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## Revision

# Why did Attlee win the 1945 general election?

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Consider the following question on the topic of the 1945 general election, then take a look at the sample student response and examiner's commentary (in red).

## Question

How far was Conservative unpopularity responsible for Labour's victory in the 1945 election?

## Student answer with commentary

Although Conservative unpopularity played a crucial role in their defeat in 1945, it is important to remember that Labour's overwhelming victory in terms of seats was the result of the first past the post system. The Conservatives still won nearly 40 per cent of the popular vote and when added to the other opposition parties, won more votes than Labour. However, Labour did gain 10 per cent more of the vote than they had done in 1935, suggesting that they had a greater appeal to the electorate, which was in part due to the social changes that had happened during the war and because they were seen as being more in touch with the mood of the nation and its desire for social and economic change.

The introduction shows a clear awareness of the election result and the extent to which it was influenced by Conservative unpopularity, suggesting that they were not as unpopular as the result suggests, at least in part due to the election system. However, it balances this against the electoral gains that Labour made and does put forward the view that Labour were more in touch with the electorate than the Conservative party, suggesting that these strengths were more important, even if Conservative unpopularity did play a role.

The Conservative party, despite Churchill's war-time leadership were unpopular with many of the electorate. In the minds of many they were still associated with the depression of the 1930s and the dole queues, unemployment, reduced benefits and means test that accompanied it. After the First World War they had been closely associated with Lloyd George's coalition and its promise to create a 'land fit for heroes' but had failed to deliver. They were also associated with the policy of appeasement and the failure to stand up to Hitler, and the failure to either prevent or prepare for war in 1939. The failure in these areas meant that many believed the Conservative party would be unable to provide the social and economic post-war reconstruction that was so evidently needed. They were viewed by many as the establishment party and Churchill's own lifestyle did not fit with the lives of the ordinary people.

The paragraph argues that Conservative unpopularity did play a role and that this can be traced back to their performance in the 1930s and even earlier. It argues that their policies, particularly on social matters, convinced many that they would be unable to meet the needs of the population after the war, suggesting long-term issues were a cause of their defeat. The response considers a range of issues to support this line of argument and is well supported by precise examples from both domestic and foreign policy measures. The issues are well explained, although a clearer judgement as to the importance of the factor would be beneficial.

Although Churchill was viewed by many as the man who had won the war, he was unable to convert this image into a peace-time leader. Even during the war there were signs that the Conservative party was becoming increasingly unpopular as they had been losing by-election since 1942 and the coalition had been under strain in the last years of the war. The Conservative party had appeared to be uninterested in domestic planning, failing to support the Beveridge report when it came out during the war. Churchill had also ensured that no social change was brought about during the war by appointing Conservatives as ministers of Town and Country Planning and also of Health, rather than more reform-minded Labour MPs, an indication to some that he was less than fulsome in his for changes in society that many reports were calling for.

Churchill seemed more concerned with international affairs and his anti-Soviet policy rather than dealing with domestic issues, which were the main concern of the electorate. Churchill's election campaign far from reversing this trend only encouraged Conservative unpopularity. His speeches and broadcasts reminded many of his association with the general strike and opposition to self-determination for India, whilst his failure to commit to an employment policy was also unpopular. His attacks on Labour were also ill-judged, particularly his suggestion that a Gestapo-style police would be needed to enforce Labour's reforms and his suggestion that the choice at the election was between freedom and socialism. Churchill simply failed to appreciate the reputation that leading figures in the Labour party, such as Attlee, Morrison, Bevin, Cripps and Dalton had gained during the war, which had also done much to destroy the myth that the party was unfit to govern.

The response also argues that Churchill was a major factor in Conservative unpopularity. It suggests that throughout his career he had been a controversial figure and that, although he was an ideal war-time leader, he was distrusted by many over his support for post-war change. The paragraph also argues that his election campaign did much to damage Conservative chances and therefore their unpopularity was a factor in their defeat. Once again, the response covers a wide-range of issues and is very well supported but further judgement as to the relative importance of Churchill's role would be helpful.

The Conservative party was undoubtedly unpopular with many, but Labour were also more in touch with the Zeitgeist of the time. They were much more in touch with the mood of the nation, a nation which had suffered deprivation and hardship for many years. Labour recognised that the war had led to a common effort which needed to be rewarded through better health and housing and were more supportive of the Beveridge report of 1942 than the Conservative party appeared to be. They voted for the quick implementation of the Beveridge Report and were clear in their support for the establishment of a welfare state. They were also the beneficiaries of war time developments, which had seen an increase in state controls, which many were now willing to accept in peace time if it meant that there would be an improvement in society. Labour had also played a key role in many of the social and economic changes that had been needed to get the country through the war, with Bevin's Boys keeping the mines going and Morrison's shelters protecting the population from bombing. It was therefore hardly surprising that many of the population thought that they would be better at carrying

out the social reforms that were needed after the war and it was this, rather than Conservative unpopularity that encouraged many to vote for them.

The essay moves on to consider how far Labour were responsible for their victory and suggests that they were more in touch with the mood of the people. Most importantly, it suggests that many believed that they were more likely to carry out the reforms that were demanded and therefore trust in the party was stronger than that in the Conservatives, helping to bring about their victory. As with the previous paragraphs there is good support and explanation of the issues discussed. There is some judgement in the final sentence.

There used to be suggestions that the result of the election was determined by the votes of the armed services who, it was argued, were influenced by the left-wing teachings of the education corps. However, to what extent those conscripted into the education services of the armed forces were left-wing and indoctrinated troops into supporting labour is debateable. Similarly, it is also difficult to tell precisely how the armed forces voted and why. It is unlikely that this played a crucial role in Labour's victory and it is more likely that the government's wartime propaganda department had a greater impact on voter attitudes. The films they put on not only were anti-German, but they also encouraged people to look beyond the war and act together to build a better nation, a message that was much more in tune with Labour ideology than Conservative, suggesting that it was the appeal of Labour that determined the election result.

The response goes on to consider the role of the education corps, which historians used to believe was important. This view is challenged, but the response does suggest that perhaps inadvertently propaganda during the war encouraged the electorate to support Labour, suggesting that it was not simply Conservative unpopularity that was important in influencing the result. The paragraph has a clear argument and is supported with a supported judgement being reached.

Despite the failings of the Labour governments of 1924 and 1929-31, voters were willing to forgive them as the party was seen to be more in touch with ordinary people and their needs. The Conservatives failed to convince the electorate that they would deliver the social reforms that were needed after the Second World War, whereas Labour appeared to represent those who wanted reform and reconstruction. Even if the Conservatives were willing to carry out reform now that the war was over, most believed that the Labour party were better equipped to carry out those reforms. They had experience from the wartime coalition and had gained the respect of the electorate. It was therefore a combination of Conservative unpopularity and Labour popularity that resulted in Labour gaining an overall majority of 148.

The conclusion does reach a judgement as to the role of Conservative party in the 1945 election result and argues that it was not the most important factor. Instead, it argues that Labour appealed to the electorate with its clear support for reform and reconstruction and therefore the result was due more to positive support for Labour rather than an anti-Conservative vote. The explanation and analysis of the issues is very clear and well supported. There are some interim judgements, which are supported in the overall conclusion, but the interim judgements would benefit from greater development. However, the level of analysis and judgement would be enough to take the response into the top level.

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