

Forty years of prime ministerial power

1979–2019

The ability of prime ministers to dictate events and determine policy depends upon a number of interrelated factors. These may include levels of parliamentary support enjoyed, personal popularity, or the impact of circumstances beyond their control (see *POLITICS REVIEW*, Vol. 29, No. 1, pp. 2–5)

Margaret Thatcher (Conservative) 1979–90

Thatcher's determination to deregulate the markets, reduce trade union power and privatise state-run industries overturned the postwar consensus and reshaped the UK, bringing a distinct ideological shift to government.

+ Three general election victories. The Falklands War (1982) showed Thatcher to be a decisive and capable leader. Successful privatisation of public utilities and industries (e.g. British Telecom, British Steel and British Airways). Curbing of trade union power, including a particularly acrimonious victory over the mining unions.

– Failed introduction of the poll tax in 1990. Overbearing style lost the support of key cabinet colleagues and saw her forced from office in 1990.

Activity



Discussion points

- List the factors that prime ministerial power can depend upon.
- Do you agree with this positioning of the various prime ministers?
- Where would you put Boris Johnson, and why?

John Major (Conservative) 1990–97

Major took over from Thatcher in 1990.

+ Won an unexpected election victory in 1992. Decisive involvement in the Northern Ireland peace process, culminating in the Good Friday Agreement, which was signed soon after Major left office.

– Significant difficulty in keeping the Conservative Party in check over attitudes to Europe (which led to his resignation and re-election as party leader in 1995). Unstable economic management led to 'Black Wednesday' crash. Authority diminished by repeated scandals and accusations of sleaze within the party. The slender majority of 1992 was lost well before the 1997 election.

Theresa May (Conservative) 2016–19

May's tenure was only marginally longer than Brown's. Enthusiastic early acceptance was derailed by a poor showing in the 2017 general election.

+ A relentless work ethic to try and get a difficult job (Brexit) done.

– Catastrophic loss of majority in the 2017 general election. Widely unpopular Brexit deal for which she failed to get Commons support. Failure to connect with colleagues or inspire the wider public.

Most powerful

Tony Blair (Labour) 1997–2007

The prime ministerial dominance of the Blair era saw a charismatic leadership style supported by the largest postwar House of Commons majority ever: over 160 seats during Blair's first two terms (1997–2005) and no parliamentary defeats.

+ Shift of the Labour Party to the centre by shedding socialist 'relics' such as Clause IV (the renationalisation of industries) and embracing the private sector. Major constitutional reforms, e.g. devolution of power to the regions and the removal of most hereditary peers from the House of Lords. Passing the Human Rights Act 1998. Creation of the UK Supreme Court. Significant investment in education, health and welfare. Three general election victories.

– Loss of authority and popularity over handling of the Iraq War (2003). Further decline in support from 2005 following confirmation of his departure.

David Cameron (Conservative) 2010–16

Five of the six years that Cameron spent at Number 10 were within a restrictive coalition partnership with the Liberal Democrats amid challenging global economic circumstances.

+ Successful navigation of an unprecedented period of coalition government. Years of austerity politics that saw significant cuts to public spending, nevertheless leading to an outright election victory in 2015.

– The 2015 manifesto commitment to a referendum on EU membership was seen as a tactical attempt to end long-standing resentment within the Conservative Party. Mishandling of the referendum campaign led to defeat and resignation in June 2016.

Gordon Brown (Labour) 2007–10

Gordon Brown's tenure in Number 10 was one of the shortest on record.

+ Handling of the global economic recession was considered to be effective, including rescue packages for failing banks.

– Criticised for not calling an early election. Beset by multiple leadership challenges. Domineering leadership style was widely criticised. Failed to enthuse voters and was replaced by Cameron after the 2010 election.

Least powerful

POLITICSREVIEWExtras

A printable PDF of this poster is available: www.hoddereducation.co.uk/politicsreviewextras

Nick Gallop is editor of *POLITICS REVIEW* and headmaster of Stamford School.