

## 6. What is a Manifesto?

**YOUTH  
MANIFESTO  
2015**



An election manifesto is essentially a list of policies that a political party says it will enact if it is voted into office at a general election. The word “manifesto” itself originates from the Latin *manifestum*, which refers to a list of facts.

Before an election, each party will produce an official manifesto which will form the basis of its campaign. Manifestos serve a very important function, because they are the main way of telling voters why they should give their vote to a particular political party. This means they are usually written in a persuasive style which attempts to make readers believe that the policies they contain will be in their best interests.

A manifesto can be just a simple list of policy ideas, although these days political manifestos tend to be lengthy documents which explain the party’s policies on a wide range of issues in great detail. The key feature of a political manifesto is that it will usually say what the party’s policies are, as well as giving some kind of explanation as to what each policy is trying to achieve and why that would be a good thing, in order to persuade the voter to support it. Manifestos usually cover a wide range of political issues, including the economy, health, education, welfare, jobs, housing, defence, the environment and foreign policy.

Branding is an extremely important feature of modern political manifestos. This usually begins with a title which tries to make the party sound appealing to voters, and often contains some kind of reference to the core theme of the party’s election campaign. For example, at the 2010 election the Conservative Party’s manifesto was called *An Invitation to Join the Government of Britain*, a title which tied in with the party’s election slogan “We’re all in this together” by making it sound as if the voters would be treated as equal partners alongside the politicians if the Conservatives won.

The body of a manifesto usually breaks the party’s policies down into a number of key areas. The Labour Party manifesto in 2010 was called *A future fair for all*, and its contents were grouped into three main areas – “Rebuilding our economy”, “Protecting public services and strengthening society” and “A new politics” – which each contained a number of sub-chapters such as “Health” and

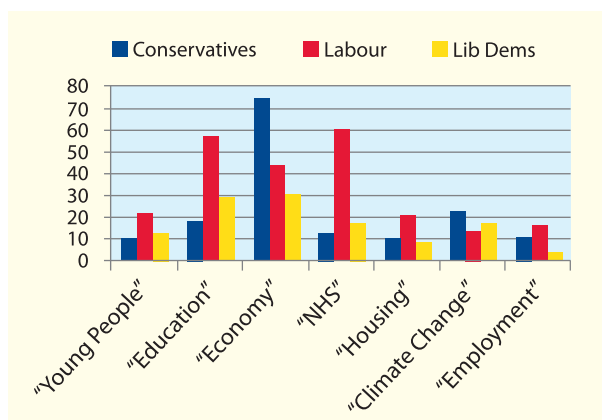
“Education” where they explained their policies covering these areas in greater detail. When they are added together, the policies covering these different areas are supposed to create a “package” which will appeal to the kind of voters they are targeting.

In order for a manifesto to be taken seriously, the policies which it contains cannot be impractical or unpopular, or it would fail in its purpose to help the party to attract support. There have been some famous examples when parties have misjudged this: the Labour manifesto at the 1983 election was described as “the longest suicide note in history” by one of the party’s own MPs because he thought its policies would be so unpopular.

However, it is important to note that manifesto promises are not binding; political parties do not actually *have* to do any of the things they said they would in their manifesto if they succeed in getting elected, although they have to be careful, because failing to implement certain policies can leave voters feeling betrayed, leading to a negative backlash. For example, at the 2010 general election the Liberal Democrats made a promise in their manifesto that they would abolish university tuition fees if they were elected; when they unexpectedly ended up sharing power with the Conservatives in a coalition government this was one of the pledges they decided not to honour, causing widespread anger among student voters (many of whom had chosen to support the party because of this policy). The Liberal Democrat leader, Nick Clegg, was so concerned by the reaction this caused that he

made a party political broadcast where he publicly apologised for abandoning his former pledge.

Political parties differ in how much attention they give in their manifesto to different policy areas, reflecting their priorities. Parties which were originally established to campaign on particular issues naturally give them greater prominence, such as the Green Party on the environment. A simple way of measuring this is to count how many times each party used certain words in their manifestos for the 2010 general election (see chart).



As manifestos are designed to try to persuade the reader to vote for a particular party, they tend to repeat certain key ideas and phrases which they want the voters to associate with their campaign. Clearly, the parties decided to emphasise different issues in their manifestos: the Conservatives wanted to emphasise the economy, while Labour placed more of a focus on their policies for health and education. What is particularly striking is that young people were referred to so few times, suggesting that the politicians did not think policies aimed at helping young people would be vote-winners.

Not all manifestos are written by political parties. Some famous examples of non-electoral manifestos include *The United States Declaration of Independence* (1776), in which the American colonies asserted their independence from Great Britain, and *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), written by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, which outlined their view of the class system. Charities and other non-government organisations (NGOs) also often produce manifestos to coincide with elections in which they try to draw attention to what they want the politicians to do to help them. It can be useful to look at these other kinds of manifesto in order to get an idea of how they are written, and to see how the ideas in a really persuasive manifesto can change the world.

#### Sources:

- *Invitation to Join the Government of Britain* (2010 Conservative Party Manifesto)
- *A future fair for all* (2010 Labour Party Manifesto)
- *Change that works for you* (2010 Liberal Democrat Manifesto)
- *Fair is Worth Fighting For* (2010 Green Party Manifesto)

#### Useful Resources:

- *No easy way to say this...* – the Liberal Democrat video message apologising for not abolishing tuition fees
- <http://www.politicsresources.net/area/uk/man.htm> – a webpage containing every single UK general election manifesto dating back to 1945
- *Child Poverty: A Manifesto Towards Eradication* (2011) – a good example of a non-political manifesto