

The Good, the Not so Good, and Liz Truss: MPs' Evaluations of Postwar Prime Ministers

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Abstract

This article reports the findings from a 2023 survey that invited all MPs to evaluate the performance of postwar prime ministers from Clement Attlee to Liz Truss. It also compares MPs' responses with those from a similar survey conducted in 2013. Among the MPs who responded in 2023, Margaret Thatcher was ranked as the most successful postwar prime minister, and Truss was ranked as the least successful. The results further suggest that prime ministers' historical reputations among MPs are relatively sticky, closely associated with their length of tenure in 10 Downing Street, and greatly affected by party loyalties. Lastly, the rankings based on parliamentary opinion in 2023 are broadly comparable with those based on recent surveys of academic and public opinion.

Keywords: prime ministers, leadership, Members of Parliament, Liz Truss, Margaret Thatcher, ranking and rating exercises

Introduction

THERE HAVE BEEN various attempts to rank UK prime ministers by their performance in office.¹ Some rankings have been based on surveys of voters, others have reflected the views of single commentators, and others still have drawn on the combined judgements of multiple commentators or public figures. For example, a 2004 league table based on academic opinion ranked Clement Attlee, Winston Churchill and David Lloyd George as the most successful twentieth century prime ministers, and Arthur Balfour, Sir Alec Douglas-Home and Sir Anthony Eden as the least successful.² Yet, no league table can be a definitive ranking of prime ministerial performance. There will always be new names to add, while past leaders' reputations will tend to evolve as values change, memories fade and new details

of their time in office emerge. More prosaically, all rankings ultimately depend on the variable expertise and biases of those on whose judgements they rest.

This article investigates how UK Members of Parliament evaluate postwar prime ministers from Attlee to Liz Truss. It reports the results of a mail-back survey sent to all 650 MPs in the summer of 2023, and compares the valid responses ($N = 65$) with those from a similar survey fielded in 2013.³ In that earlier study, Margaret Thatcher came top in MPs' estimations, and Gordon Brown came last. Would they be ranked similarly a decade later? And how would MPs rate the four most recent occupants of 10 Downing Street—David Cameron, Theresa May, Boris Johnson and Liz Truss?

Playing the rankings game is admittedly fun, but it has a serious side. It encourages us to consider to what extent individuals or circumstances make history, while the study of others' evaluations sheds light on their conventional wisdoms and biases. MPs are an important group in this regard. They are usually immersed

¹See K. Theakston, 'Evaluating prime-ministerial performance: the British experience', in P. Strangio, P. Hart and J. Walter, eds., *Understanding Prime-Ministerial Performance: Comparative Perspectives*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 221–41.

²K. Theakston and M. Gill, 'Rating 20th-century British prime ministers', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2006, pp. 193–213.

³Royal Holloway Group PR3710, 'British MPs on British PMs: parliamentary evaluations of prime ministerial success', *Politics*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2015, pp. 111–27.

in their parties' histories and traditions and spend much of their time observing and judging other politicians. They also enjoy a unique perspective on prime ministers from the benches in the House of Commons. MPs sometimes appraise prime ministers in their memoirs, and a number have gone further and written full-length biographies of past leaders. Even prime ministers have got in on the act: after leaving office, both Harold Macmillan and Harold Wilson published books offering their opinions on a range of predecessors.⁴

Recent levels of turnover in 10 Downing Street suggest that the job of prime minister has become harder.⁵ Brexit curtailed Cameron's and May's premierships, while personal failings cut short Johnson's and Truss's. This article not only reveals these leaders' emerging historical reputations among MPs, but also indicates how their predecessors' reputations have evolved since 2013. It is hardly a shock that Truss's forty-nine-day premiership received abysmal evaluations among MPs. Perhaps more surprisingly, Brown's reputational stock has seemingly risen over the last decade, especially among Conservatives.

The Royal Holloway surveys

In 2013, a group of staff and students at Royal Holloway, University of London, carried out a study of MPs' evaluations of postwar prime ministers.⁶ Inspired by Kevin Theakston and Mark Gill's earlier surveys of academics, the group sent a short, anonymous mail-back survey to all 650 MPs that elicited 158 replies, a response rate of 24 per cent.⁷ The questionnaire included several questions about the premiership, including one that asked respondents to score each prime minister on a scale of 0–10,

⁴H. Macmillan, *The Past Masters: Politics and Politicians, 1906–1939*, London, Macmillan, 1975; H. Wilson, *A Prime Minister on Prime Ministers*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977.

⁵A. Seldon, *The Impossible Office? The History of the British Prime Minister*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2021.

⁶Royal Holloway Group PR3710, 'British MPs on British PMs'.

⁷Theakston and Gill, 'Rating 20th-century British prime ministers'; K. Theakston and M. Gill, 'The postwar premiership league', *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 82, no. 1, 2011, pp. 67–80.

where 0 meant 'highly unsuccessful' and 10 meant 'highly successful'.⁸ The prime ministers covered in the 2013 survey included all those from Attlee to Brown. Cameron was excluded because his premiership was ongoing.

In response, MPs gave Thatcher the highest average score, ahead of Attlee, Tony Blair, Churchill, Macmillan, Wilson, John Major, James Callaghan, Edward Heath, Douglas-Home, Eden and Brown (see Table 2 below). That Thatcher had the highest score among MPs and Brown the lowest was partly a reflection of their performance in office and partly a reflection of the large proportion of Conservatives in the sample (44 per cent). Party loyalty was a powerful influence on MPs' scoring: on average, Labour prime ministers scored significantly more highly among Labour MPs than among Tory MPs, whereas Conservative prime ministers scored more highly among Conservatives than among Labour MPs.⁹ Heath, whose score was highest among Labour MPs, was the exception to this rule.

A decade later, a new group of academics and students at Royal Holloway conducted a follow-up survey that sought to measure, for the first time, how MPs rated Cameron, May, Johnson and Truss, and to investigate possible changes in how they rated earlier prime ministers. A mail-back questionnaire was again sent to all MPs, and it again asked MPs to score each prime minister on the same 0–10 scale. Rishi Sunak, as the incumbent prime minister, was excluded for the same reasons that Cameron had been omitted in 2013. The questionnaire was accompanied by a cover letter that contained details of the study and guaranteed respondents their anonymity. As the letter explained, each questionnaire had a unique identifier enabling MPs' responses to be linked to other publicly available data covering their backgrounds, political careers and public stances on Brexit ahead of the 2016 referendum.

⁸MPs were asked: 'Some prime ministers are more successful than others. How successful or unsuccessful do you think each of the following postwar prime ministers was in office? Please answer using the 0 to 10 scale, where 0 means highly unsuccessful and 10 means highly successful.'

⁹Throughout this article, statistically significant means a p-value less than or equal to 0.05, a conventional threshold that indicates there is only a 5 per cent chance that the results are random.

The use of this identifier helped to limit the questionnaire to two sides of A4.

The questionnaires were posted to MPs in May 2023. The first responses were received within four days and the last response was received in early August. Overall, sixty-seven questionnaires were returned, a response rate of 10 per cent. Two of the questionnaires were excluded from subsequent analysis, one because the identifier had been removed (including the responses had no substantial effect on the results presented), the other because the answers indicated a pronounced case of ‘careless response’.¹⁰

It is unclear why the response rate was so much lower in 2023 than in 2013. The inclusion of a unique identifier might have dissuaded some MPs from completing the survey. MPs in general might also have become more hesitant about completing academic surveys. Nevertheless, the respondents included a good cross-section of MPs, as Table 1 shows, while the sample’s demographic and political profile was broadly comparable to that of the House as a whole.

The 2023 scores and rankings

Table 2 shows how MPs in 2023 evaluated all postwar prime ministers from Attlee to Truss. The second column ranks them by their average score on the 0–10 scale (rounded to one decimal place). Thatcher had the highest score (7.8), ahead of Attlee (7.4) and Blair (7.4), followed by Churchill (6.4), Wilson (6.4), Macmillan (6.0), Cameron (5.6), Major (5.6), Brown (4.8), Callaghan (4.3), Johnson (4.3) and Heath (4.2). The remaining four places were taken by May (4.1), Douglas-Home (3.9), Eden (3.2) and, with by far the lowest score, Truss (0.7). The average score across all prime ministers was 5.1.

Table 2 also shows a high degree of continuity in prime ministers’ scores and rankings between 2013 and 2023. Thatcher, Attlee, Blair and Churchill held the top four positions in both years, while Major, Callaghan, Heath, Douglas-Home and Eden held the same order

¹⁰See M. K. Ward and A. W. Meade, ‘Dealing with careless responding in survey data: prevention, identification, and recommended best practices’, *Annual Review of Psychology*, vol. 74, no. 1, 2023, pp. 577–96.

Table 1: The profile of respondents and all MPs (May 2023)

	Valid responses	All MPs
Female	29%	35%
Male	71%	65%
Black and Global Majority	8%	10%
White	92%	90%
Mean age (years)	58.4	52.9
Conservative	48%	55%
Labour	29%	30%
SNP	6%	7%
Liberal Democrat	5%	2%
Other party	12%	6%
England	74%	82%
Scotland	6%	9%
Wales	9%	6%
Northern Ireland	11%	3%
Backed Remain before 2016 referendum	58%	61%
Backed Leave before 2016 referendum	34%	32%
Position on Brexit not known	8%	7%
Member of government (incl. whips)	8%	14%
Mean experience (years in Parliament)	15.3	11.4
Total	65	650

Table 2: Rankings of prime ministers by average score among MPs in 2023 and 2013

Ranking	2023	2013
1	Thatcher (7.8)	Thatcher (7.4)
2	Attlee (7.4)	Attlee (7.3)
3	Blair (7.4)	Blair (6.8)
4	Churchill (6.4)	Churchill (6.5)
5	Wilson (6.4)	Macmillan (6.1)
6	Macmillan (6.0)	Wilson (5.8)
7	Cameron (5.6)	Major (5.3)
8	Major (5.6)	Callaghan (4.4)
9	Brown (4.8)	Heath (4.4)
10	Callaghan (4.3)	Douglas-Home (4.0)
11	Johnson (4.3)	Eden (3.7)
12	Heath (4.2)	Brown (3.3)
13	May (4.1)	
14	Douglas-Home (3.9)	
15	Eden (3.2)	
16	Truss (0.7)	

among themselves. The main changes in the rankings were the additions of Cameron, Johnson, May and Truss, who, apart from Cameron, tended to congregate towards the bottom of the table, and the improved position of Brown, who jumped from last place in 2013 to ninth in 2023. In terms of average scores, Brown (+1.5 points) enjoyed comfortably the largest change across the two surveys. Only three other prime ministers, Blair (+0.6), Wilson (+0.6) and Eden (-0.5), saw their average score change by half a point or more.

Two relatively objective 'facts' of each premiership seem to be reflected in the 2023 (and 2013) scores. The first of these is prime ministers' records in winning general elections. Prime ministers are expected to lead their parties into power and/or keep them there, and MPs tended to score more highly those who did. Indeed, the average score in 2023 across the five multiple-elections winners (Thatcher, Attlee, Blair, Wilson and Cameron) was 6.9, compared with 4.8 for the seven single-election winners (Churchill, Macmillan, Major, Heath, Johnson, Eden and May) and 3.4 for the four prime ministers who never won a general election (Brown, Callaghan, Douglas-Home and Truss).

But winning elections is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for scoring highly. Churchill and Macmillan won only one election apiece, but scored relatively well. Brown and Callaghan, who were defeated in their lone election outings as party leader, both scored higher in 2023 than several prime ministers who had won clear victories. And while Heath's three election defeats (in 1966 and twice in 1974) might have hurt his reputation, neither Attlee's three defeats (in 1935, 1951 and 1955), nor Churchill's two defeats (in 1945 and 1950) greatly diminished their standing in MPs' eyes.

The second objective fact of each premiership reflected in the scores is length of tenure: MPs tended to score longer-serving prime ministers more highly. There was a very strong positive correlation between prime ministers' total years in office and their overall mean score in 2023.¹¹ There was also a pronounced gulf in the total time served in office between those at the top of the rankings and those at the bottom.

The top eight prime ministers in 2023 served, on average, for seven years and 356 days, whereas the bottom-eight served, on average, for just two years and 124 days.

Electoral success and length of tenure are arguably direct measures of prime ministerial performance. But they are also a precondition for something else that likely affected MPs' scores: what prime ministers did in office. Roy Jenkins reckoned 'it is essential to have a cumulative period in office of at least five years in order to rank as a Prime Minister of major impact', by which he meant exerting a significant influence on government and public policy.¹² By this criteria, Thatcher, Attlee and Blair, who all served for at least six years and who happened to have the highest scores in both 2023 and 2013, are the most obvious candidate prime ministers of major impact since 1945. They presided over enduring changes in the way government was conducted and their governments transformed broad swathes of policy. Churchill was undoubtedly a prime minister of major impact between 1940 and 1945. His wartime heroics almost certainly inflated MPs' evaluations of his disappointing peacetime premiership.

If extended runs in Downing Street facilitate major-impact status, shorter premierships may be associated with limited impact or, in some instances, manifest failure. The prime ministers who scored less than 5 on the 0–10 scale—the midway point—in both surveys all served for relatively short periods, as seen. In terms of their records, Eden colluded in starting a war against Egypt to regain control over the Suez Canal; Douglas-Home was little more than a caretaker leader preoccupied with a looming election; and Heath was forced to U-turn on his ambitious programme, before losing a snap election in the face of industrial strife. Callaghan's government was confounded by worsening economic conditions, and Brown, having finally succeeded Blair in 2007, permanently weakened his position by hivering over whether to call an early election. He never recovered his authority as the economic and political crises mounted.

Of the three most recent prime ministers, all of whom were relatively short-serving and

¹¹The Pearson correlation coefficient, a conventional measure, is 0.91.

¹²R. Jenkins, *Gallery of Twentieth Century Portraits*, London, David & Charles, 1988, p. 204.

low-scoring, May failed to secure parliamentary backing for her Brexit deal with the EU, while her plans to develop a 'proper industrial strategy' and create a more meritocratic society came to naught. Johnson, despite winning his party's largest parliamentary majority since 1987 and 'getting Brexit done', was undone by his own serial dishonesty. Truss torpedoed her own seven-week premiership with a financially catastrophic mini-budget. She will be forever remembered as the prime minister who was outlasted by a lettuce.

May's, Johnson's and Truss's failings are reflected in MPs' scores. Their failings may also help to explain the relative boost in Brown's ranking between 2013 and 2023. From a governmental perspective, his response to the 2008 global financial crisis looks ever more creditable when contrasted with his successors' records. Moreover, Labour's defeat in the 2010 general election has since been overshadowed by its defeats in 2015, 2017 and 2019. The facts of Brown's premiership have not changed, but subsequent events have probably led MPs to reappraise his record.

Party loyalties and MPs' scores

The discussion so far has focussed on the overall rankings and how the 'facts' of each premiership might have affected MPs' scoring. But success is also in the eye of the beholder, and although the small sample size precludes fine-grained analyses, it is possible to investigate how some individual-level characteristics affected MPs' scores.

We begin with gender and whether women and men differed in their evaluations of prime ministers. They certainly tended to differ over whether they thought there was a level playing field for women and men in leadership positions. An additional question in the 2023 survey asked MPs if they thought those in political life generally held women leaders to higher standards than men, to the same standards, or to lower standards. In response, 84 per cent of women MPs and 33 per cent of men said women were held to 'higher standards', whereas 16 per cent of women MPs and 67 per cent of men said 'the same standards'.¹³ Yet, women tended to be

harsher critics than men when it came to evaluating their own gender. Thatcher's, May's and Truss's average scores among women MPs were lower than among men by -1.9, -0.3 and -0.5 points respectively.

If these results seem surprising, they are also misleading because of how gender and party intersected among the sample. Party loyalty predisposes MPs, like others, to downplay any successes achieved by the opposing side and to downplay any failings on their own side. Only four of the nineteen women who returned the survey were Conservatives, whereas nine were Labour MPs and the remaining six were from other parties. After controlling for party loyalty in a series of simple multivariate models, MPs' gender had no significant impact on Thatcher's, May's or Truss's scores. In fact, gender had a statistically significant effect on MPs' scores for just one prime minister, Callaghan. Controlling for party, women tended to judge him less favourably than men by -1.2 points.

Figure 1 demonstrates the general effect of party loyalty by comparing Labour prime ministers' average scores among Conservative and Labour MPs in 2023. Figure 2 likewise compares Conservative prime ministers' scores across the same two groups. MPs from other parties are excluded because of their relatively small numbers. In all cases, Labour prime ministers received a higher average score among Labour MPs than among Conservatives, whereas Conservative prime ministers received a higher score among Conservatives than among Labour MPs. The largest difference in scores among the two groups was for Thatcher, whose average score of 9.2 among Conservatives was matched by 6.4 among Labour MPs. Only the differences for Eden, Heath and May were not statistically significant. In Heath's case, the difference vanished when rounded to one decimal place.

There were also some notable differences in how MPs from the same party scored prime ministers in 2023 compared with in 2013. Table 3 reports the mean scores among Conservative and Labour MPs for both years. Remarkably, all five Labour prime ministers

standards? 52 per cent of all MPs said 'the same standards' and 48 per cent said 'higher standards'. The differences by gender were statistically significant.

¹³MPs were asked: 'Do you think those in political life generally hold women leaders to higher standards than men, to the same standards, or to lower

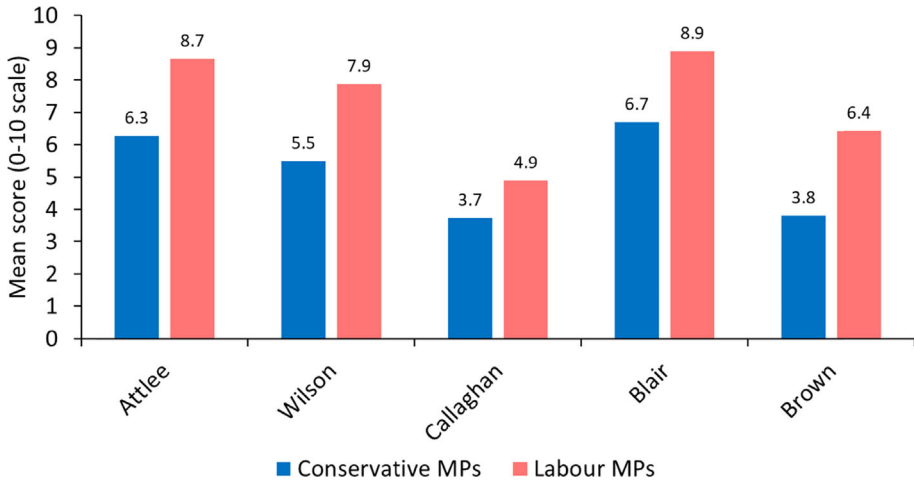


Figure 1: Labour prime ministers' average scores by party

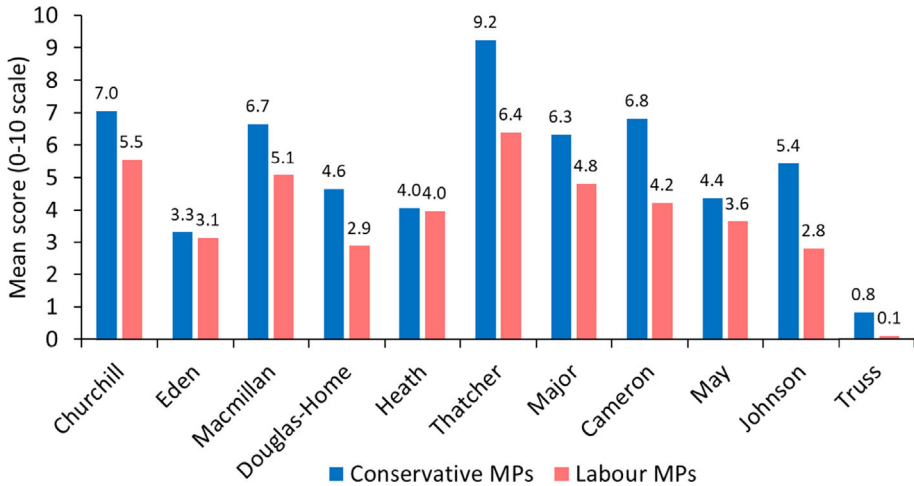


Figure 2: Conservative prime ministers' average scores by party

had a higher score among Conservative MPs in the 2023 survey compared with the 2013 survey, whereas several Conservative prime ministers, most notably Churchill, received a lower score. The difference in Brown's score among Conservatives (+2.1 points) was especially pronounced, which confirms that his improvement in the rankings was not just a Labour-driven phenomenon. Brown also received a notably higher score among Labour MPs in 2023 compared with in 2013, as did Blair and Wilson, whereas Attlee and Callaghan had a slightly lower score. Thatcher and Major also

scored higher among Labour MPs in 2023. These differences suggest that most Labour respondents the most recent survey were not from the Corbynista wing of the party.

One final individual-level factor we investigate is Brexit and how MPs' public positions before the 2016 referendum were associated with their scoring in 2023. We focus exclusively on Conservatives, partly to control for the effects of party loyalty, but mainly because they were the only group that was substantially divided over the issue. Among the thirty-one Conservative MPs

Table 3: Prime ministers' mean scores by party in 2013 and 2023

	Conservative MPs			Labour MPs		
	2013	2023	Difference	2013	2023	Difference
Attlee	5.9	6.3	+0.4	8.7	8.7	0.0
Churchill	7.7	7.0	-0.7	5.4	5.5	+0.1
Eden	4.3	3.3	-1.0	3.1	3.1	0.0
Macmillan	6.4	6.7	+0.3	5.8	5.1	-0.7
Douglas-Home	5.0	4.6	-0.4	3.0	2.9	-0.1
Wilson	4.3	5.5	+1.2	7.4	7.9	+0.5
Heath	4.1	4.0	-0.1	4.5	4.0	-0.5
Callaghan	3.5	3.7	+0.2	5.3	4.9	-0.4
Thatcher	9.0	9.2	+0.2	5.8	6.4	+0.6
Major	6.2	6.3	+0.1	4.3	4.8	+0.5
Blair	5.5	6.7	+1.2	7.9	8.9	+1.0
Brown	1.7	3.8	+2.1	4.8	6.4	+1.6

who returned the questionnaire, twelve had publicly backed Remain and eighteen had publicly backed Leave.

Although the small sample invites a note of caution, the differences are revealing. Overall, Leavers were more partisan than Remainers: their mean scores for Labour prime ministers were notably lower than Remainers' corresponding scores, with the differences for Attlee (-2.2 points), Wilson (-1.6) and Blair (-1.5) meeting conventional levels of statistical significance, and those for Callaghan (-1.2) and Brown (-1.2) falling just short. When it came to Conservative prime ministers, Leavers' scores were significantly lower than Remainers' scores for Macmillan (-1.4), Heath (-2.6) and Major (-2.2). It was, of course, Macmillan who first sought UK membership of the Common Market, and it was Heath who achieved it. Major blotted his copybook in the eyes of many Leavers by signing the 1992 Maastricht Treaty. By contrast, Johnson, the prime minister who finally oversaw the UK's exit from EU, received a mean score among Leavers that was 1.7 points higher than his score among Remainers, although the difference fell just short of statistical significance. None of the other differences in mean scores were significant.

Prime ministerial character

In addition to asking MPs to score each prime minister, the 2023 survey also repeated an item from 2013 that asked MPs to select the three most important character traits from among a

list of twelve that they thought were necessary for a prime minister to be successful.¹⁴ Prime ministerial character is not the only thing that shapes their performance in office: the size of their majority, their party's and their personal poll ratings, the unity or disunity of their party and the state of the economy all matter. On that last point, no fewer than 71 per cent of MPs returning the survey in 2023 indicated that favourable economic circumstances were 'extremely important' for a prime minister to be successful, with 28 per cent indicating 'moderately important'.¹⁵ Nevertheless, leaders' characters matter for how they conduct themselves in office, as well as how they are perceived by others.

Table 4 reports the character traits presented to MPs, together with the proportions of MPs who selected them. Overall, the results suggest an enduring consensus on what traits MPs think matter. MPs in 2023, as in 2013, tended to select 'decisive', 'intelligent' and 'principled' as being among the three most important. 'Honest' was again the fourth most frequently selected trait,

¹⁴Royal Holloway Group PR3710, 'British MPs on British PMs'. MPs were asked: 'People disagree over which character traits are most important for a prime minister if he or she is to be successful. Which traits do you think are most important? Please select up to three from among the following...'

¹⁵MPs were asked: 'Do you think favourable economic circumstances are extremely important, moderately important, or not at all important for a prime minister to be successful?'

Table 4: Which character traits are most important? (% agreeing)

	2023	2013
Decisive	68%	76%
Intelligent	57%	48%
Principled	54%	66%
Honest	38%	31%
Energetic	25%	18%
Compassionate	14%	10%
Creative	14%	10%
Ruthless	12%	8%
Collegial	8%	14%
Friendly	8%	2%
Tolerant	3%	4%
Cautious	0%	1%

and ‘energetic’ was the fifth. Relatively small proportions of MPs selected any of the other traits. It has long been held that the qualities of elected politicians can be reduced to two general characteristics: competence and honesty.¹⁶ Insofar as ‘decisive’ and ‘intelligent’ align with the former, and ‘principled’ and ‘honest’ align with the latter, most MPs continue to think that competence is more important for successful prime ministerial leadership than honesty.

Once again, the small sample size limits our ability to compare differences across groupings of MPs in 2023. There were no significant differences by gender, but there were three statistically significant differences when responses were cross-tabulated by party. First, whereas 6 per cent of Conservatives and 11 per cent of Labour MPs selected ‘compassionate’, 33 per cent of MPs from other parties chose this trait. Second, 81 per cent of Conservatives chose ‘intelligent’, compared with 37 per cent of Labour MPs and 33 per cent of other MPs. Third, 74 per cent of Conservatives and 79 per cent of Labour MPs chose ‘decisive’, compared with only 40 per cent of other MPs.

More broadly, and in contrast to the overall pattern discussed earlier, the two most important traits among MPs from other

parties were ‘principled’ and ‘honest’. It may be that the expectation or experience of being in government conditioned Conservative and Labour MPs to emphasise competence over honesty. It may also be that the relatively limited importance attached to ‘principled’ among Conservative and Labour MPs, coupled with the dip in its perceived importance in 2023, is indicative of a ‘Truss effect’ and ‘Corbyn effect’ respectively. Truss, when Conservative leader and prime minister, and Jeremy Corbyn, when Labour leader, were highly principled in their ways. Yet, Truss’s commitment to tax cuts and growth drove the mini-budget that abruptly ended her premiership, and Corbyn’s left-wing values were a factor in the outcome of the 2019 general election and Labour’s worst election results since 1935. Principles matter, but holding the wrong principles can make leaders appear dogmatic and overly ideological.

MPs’ rankings in context

This article has examined how MPs judge postwar prime ministers and some of the factors they think make for a successful premiership. The results suggest that prime ministers’ historical reputations among MPs are relatively sticky, closely associated with their length of tenure and filtered by party loyalties.

MPs’ evaluations of prime ministerial performance are politically significant, to be sure, and may also reflect important insights gleaned from working in politics. But they are not necessarily more authoritative than those based on others’ judgements. This final section briefly compares the rankings based on parliamentary opinion with others based on contemporary academic and public opinion.

In the case of academic opinion, there are scores and rankings of prime ministerial ‘success’ broadly comparable with those reported above. In their most recent (2021) survey of historians and political scientists, Theakston and Gill asked respondents to score postwar prime ministers on a similar 0–10 scale. Attlee, Thatcher and Blair achieved the top three scores, ahead of Wilson, Macmillan, Brown, Major, Churchill, Callaghan, Heath, Cameron, Douglas-Home,

¹⁶See N. Allen, S. Birch and K. Sarmiento-Mirwaldt, ‘Honesty above all else? Expectations and perceptions of political conduct in three established democracies’, *Comparative European Politics*, vol. 16, no. 3, 2018, pp. 511–34.

Eden and May.¹⁷ As with MPs, academics tended to score longer-serving prime ministers more highly. Furthermore, once Johnson and Truss are excluded, only three prime ministers' rankings based on MPs' and academics' scores varied by three or more places. The heavily Labour-leaning sample of academics tended to score Brown more highly than MPs, and Churchill and Cameron more critically.

In terms of public opinion, there are no directly comparable measures to those reported above. But some surveys have asked respondents to judge the performance of postwar prime ministers, such as a 2021 Ipsos survey that asked voters whether they thought each prime minister had done a 'good job', a 'bad job' or 'neither'.¹⁸ Based on the proportion of respondents who said they had done a 'good job', Churchill came top, ahead of Thatcher, Blair, Wilson, Cameron, Major, Brown, Macmillan, Attlee, May, Heath, Callaghan, Eden and Douglas-Home. Again, most prime ministers held positions in this league table comparable to those in the 2023 parliamentary rankings. Only Attlee's and Churchill's positions differed by more than two places. When focussing on postwar performance, MPs in 2023 (as well as academics in 2021) placed the former some way ahead of the latter, whereas voters regarded Churchill much more highly. This discrepancy is probably a reflection of Churchill's almost mythical status and Attlee's relative obscurity in popular culture.

It remains to be seen how prime ministers' historical reputations evolve, especially those of 10 Downing Street's most recent incumbents. Cameron's stock could well rise for the relative calmness of his pre-referendum premiership, or it might fall because of his role in Brexit and the long-term impact of his government's austerity policies. His surprise return to government as foreign secretary in November

2023 could also revise memories of his premiership. May's failure to secure approval for her Brexit deal is an almost indelible mark on her long-term reputation, but her perseverance may come to be appreciated. Johnson's credit for getting Brexit done will depend on how Britain's withdrawal from the EU is valued, but his personal failings leave a shadow of dishonesty that will be difficult to discount, while revelations about his actions during the Covid pandemic may further weaken his reputation. Truss's tenure in Downing Street was so short-lived that it is difficult to see how anyone could come to view her stint as anything other than an unmitigated failure.

These predictions may sound harsh, but in an era of highly personalised politics, when parties are often divided on almost tribal lines, the abilities and calibre of prime ministers are arguably more important than ever. Those who aspire to the highest political office must be prepared for critical and unvarnished evaluation. The conventional wisdoms surrounding prime ministers—whether those of politicians, academics or citizens—may be wrong or misguided, yet prime ministers themselves have more opportunity than most to shape how others view them. If they end up being widely viewed as incompetent, dishonest or deficient in other ways, 'them's the breaks'.

Acknowledgements

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¹⁷K. Theakston and M. Gill, 'Theresa May joint worst post-war prime minister, say historians and politics professors in new survey', *The Conversation*, 6 July 2021; <https://theconversation.com/theresa-may-joint-worst-post-war-prime-minister-say-historians-and-politics-professors-in-new-survey-163912>

¹⁸K. Pedley, 'British public say Churchill, followed by Thatcher, did best job as Prime Minister', Ipsos, 29 March 2021; <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/british-public-say-churchill-followed-thatcher-did-best-job-prime-minister>