

Background Briefing:

The new 'Kingmaker' seats that could decide the next Prime Minister

Britain's electoral map is changing in this too-close-to-call election. Our fragmenting party system and shifting electoral geography has made the 2015 General Election a battle on many different electoral fronts.

North of the border, Election 2015 is now an "SNP versus all comers" contest as the fallout from last Autumn's referendum rewrites the rules of Scottish politics. While Wales adapts five party politics, Northern Ireland's tight races in Belfast and Fermanagh will also be watched more closely for their potential impact on the Commons arithmetic, in an election on a knife-edge across Britain.

The Conservatives and Labour often go head-to-head in their battle for Downing Street, particularly in the north-west, the Midlands and the outer London suburbs, while it is about Liberal Democrats versus the Conservatives in the south-west. UKIP's insurgency challenges both major parties around the coast in Kent and Essex, Lincolnshire and Humberside, where voters are keenest to question the pace of change in British society. Candidates in increasingly-diverse cities and university towns face different challenges about whether they have a vision of the future equipped to keep pace with those changes.

In this kaleidoscope of shifting party colours, one thing that has been less noticed is that the geographic frontlines of the battle between the two major parties has also shifted considerably too from a generation ago. Our examination of the new sceptical centre of this uncertain election nation reveals some important truths about how the changing nature of British society may well be reflected in our politics too.

It also allows us all to identify which results to listen out for on election night – and which voters over the next three weeks seem most likely to play a pivotal role in deciding the next Prime Minister. While the list of new Kingmaker seats would look very different were either party leader confidently seeking an outright majority, in this scrap for control of a hung parliament the battlefield is made up of neck-and-neck races in a diverse range of seats spread across the country.

Yet the increasingly-varied electoral frontline revealed by this exercise also tells us something important about the challenges facing political leaders in the Britain of 2015.

A fragmented politics gives voters more choice, but it also makes it more difficult to build the social and political coalitions on which government depends. An increasingly diverse map of potentially decisive constituencies means it is harder to be a political leader than it was a generation ago. That fact will place a premium on leaders who are able not only to understand and articulate these differences, but also to find the common ground in our fragmented and polarised political nation.

Why the old 'bellwether' seats no longer capture the national mood

Election watchers in Britain in 2015 need to find new 'bellwether' seats – because the seats that used to be a reliable guide to the national mood no longer play that role. Decisive 'swing' constituencies have moved off the electoral frontline in both directions, thanks to a series of social, economic and demographic shifts.

For half a century from 1951 onwards, nobody ever governed Britain without persuading the voters of **Luton South** to support them, but that pattern was broken as Labour kept hold of the seat in 2010. Like several other seats won by John Major's Conservatives in 1992, Luton South is much more ethnically diverse than it was a quarter of a century ago.

It was **Dartford** which took Luton's crown in 2010 as the only seat to vote for every Prime Minister since 1964, switching from New Labour to the Conservatives. But it will not be a reliable bellwether seat in 2015, when it looks very likely to stick with the Conservatives in victory or defeat. With double the national swing to the Conservatives, its 20% majority took it right off the Labour target seats radar. That reflected social, economic and demographic changes in south-east Kent seat, which now looks safely Conservative for the foreseeable future, with the demographics of the new Ebbsfleet garden city development thought likely by experts to entrench this.

The 'Kingmaker' seats that will decide the next Prime Minister

Current betting odds have David Cameron and Ed Miliband virtually neck-and-neck on 277 and 274 seats. With most commentators agreeing with YouGov's Peter Kellner that the Conservatives will need a 20-seat lead in order to form a government, that means Cameron needs to take ten of those 274 seats that are currently tipped to go to Labour.

So what are these 'Kingmaker' seats that will decide who ends up in No10? This analysis uses Ladbrokes betting odds and constituency polling by Lord Ashcroft to identify the dozen seats where the two main parties are closest.

The Kingmaker seats offer a snapshot of the election battleground on April 15th 2015, after the publication of the party manifestos. This list will remain viable even if overall election expectations tilt heavily in either a blue or red direction, unless there is a dramatic reordering of the *comparable* rank position of the marginal seats.

There was no element of subjective choice in the seats identified. These are the dozen Tory-held marginal seats in which Labour was most narrowly the favourite over the Conservatives, as ranked by Ladbrokes constituency odds on April 15th 2015. The Lord Ashcroft constituency polls appear to verify that the best public

information available shows Labour having established a small lead in these constituencies, which the Conservatives need to overturn during the campaign.

The model focuses on Conservative-Labour marginal seats for three reasons:

- Firstly, 'Kingmaker' seats count double in their impact on the crucial gap between the parties. It would take two additional gains from smaller parties to match the value of winning (or losing) a Kingmaker seat.
- Secondly, at the margin, it seems unlikely that Conservative gains from the LibDems, nor Labour seats defended from the SNP, would significantly affect the Commons arithmetic of a confidence vote, given the positions and preferences of the various parties.

It is perfectly possible that either major party could secure a breakthrough to win by a much clearer margin. Yet it remains very likely that any route to Downing Street would involve securing the 'Kingmaker' seats on the way to a more impressive victory. If a major party makes a net loss of other constituencies where it is currently favourite to win, it would need to take an additional Kingmaker seat for each such seat lost to its main rival, or one additional Kingmaker seat for every two (net) seats lost to smaller parties. It is unlikely that any party could win most or all of the Kingmaker seats while losing significant numbers of seats that are currently projected to be more favourable to that party.

What's interesting is that the election is no longer about narrowly finding the next 'Worcester Woman' - the seats that will decide this election are both urban and rural, socially conservative and liberal, white and diverse, in the north and south.

Our analysis in fact pinpoints one Kingmaker seat that could be the decider on election night: Ealing and Acton. At number eight in the Kingmaker seats list, the voters of West London could be the ones who give David Cameron the 19-20 seat lead that he needs to stay in No10, or who tip the balance in favour of his Labour challenger Ed Miliband.

The new Kingmaker Seats

		2010 Con majority	Con odds	Lab odds	Other contender	Local poll (Ashcroft)
1	Harrow East	3,403 (7.1%)	Evens 45.7%	4/6 50.7%		Lab 43 Con 39 (April15)
2	Wirral West	2,436 (6.2%)	Evens 45.4%	8/11 52.8%		Lab 42 +5 Con 37 (Mar15)
3	Northampton North	1,936 (4.8%)	Evens 44.5%	5/6 48.6%		Lab 35 Con 31 (Oct 14)
4	Cannock Chase	3,195 (7%)	7/4 32.9%	11/8 38.2%	UKIP 9/4 27.9%	Lab 32 +5 Ukip 30 Con 27 (Oct14)
5	Ipswich	2,079 (4.4%)	Evens 44.2%	8/11 51.4%		Lab 38 +7 Con 31 (Oct 14)
6	City of Chester	2,583 (5.5%)	11/10 43.3%	4/6 54.4%		Lab +11 (March)
7	Stockton South	332 (0.7%)	11/10 43.3%	4/6 54.5%		Lab 44 +5 Con 39 (April15)
8	Ealing Central and Acton	3,716 (7.9%)	11/10 43.1%	4/6 54.2%		Lab 40 Con 34 (Dec14)
9	Brighton Kempton	1,328 (3.1%)	5/4 40.7%	4/6 54.8%		Lab 37 +4 Con 33 (Oct 14)
10	Keighley	2,940 (6.2%)	11/10 42.7%	8/11 52.1%		Lab 37 +6 Con 31 (Oct14)
11	Nuneaton	2,069 (4.6%)	5/4 40.0%	8/13 55.6%		Lab 39 +5 Con 34 (March15)
12	Croydon Central	2,879 (5.8%)	5/4 40.0%	4/7 57.3%		Lab +4 (Mar15)

How the Kingmaker marginals could change the Commons

Conservatives (Labour) Kingmaker seats won	Total Conservative seats	Total Labour seats	Resulting Con lead	Likely PM
0 (12)	277	274	+3	Miliband
1 (11)	278	273	+5	Miliband
2 (10)	279	272	+7	Miliband
3 (9)	280	271	+9	Miliband
4 (8)	281	270	+11	Miliband
5 (7)	282	269	+13	Miliband
6 (6)	283	268	+15	Miliband
7 (5)	284	267	+17	Unpredictable. Too close to call. deadlock?
8 (4)	285	266	+19	Cameron
9 (3)	286	265	+21	Cameron
10 (2)	287	264	+23	Cameron
11 (1)	288	263	+25	Cameron
12 (0)	289	262	+27	Cameron

What do the new Kingmaker seats look like?

Harrow East: The only Conservative-held seat in which most voters are ethnic minorities, with over a quarter of the vote being Hindu. Incumbent Bob Blackman had been expected to hold this affluent seat until Lord Ashcroft's recent poll showed Labour opponent Uma Kumaran 4% ahead. Over a third of voters are under 34. If the Conservatives can hold on, it would suggest the party can find ways to appeal to younger aspirational Asian voters as well as their parents.

Wirral West Employment minister Esther McVey is a rising star has said she would like to be party leader and Prime Minister one day – but the former GMTV presenter who grew up in Liverpool will need to hold her seat first. This leafy and affluent north-west constituency is 95% white British. McVey missed out by 1,000 votes on her first attempt to get elected here in 2005 before gaining the seat in 2010, and must battle to reverse a 5 point poll lead for her Labour opponent Margaret Greenwood, a former teacher.

Northampton North The East Midlands seat has voted for the winning party in every General Election since 1974. Michael Ellis won the seat from Labour's Sally Keeble in 2010 and she is standing again to try to win it back. Tony Clarke, Labour's Northampton North MP from 1997 to 2005, is now standing here for the Green Party. The urban seat containing the new university is now 15% non-white: nearly 10,000 minority voters make it the 150th most ethnically diverse seat in Britain,

Cannock Chase A 14% swing to the Conservatives in 2010 was the second-largest anywhere in Britain, but the intervention of UKIP has made this an unpredictable three-way contest. A constituency poll last Autumn put Labour on 32%, UKIP on 30% and the Conservatives in third on 27%. This 97% white British seat is named after the forest and country park which is a designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Ipswich A hard fought race between the Conservative MP Ben Gummer, who gained the seat in 2010 and the local Labour council leader David Ellesmere. A third of voters are under 34 and there are just under 9,500 ethnic minority voters.

City of Chester The market town on the Welsh border, 96% white British, has often returned a Conservative MP. But incumbent Conservative Stephen Mosley appears to face a tough challenge to retain the seat, with a constituency poll last month showing a big 8.5% swing to give Labour an 11 point lead. He will be hoping his Eurosceptic credentials stem votes going to UKIP.

Stockton South This rare Conservative seat in the north-east does have a long history, with Harold Macmillan having represented Stockton through the 1930s, while losing his seat in both 1929 and 1945. Stockton South has voted for the governing party in the last six general elections since 1987, by just 332 votes in 2010. Lord Ashcroft's latest poll showed a 5% Labour lead.

Ealing Central and Acton The home of the famous Ealing studios emerges as our King of the Kingmaker seats, offering David Cameron or Ed Miliband not just a Passport to Pimlico but to Downing Street itself. With over one-third of voters from an ethnic minority, it is the sixth most ethnically diverse Conservative-held seat, containing almost 11,000 black voters and over 15,000 British Asians. 13.4% of the electorate is Muslim. The Conservative incumbent is Angie Bray, a former LBC presenter, and she defends a seat gained in 2010 against the challenge of Rupa Huq, a lecturer at Kingston University who attended school in the constituency.

Brighton Kemptown Kemptown, which has voted for the winning party in every General Election since 1979, is believed to be the seat with the largest number of gay voters in the country. The affluence of the constituency makes it a Conservative-held marginal seat targeted by Labour, one which also has a significant Green presence around Falmer University.

Nuneaton At around 1am on May 8th, Nuneaton is expected to be the first marginal seat to declare a result, so David Cameron and Ed Miliband may well find out whether or not the exit polls are correct. Former local council leader Marcus Jones will be defending the seat he gained in 2010 against Labour's Vicky Fowler. The 24-year-old is one of the youngest candidates with a chance of being elected, having first been elected to the local council at 20.

Keighley Former soldier and ex-leader of Bradford Council Kris Hopkins, who gained this seat in 2010, faces John Grogan, the Labour MP for Selby until 2010. This Yorkshire Moors seat with a sizeable Pakistani Muslim community has sometimes had tense race relations. The BNP targeted the area over the last decade – and its political demise will not be regretted.

Croydon Central With the other two Croydon seats split between Labour (north) and Conservative (south), Croydon Central has been a hard-fought marginal seat. It is the fifth most ethnically diverse Tory-held seat with over 18,000 black voters and over 10,000 Asian voters. Conservative Gavin Barwell has been a vocal advocate of his party's need to engage with ethnic minorities but faces a tough challenge against Labour's Sarah Jones if polling, suggesting a strong London swing leftwards, is borne out on May 7th.

What do Kingmaker seats tell us about the ‘new centre’ of British politics?

The Kingmaker seats list comprises a remarkably varied group of swing constituencies, both urban and rural. The seats cross north and south, young and old, they are socially conservative and socially liberal, and incorporate areas of high and low ethnic diversity.

The challenge for the competing political parties is therefore to broaden their appeal beyond existing partisan support, in these local races as well as nationally. Young, first-time voters might particularly matter to leaders who are trying to break a stalemate. So might ethnic minority voters, who have moved from the margins to the mainstream. As the ethnic minority electorate has swelled, it has also diversified geographically, away from the inner cities to the suburban seats at the centre of this knife-edge election.

That five of the twelve Kingmaker seats are among the country’s most ethnically-diverse constituencies, not least the pivotal Ealing Central and Acton, highlights the growing importance of appealing to minority voters.

Yet a party seeking to govern will need to have a broad appeal, across seats that are highly diverse and also those with little diversity at all. A governing party needs to find common ground between the voters of Harrow East, where over a quarter of voters are Hindu, and 97% white Cannock Chase, where UKIP are polling a third of the vote.

	Kingmaker seats	BME voters	Diversity seat ranking (out of 650)
1	Harrow East	46,114	13 th
2	Wirral West	1,353	433 rd
3	Northampton North	9,354	150 th
4	Cannock Chase	1,614	464 th
5	Ipswich	9,355	183 rd
6	City of Chester	2,826	360 th
7	Stockton South	4,833	290 th
8	Ealing Central and Acton	36,745	54 th
9	Brighton Kemptown	6,407	229 th
10	Keighley	11,654	140 th
11	Nuneaton	5,387	243 rd
12	Croydon Central	32,389	51 st

This changing electoral battleground may be more difficult for political leaders to navigate, but it may bring longer-term democratic benefits.

The 'Middle England' electoral focus of the 1992 and 1997 General Elections reflected a more homogenous political centre – as both of the major parties famously sought to converge on “Worcester Woman” and “Mondeo Man”.

This focus on the centre ground did put the parties in touch with the median voter, but it also meant that significant swathes of different voters felt that the parties were ignoring them. From Old Labour and traditional Conservatives, affluent voters in the Tory shires to ethnic minorities in the big cities, many voters sensed that the political parties were not competing for their votes because of their laser-like focus on the median voter. It felt that politics was taking them for granted - because the logic of electoral competition meant that this was largely true.

This approach to politics was also a contributor to political disengagement, for example in the record drop in electoral turnout to as low as 58% in 2001, while also fuelling a series of different 'revolts' and fragmentations by which different voters have found a way to make their voice count again.

The politics of 2015 are more complex. Each party certainly still needs to compete for the centre-ground: it is difficult to see how Labour could form a majority government without winning over Worcester woman again, or how the Conservatives could ever pass the winning line without closing the ethnic minority gap so that leafy and diverse Birmingham Edgbaston was back on the electoral frontline, having backed every previous Conservative prime minister since the 1930s.

But the challenge of 2015 and 2020 and beyond is that any successful political leader will have to do more than one thing at once. The shifting political centre-ground means that a wider range of voters than a generation ago might find themselves being courted by the political parties – perhaps better representing the country they are seeking to govern.