Nohope recovery	448	1930	354	852	374	372	45	4580
TOTAL	3996	3694	1108	1672	632	608	80	12253

Table 6: Voting for parties within each recovery benefit category and attitude to austerity (%)

	CON	LAB	LIBDEM	UKIP	GREEN	SNP	Pcymru	TOTAL
More austerity	59.0	11.1	8.9	13.7	2.1	1.2	0.4	100.0
No more austerity	15.5	42.6	11.7	15.1	4.5	6.0	0.6	100.0
Never needed austerity	2.9	51.3	6.0	11.4	11.9	11.0	1.3	100.0
(All antiausterity)	9.9	46.4	9.2	13.5	7.8	8.2	0.9	100.0
Alreadyfelt recovery	61.8	11.5	9.2	9.3	2.8	1.7	0.4	100.0
Expectfeel recovery	35.2	31.2	10.3	11.7	3.7	4.1	0.5	100.0
Nohope recovery	9.8	42.1	7.7	18.6	8.2	8.1	1.0	100.0
TOTAL	32.6	30.1	9.0	13.6	5.2	5.0	0.7	100.0

Table 7: Voting for parties analysed by recovery benefit category and attitude to austerity (%)

	CON	LAB	LIBDEM	UKIP	GREEN	SNP	Pcymru	TOTAL
More austerity	83.6	17.0	45.4	46.2	19.0	10.9	26.3	46.2
No more austerity	14.3	42.5	38.9	33.4	26.1	36.2	26.3	30.1
Never needed austerity	2.2	40.5	15.7	19.8	54.9	53.0	47.5	23.8
(All antiausterity)	16.4	83.0	54.6	53.2	81.0	89.1	73.8	53.9
Alreadyfelt recovery	49.3	10.0	26.5	17.8	14.4	8.7	15.0	26.1
Expectfeel recovery	39.4	37.8	41.5	31.3	26.4	30.1	28.8	36.6
Nohope recovery	11.2	52.2	31.9	51.0	59.2	61.2	56.3	37.4
TOTAL	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 8: Percentages of respondents within each sub-category of the overall analysis

	CON	LAB	LIBDEM	UKIP	GREEN	SNP	Pcymru	TOTAL
More austerity	27.3	5.1	4.1	6.3	1.0	0.5	0.2	46.2
No more austerity	4.7	12.8	3.5	4.6	1.3	1.8	0.2	30.1
Never needed austerity	0.7	12.2	1.4	2.7	2.8	2.6	0.3	23.8
(All antiausterity)	5.4	25.0	4.9	7.3	4.2	4.4	0.5	53.9
Alreadyfelt recovery	16.1	3.0	2.4	2.4	0.7	0.4	0.1	26.1
Expectfeel recovery	12.9	11.4	3.8	4.3	1.4	1.5	0.2	36.6
Nohope recovery	3.7	15.8	2.9	7.0	3.1	3.0	0.4	37.4
TOTAL	32.6	30.1	9.0	13.6	5.2	5.0	0.7	100.0

The supplementary tables 9-12 below give some further detail of policy attitudes and preferences amongst the categories of voters that have already/previously been identified.

Table 9: Numbers of respondents in each category of policy priority

	Alreadyfeel	Expect2feel	Nohope	Moreaust	Nomoreaust	Austacon	Total
NHS	1532	2637	2902	2740	2413	1918	7071
Costofliving	928	2068	2412	1979	1879	1550	5408
Growthnjobs	1594	1960	1558	2574	1483	1055	5112
Deficitndebt	1081	936	487	1918	406	190	2504
Total	3193	4480	4580	5657	3680	2916	12253

Of the 3193 voters who had already felt some benefit from economic recovery 1532 had identified the future of the NHS as amongst their 'Top 3' priorities in terms of government policy. Overall, amongst the 12253 voters questioned, 7071 chose the NHS as one of their 'Top 3' priorities in terms of government policy.

Table 10: Policy priorities within types of voters (%)

	Alreadyfeel	Expect2feel	Nohope	Moreaust	Nomoreaust	Austacon	Total
NHS	48.0	58.9	63.4	48.4	65.6	65.8	57.7
Costofliving	29.1	46.2	52.7	35.0	51.1	53.2	44.1
Growthnjobs	49.9	43.8	34.0	45.5	40.3	36.2	41.7
Deficitndebt	33.9	20.9	10.6	33.9	11.0	6.5	20.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Growth and jobs was a top priority amongst those already feeling some benefit from economic recovery (49.9%) as much as the NHS (48.0%). Only a tenth (10.6) of those without hope of feeling benefit from economic recovery thought that dealing with government's deficit or debt was a priority. Unsurprisingly there were similarly small fractions prioritising dealing with the deficit and debt amongst those who didn't favour more austerity (11.0%) or never favoured it in the first place (6.5%).

Table 11: Types of voters within categories of policy priority (%)

	Alreadyfeel	Expect2feel	Nohope	Moreaust	Nomoreaust	Austacon	Total
NHS	21.7	37.3	41.0	38.7	34.1	27.1	100.0
Costofliving	17.2	38.2	44.6	36.6	34.7	28.7	100.0
Growthnjobs	31.2	38.3	30.5	50.4	29.0	20.6	100.0
Deficitndebt	43.2	37.4	19.4	76.6	16.2	7.6	100.0
Total	26.1	36.6	37.4	46.2	30.0	23.8	100.0

An overwhelming majority (76.6%) of those who thought that dealing with government deficit and debt was a priority favoured continuing austerity.

Table 12: Percentages of respondents within each sub-category of the overall analysis

	Alreadyfeel	Expect2feel	Nohope	Moreaust	Nomoreaust	Austacon	Total
NHS	12.5	21.5	23.7	22.4	19.7	15.7	57.7
Costofliving	7.6	16.9	19.7	16.2	15.3	12.6	44.1
Growthnjobs	13.0	16.0	12.7	21.0	12.1	8.6	41.7
Deficitndebt	8.8	7.6	4.0	15.7	3.3	1.6	20.4
Total	26.1	36.6	37.4	46.2	30.0	23.8	100.0

Only 1.6% of voters thought that austerity had been a con but still considered dealing with government deficit and debt was a priority.