

Funding the Future

The Tories are the biggest government borrowers, and ha...

Published: January 12, 2026, 9:22 pm

It is often suggested that Labour is profligate and the Tories are the naturally 'safe pair of hands' when it comes to running the economy. The Tories, it is presumed, do not borrow as much as Labour. This is a hypothesis I have tested before. I thought it time to update to the end of the 2019/20 financial year.

The analysis that follows is based on borrowing, as reported by the House of Commons Library and other data supplied by the Office for Budget Responsibility.

The government in office was decided by who was at the end of a financial year.

I then calculated the total net borrowing in Labour and Conservative years and averaged them by the number of years in office. All figures are stated billions of pounds in all the tables that follow and in this case are in original values i.e. in the prices of the periods when they actually occurred:

	Labour	Conservative	Total	Higher: Labour or Conservative?
Years in office	28	46	74	Conservative
Total net borrowing - original prices	554.9	1189.7	1744.6	Conservative
Average borrowing for each year in office - original prices	19.8	25.9	23.6	Conservative

The Conservatives borrowed more, not just absolutely (which is unsurprising as they had more years in office), but on average.

This though, is a bit unfair: the value of money changes over time. So I restated all borrowing in 2019 prices to eliminate the bias this gives rise to. This resulted in the following table:

	Labour	Conservative	Total	Higher: Labour or Conservative?
Years in office	Page 28/4	46	74	Conservative
Total net borrowing - 2019 prices	874.0	1707.6	2581.6	Conservative
Average borrowing for each year in office - 2019 prices	28.0	36.0	31.0	Conservative

In current prices the Conservatives still borrowed more (much more) overall, and on average, by a long way.

So then I speculated that this may be distorted by events since 2008. That is what the Conservatives would claim, after all: they would say that they have spent six years clearing up Labour's mess. So I took those years out of account and looked at the first 62 years of the sample. First I did this in original prices:

	Labour	Conservative	Total	Higher: Labour or Conservative?
Years in office prior to Global Financial Crisis	26	36	62	Conservative
Total borrowing in original prices excluding the Global Financial Crisis	278.7	319.6	598.3	Conservative
Average borrowing for each year in office excluding the Global Financial Crisis - original prices	10.7	8.9	9.65	Labour

It looked like their claim might stack. So I did it again in 2019 prices:

	Labour	Conservative	Total	Higher: Labour or Conservative?
Years in office prior to Global Financial Crisis	26	36	62	Conservative
Total borrowing in 2019 prices excluding the Global Financial Crisis	549.0	762.9	1312.0	Conservative
Average borrowing for each year in office in 2019 prices excluding the Global Financial Crisis	21.1	21.2	21.2	Conservative

The Conservatives borrowed more, after all, although it was a close run thing.

Then I speculated that this might be because Labour are good Keynesians: maybe they repaid national debt more often than the Conservatives. Or, to put it another way, they actually repaired the roof when the sun was shining. This is the data in terms of number of years:

	Labour	Conservative	Total	Higher: Labour or Conservative?
Years in office	28	46	74	Conservative
Number of years when repaid debt	7	4	11	Labour
Percentage of years in office when debt repaid	25.0%	8.7%	14.9%	Labour

Labour do walk the talk: they repay national debt much more often in absolute and percentage terms than the Conservatives. In fact, one in four Labour years saw debt repaid. That was true in less than one in ten Conservative years.

But maybe the Conservatives repaid more. I checked that. This is the data in both original and 2014 prices:

	Labour	Conservative	Total	Higher: Labour or Conservative?
Number of years when repaid debt	7	4	11	Labour
Total repayments made - original prices	30.6	7.0	37.6	Labour
Total repayments made - 2019 prices	105.4	20.6	126.1	Labour

Labour not only repaid more often, it turns out: it also repaid much more in total and on average (not shown) during each year when repayment was made.

So what do we learn? Two essential things, I suggest.

First, Labour borrows less than the Conservatives. The data shows that.

And second, Labour has always repaid debt more often than the Conservatives, and has always repaid more debt, on average.

The trend does not vary however you do the data. I have tried time lagging it for example: it makes no difference.

Or, to put it another way, the Conservatives are the party of high UK borrowing and low debt repayment contrary to all popular belief.

For those interested, this is the overall summary table: the pattern in the right hand column is really quite surprising:

	Labour	Conservative	Total	Higher: Labour or Conservative?
Years in office	28	46	74	Conservative
Total net borrowing - original prices	554.9	1189.7	1744.6	Conservative
Percentage of national debt since 1946 due to the party	31.8%	68.2%	100.0%	Conservative
Percentage of total national debt due to the party's borrowing since 1946	30.5%	65.5%	96.0%	Conservative
Average borrowing for each year in office - original prices	19.8	25.9	23.6	Conservative
Total net borrowing - 2019 prices	874.0	1707.6	2581.6	Conservative
Percentage of national debt since 1946 due to the party when expressed in 2016 prices	33.9%	66.1%	100.0%	Conservative
Average borrowing for each year in office - 2019 prices	31.2	37.1	34.9	Conservative

Data sources

The basic data on borrowing came from the [House of Commons Library](#). This data is updated over time: figures will differ from earlier versions of this blog.

All other data comes from the [Office for Budget Responsibility](#)