

## SPECIAL REPORT

# High stakes for science in UK election

The new government may have to make cuts — but which party will slice deepest? **Geoff Brumfiel** reports.

Robin Weiss was one of 22 prominent scientists to sign a recent letter to *The Independent* newspaper, endorsing the United Kingdom's ruling Labour Party in the run-up to next week's general election.

But Weiss, a virologist at University College London, is now unsure whether he will vote Labour on 6 May, partly because of his unhappiness with the government's recent push to milk more short-term economic value from fundamental research. "I'm pretty pissed off with Labour as a whole," he says.

Weiss is not alone. An informal e-mail poll by *Nature* of more than 260 researchers in Britain has found reduced support for Labour compared with the last election, and roughly a quarter of respondents said they were unsure how they would vote (see 'The science vote'). But, like many scientists in the United Kingdom, Weiss holds a dim view of the main opposition party, the Conservatives, who slashed public spending on research and higher education in the 1980s.

According to national opinion polls, Labour will struggle to get re-elected, but the Conservatives may not win enough parliamentary seats to form a majority government. The third major party, the left-leaning Liberal Democrats, is rapidly gaining support, and the election could produce a hung parliament, in which two or more parties form a coalition government. More than a quarter of the scientists polled by *Nature* said they planned to vote Liberal Democrat.

Regardless of the outcome, Britain's next government will face a soaring budget deficit, rising inflation and a sluggish economy, and it will have to move quickly to raise taxes, cut public spending, or both (see *Nature* 463, 410–411; 2010). How those cuts fall could dramatically alter the research landscape in Britain, says Nick Dusic, director of the Campaign

for Science and Engineering in the UK, a think tank devoted to increasing the profile of science in government.

The economic crisis could mark a turning point for a nation that, in recent years, has enjoyed relatively strong growth in fundamental research. Since Labour came to power in 1997, annual funding for basic research has more than doubled to £3.7 billion (US\$5.7 billion), along with extra cash for university facilities and laboratories. But more recent actions

by the Labour government have not sat well with scientists. The party has increasingly emphasized the need for scientists to show the 'economic and societal impact' of their research, and its new Research Excellence Framework

(REF) will take such metrics into account in allocating research and development money to universities. Many scientists were also riled by the government's decision to fire drugs adviser David Nutt over his statements playing down the risks of the drug ecstasy, based on his research (see *Nature* 462, 11–12; 2009).

All three parties are courting scientists with their agendas, and roughly 80% of scientists polled by *Nature* say that the candidates' attitudes towards science will affect how they vote. Labour vows not to raid the science budget to fund other priorities, and the Conservatives promise a multi-year budget to "provide a stable investment climate for Research Councils". They would also delay the unpopular REF and review the metrics it uses. The Liberal Democrats have responded to the Nutt affair by promising reforms to "prevent government from bullying or mistreating advisers". Dusic says that, in a nation where roughly 3.3 million people have some scientific training, the commitments are evidence of science's growing profile.

According to *Nature's* poll, scientists see the

Liberal Democrats as the party most likely to formulate scientifically based policies. Evan Harris, member of parliament (MP) for Oxford West and Abingdon and the Liberal Democrat spokesman on science, says that the party has a proven track record of respecting scientific advice on issues such as research involving human embryos. "Do we think there's a sizeable science vote? Yes we do," he says. The science supremos for Labour and the Conservatives declined *Nature's* interview requests.

The Conservatives seem to have seen little benefit from their science pledges. Only one in ten scientists polled by *Nature* say they would vote Conservative, and 70% feel that the party would make the deepest cuts to funding if elected. Martin Rees, an astronomer at the University of Cambridge (not speaking in his capacity as president of the Royal Society), says that despite campaign pledges, "the average MP from the party has very little understanding of science".

Ultimately, the tight financial situation is likely to be the biggest player in the election. Because of it, none of the parties has committed to increasing or even maintaining the current level of science spending. And none has promised to roll back the cuts already planned, notes Keith O'Nions, the acting rector of Imperial College in London.

Late last year, the Labour government announced that universities and research would face £600 million in cuts by the 2012–13 fiscal year. And there remains the strong possibility that universities and science will see further budget pressure. All will be determined by the emergency budget that is expected to be drawn up immediately after the election by the new government. "There are some very big questions that have to be answered," O'Nions says. ■

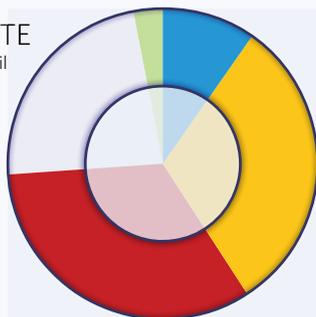
Survey work by Sara Grimme and Fiona Watt. Survey results available at [go.nature.com/nhmao7](http://go.nature.com/nhmao7).

**"Do we think there's a sizeable science vote? Yes we do."**

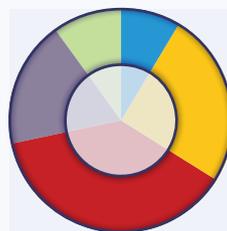
## THE SCIENCE VOTE

The results of *Nature's* e-mail survey of 262 scientists.

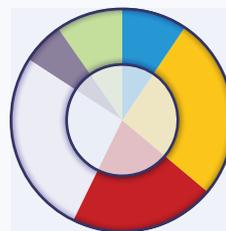
Which political party would give scientific research the best chance of thriving in the United Kingdom?

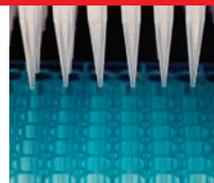


How did you vote in the last election?



How do you plan to vote in this election?





**PLASTICS HAMPER DNA ASSAYS**  
Chemicals leaching from lab plastic throw off results.  
[go.nature.com/R7eAFN](http://go.nature.com/R7eAFN)

DRA\_SCHWARTZ/ISTOCKPHOTO

# A guide for the scientific voter

The three main parties contesting the UK general election have all promised to support basic science, bolster innovation and take action to protect the environment. But how do their promises stack up?

## LABOUR

Led by Gordon Brown

Under the party's reign, the research budget has doubled in real terms, but our poll suggests that far fewer scientists are ready to vote for Labour than in the previous election.

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**Research:** "Britain is among the best places in the world to do science," trumpets the party manifesto. Whether the science budget rises or falls, Labour promises to 'ring fence' it so that it can't be raided by other departments.

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**Higher education:** "Our aim is to continue the expansion of higher education," Labour says. The party says it has secured funding for 20,000 more university students this year, although it provides no details on how it will adjust university budgets to cope with the increase. Labour also hopes to extend the reach of universities to other countries through research partnerships and distance learning.

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**Environment and energy:** The party commits itself to 40% low-carbon electricity and 15% renewable energy by 2020, and hopes to make the European Union's emissions reduction targets more stringent. Labour also says it will build four clean-coal plants with carbon capture and ease the approval process to construct nuclear power stations through regulatory reforms.

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**Innovation:** The party would continue efforts to promote technology transfer through its Technology Strategy Board. It also promises to help industry make use of research and development tax credits and to encourage collaborations between universities and business.

## CONSERVATIVES

Led by David Cameron

The Conservative manifesto calls for "an economy where Britain leads in science, technology and innovation". But our survey shows that most think that the party will make the deepest research cuts.

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**Research:** The party vows to provide "a stable investment climate for Research Councils". Given the party's commitment to rein in spending, most observers believe that "stable" could be read as 'falling at a predictable rate'.

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**Higher education:** The Conservatives promise to suspend the Labour government's proposed Research Education Framework (REF) for assessing universities' research funding. They would also commit to adding 10,000 undergraduate places to university rosters funded by encouraging past students to pay back loans early. But as with science funding, there is no promise of money for the universities.

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**Environment and energy:** Setting what they call "ambitious" targets for reducing carbon emissions by 80% by 2050, the Conservatives commit to developing four clean coal-fired power plants equipped with carbon-capture-and-storage facilities, and they back nuclear power. The party also promises to regulate genetically modified (GM) crops more tightly and to make sure GM food is clearly labelled.

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**Innovation:** The party would seek to establish more collaborations between universities and industry, provide research and development tax credits to start-up companies and high-tech companies, and to reform corporate tax law to help attract high-tech companies from overseas.

## LIBERAL DEMOCRATS

Led by Nick Clegg

The Liberal Democrats are the dark horse in this year's election, but poll participants overwhelmingly see them as the party most likely to incorporate scientific advice into their policies.

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**Research:** Of the major parties, the Lib Dems make the most promises to scientists. Once allocated, the party says, the science budget will not be "used for other purposes". The Lib Dems also promise to ensure that politicians cannot distort scientific data to support their own agendas, and make all publicly funded research freely available to anyone.

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**Higher education:** The party promises to look for criteria other than "narrow impact factors" — an allusion to the REF — in allocating research funds to universities. The Lib Dems also promise to scrap tuition fees for students taking their first degrees, without cutting university income — a bold (opponents might say unrealistic) promise.

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**Environment and energy:** The Lib Dems call for sweeping policy changes, with 40% of energy coming from renewable sources by 2020, rising to 100% by 2050. These targets will be met without nuclear reactors. A slew of other ambitious green projects include a £140-million scheme to replace old buses with cleaner ones, and a one-time £400 rebate for homeowners making energy-conserving modifications to their homes.

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**Innovation:** Much of the party's agenda for innovation involves converting to a green economy. For example, promising a £400-million refurbishment of northern shipyards into wind turbine plants. The party also says it will work with the European Union to invest in energy technology.

LEFT TO RIGHT: S. PLUNKETT/REUTERS; O. SCARFF/REUTERS; R. EVANS/AP