

Volume 35, issue 2, November 2025

UK politics

Party leaders and party success

This sample Edexcel-style essay should be read alongside the article on Kemi Badenoch (pp. 8–11).

Question: Evaluate the view that the success of a political party is dependent on the leader.

Both Prime Minister Keir Starmer and Leader of the Opposition Kemi Badenoch have had a tough time in the opinion polls. Is party success all about leadership? Or are other factors more important, such as party unity or the role of the media?

Introduction

The popularity of a party leader is very important in determining party success. Leaders such as Tony Blair and Margaret Thatcher were seen by many voters as being highly effective, and this helped their parties get elected to government. However, it can also be argued that there are other more significant factors. If a party appears to be disunited, as was the case with the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn in 2019, voters switch off. Governing competency is another important factor. Voters make a judgement on the previous government: were they effective or not? If not, they will choose an alternative. Finally, the media can have a significant influence on party success in the way that it portrays a party. However, in recent years the development of 'personality politics' suggests that the leader is the most important factor leading to party success.

Paragraph 1

It could be argued that party unity is the most important factor leading to success. There are many examples of party division that have been very damaging to a party's reputation. For example, in 2019 the Labour Party was split over how far it should support the Brexit process, with some MPs arguing that the decision should be reversed. There were also allegations of antisemitism in the party, leading to the resignation of several Labour MPs. In a similar way, before and after the landslide election victory of New Labour in 1997, the Conservative Party found itself split over its attitude to the European Union. Voters were put off by this, particularly as they were not too concerned about this topic and were more interested in the economy and issues relating to corruption and sleaze. A stronger argument, however, is that the party leader is more significant. A decisive and charismatic leader can reduce internal division and unite a party. For example, Boris Johnson unified the Tories and widened the party's appeal to reach the so-called 'Red Wall' voters. He was the most significant factor in the 2019 general election win, with his promise to 'get Brexit done'. More recently, it can be argued that without Nigel Farage, it is unlikely that Reform UK would be surging in the polls. As a party, Reform is not always unified and has had various internal scandals and disagreements. This shows that the party leader is the most significant factor, as they can unite a party as well as inspiring voters.

Paragraph 2

Another argument is that governing competency is the most important factor influencing party success. Elections are judgements, with voters examining the government of the last few years to decide whether they would like a change. For example, in 2009 there was an economic crisis, leading to a major stock-market crash. The Labour government, under Prime Minister Gordon Brown, was held responsible by many voters, and they chose to vote it out in the 2010 election. However, although governing competency is important, the leader is closely linked to this decision. In 2010 the voters saw Brown as weak, uncharismatic and over-cautious. They were more enthusiastic about David Cameron, who was attempting to relaunch the Conservative Party as a more compassionate and less 'nasty' party. Voters were also impressed by the leader of the Liberal Democrats, Nick Clegg, who was rated highly in opinion polls after the televised debates. These two leaders entered the coalition government together after the election. This shows the importance of the party leader, as ...

Paragraph 3

The media could be seen as the most important factor, as it influences voters' perceptions and voting behaviour. In 2019, some argued that the media was far more critical of Jeremy Corbyn than Boris Johnson, and there was a huge focus on issues relating to antisemitism in the Labour Party, while the eccentric behaviour of Boris Johnson was seen as humorous. In contrast, the media was positive in its portrayal of a young and dynamic leader, Tony Blair, in 1997, while John Major – leader of the Conservative Party – was portrayed as 'grey' and dull. However, there is little conclusive evidence that the media has much influence on voters. It arguably tends to follow public opinion rather than lead it. A stronger argument is that the party leader is the most important factor, due to increased focus on personality in UK and international politics. This is linked to changes in the media, for example the development of social media and 24-hour access to news. A party leader today is under constant media attention and needs to have excellent communication skills. Leaders who don't – such as Badenoch and Starmer, according to some commentators – will damage their party's ability to be successful. This shows the importance of the party leader, as...

Conclusion

Although internal division, the media and governing competency are significant factors in party success, the accomplishments of the party leader are usually more important. A strong and popular leader, such as Tony Blair in 1997, can overcome disunity in a party and a weaker leader, such as Jeremy Corbyn, can seriously damage a party's electoral prospects. This is clearly a more convincing argument: without an impressive leader, a party will not be successful.

Student tasks

- 1 Highlight the different factors and the line of argument in the introduction.
- 2 Write a brief mini-judgement at the end of paragraphs 2 and 3.
- 3 Is the argument of this essay convincing? Plan an essay with an alternative point of view.

Jessica Hardy is editor of Politics Review online extras.

This resource is part of POLITICS REVIEW, a magazine written for A-level students by subject experts. To subscribe to the full magazine go to: www.hachettelearning.com/politicsreview