

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper sets out to help answer the question that many in Labour and on the left in general have been asking in recent years. With people’s attitudes swinging in our favour on a range of social issues, and even post-pandemic on economic intervention, why do we keep failing to win a general election?

Such a question will never have one definitive answer, but the analysis here suggests we must pay much greater attention to the role of education in how people vote, and are distributed around the country. If we do, we can tailor our policy and messaging to appeal to the broad swathes of constituencies in England in particular who have left the party – without compromising our values or vision.

I. The realignment in UK politics is rooted in education levels

Analysis of swings over the last decade shows constituencies with low formal education and high educational deprivation swinging to Tories.

Cumulative 2010-19 swing versus proportion with no qualifications (English seats only, colours signify holding party, correlations for Lab and Tory-held seats picked out)



This realignment favours the right in terms of electoral arithmetic, because non-graduates are more evenly distributed across constituencies.

II. The split is between direct and systemic reasoners

The cause of the divergence between voters with different education levels does not come down to values as much as we sometimes imagine; it relates to differences in logic and language. This lies at the root of many ‘culture war’ issues.

Voters with higher formal education are more likely to favour *systemic* logic. Labour has increasingly appealed to those who see things in this way. Those with fewer qualifications prefer *direct* logic. The Conservatives, especially under Boris Johnson, have captured this audience.

This distinction does, it is true, point to genuine differences on some policy positions (e.g. ‘Toughness on the causes of crime’ (systemic) versus ‘Toughness on crime’ (direct)).

But the so-called culture war debates in the UK are often not divides about core values or existential questions like abortion or climate change, as they are in the US. Instead, they are frequently about definitional questions, exposing rifts in analysis and logic.

(The focus on direct and systemic causation is a hypothesis. Despite making extensive use of secondary research, the topic would benefit from additional primary research.)

“Direct causation is dealing with a problem via direct action. Systemic causation recognises that many problems arise from the system they are in and must be dealt with via systemic causation.”

– George Lakoff

III. The 2010s have seen rising education levels and growing political complexity

Voters with higher formal education are more likely to favour systemic logic. Labour has increasingly appealed to those who see things in this way. Those with fewer qualifications often prefer direct logic.

The Conservatives, especially under Boris Johnson, have captured this audience. The causes of this realignment relate to rising university access and the complexities thrown up by globalisation. These factors divide direct and systemic reasoners.

IV. Boris Johnson is a master of direct reasoning

Boris Johnson has pioneered an ultra-direct approach, based on metaphors (e.g. “bung Brexit in the microwave”) and on the ridicule of systemic reasoning as ‘woke’. This lets him attack his opponents in ways that seem authentic, yet which are consistent with socially liberal attitudes on some issues (he is not *culturally* conservative, as such). But it is a fundamental departure from Cameron’s attempts to modernise the Tories, which sought to recognise the role of society and the complexity of international relations. Labour must see what is attractive about ‘Johnson-ism’ – in that it promises actions not words, and bestows agency upon voters – as well as what is wrong with it.

V. Some progressives mis-use systemic logic

Conversely, an ultra-systemic approach has been adopted by some leftist groups in recent years. This takes the form of language which implies everything is linked (e.g. “climate justice *is* social justice”) or which equates complicity in a system with direct harm (e.g. through references to a range of behaviours being “acts of violence”).

These approaches alienate directly minded voters, making the progressive critique of ‘the system’ more confusing rather than less. They also have a negative impact on wider systemic thinking, guiding it into non-progressive cul-de-sacs.

VI. There are three steps for Labour to address this

Labour must win back direct reasoners, to avoid becoming a party which speaks solely to university towns and urban hubs. There are three steps to closing the gap:

- 1. Labour must acknowledge the value of direct reasoning.** There are times when A plus B really does equal C. We must ditch the idea that direct and systemic logic are in competition. We will demonstrate our competence through being willing to speak directly when we need to.
- 2. Labour must distance itself from those who misuse systemic thinking, or render it woolly and impenetrable.** We should avoid culture war slogans, which make structural arguments more confusing rather than less.
- 3. Labour should use the post-Covid period as a moment, like 1945, to argue for big systemic and societal reforms.** To bring direct reasoners along, this needs to be done in a practical way, which is crystal clear about what the changes are, why they matter and how exactly we will make them.